

## XXXV. Friends, Romans, Countrymen

May 9/10/11, 2017

Romans 16:1-16

**Aim:** To appreciate the Apostle Paul's love of the church and the individual Christians within the body of Christ.

If the long list of names and greetings in these verses teaches us anything, it is that Paul had a diffusive love for people. The word 'greet' appears nineteen times, and seventeen of them are by Paul. The text features thirty-three names. Twenty-four were in Rome (seventeen men and seven women). In addition, the apostle mentions two households, the mother of Rufus, and the sister of Nereus. Nine of the people mentioned were with Paul in Corinth (eight men in vv. 21-23 and one woman in vv. 1-2). Obviously Paul maintained a remarkable amount of affectionate relationships.

This passage is by far the most extensive and intimate expression of love and appreciation to come from the tender heart and inspired mind of the apostle Paul. It is a rich and rewarding section that yields many insights into the life of Paul, into the lives of other early Christians, and into the nature and character of the first-century church. The apostle's comments about these mostly unknown individuals are all the more poignant because this great apostle takes time to speak so warmly and appreciatively of these 'ordinary' Christians, who were as much his brothers and sisters in Christ as Peter, James, John, and other New Testament notables. He here reveals his deep affection for those whom he had served, for those who had served him, and for those who had served with him.

We do not perhaps normally think of Paul this way. We may naturally assume that though he was a great man, his greatness made him a forbidding companion. Having read through Romans, and knowing of his massive intellect, most of us would feel somewhat intimidated if we knew we were to spend an evening alone with him. We probably would spend the day brushing up on our memory work, wading through the Minor Prophets, or clarifying some points in theology. No doubt such time would be well spent, but our fears unfounded, for Paul was a 'people person' *par excellence*. Moreover, he did not determine his friendships on the basis of intellectual capability or theological literacy.

What makes this list of those he knew in the church of Rome so amazing is the fact that *he had never been to Rome!* Most of the people he mentions are those whom he had met on his journeys and who had subsequently taken up residence in Rome. Some perceptively suggest that the reason Paul could so readily recite all these names in dictation was because of their frequent mention in his personal prayer list.

We should also note the abundance of women the apostle mentions with obvious affection. There are far more women mentioned here than in the typical literature of the day. Paul was no misogynist! As we look at the list of greetings and kind words in the first sixteen verses, we cannot escape the sense of genuine affection contained there.

### A. Commendation of Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2)

Paul often brings to the attention of his readers at the end of his letters fellow Christians who may come into contact with his readers (cp. 1 Cor. 16:10-12, 15-18; Eph. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7-9; 2 Tim. 4:20). Only here, however, does Paul request the assistance of a church in the private

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matter of a fellow believer. Phoebe is mentioned nowhere else in the NT, but it is clear from what Paul says about her here that she was a prominent member of the church at Cenchreae, that she was actively involved in ministry, and that she was planning a trip to Rome. Probably she was the person who carried Paul's letter.

### 1. 'Commend ... a Servant' (16:1)

#### a) *Commend (16:1a)*

<sup>1</sup>*I commend to you our sister Phoebe...*

This lengthy list of greetings and mentions of various people begins with a special commendation of a woman named Phoebe. She is described as a servant of the church in Cenchreae, which is on one of the coasts of Corinth. Phoebe's name is taken from a pagan goddess. In the early church, Christians who had been named for pagan deities retained those names after conversion because the names' origins no longer had any religious or theological significance.

Paul's words, 'I commend,' are of a technical nature, and were used in a letter of introduction to 'commend' a person known to the writer but not to the readers. Letters of commendation were common in the ancient world. People who were traveling in an age with few public facilities often depended on the assistance of people they had never met; and this assistance was easier to be had if the travel could produce a letter of introduction from someone known to the potential host/assistant. So Paul writes to 'commend' (*συνιστημι, sunistēmi*) Phoebe to the Roman Christians. She is a fellow believer (*αδελφη, adelphē, 'sister'*), probably a Gentile, and comes from Cenchreae. Her Gentile background is suggested by her name (*Φοιβη*), which is taken from Greek mythology.

Paul would have had plenty of opportunity to get to know her, for Cenchreae is only eight miles from Corinth, where Paul spent 18 months at one point (cp. Acts 18:1-18; cp. v. 11) and is now staying as he writes to the Romans. Corinth itself lies several miles from the sea (the Gulf of Corinth to the northwest and the Saronic Gulf to the northeast). Cenchreae was a seaport on the Saronic Gulf and was connected to Corinth by a series of forts. Paul, like other travelers taking ship for the east left from Cenchreae after his first stay in Corinth (cp. Acts 18:18). Note that 2 Corinthians is addressed to 'all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia.'

Paul could 'commend' this woman not only for what she had done as a faithful 'sister' and 'servant' of Christ, but also for what she was soon to do in further service to their Lord. It is almost certain that Phoebe delivered this letter in person to the church at Rome, a responsibility of considerable magnitude. The name 'Phoebe' means 'bright and radiant' and from Paul's brief comments about her, it seems that those words did indeed characterize her personality and her Christian life. Paul commends her to the church at Rome in three different ways: as a sister in Christ, as 'a servant,' and as 'a helper of many,' including himself. To refer to Phoebe as 'our sister' meant that she was a devoted member of the family of God, and the context makes clear that she was especially dear to Paul.

It is likely that Phoebe acted as the trusted bearer of Paul's letter to the Romans; no other person is named in Romans in this regard. Phoebe would have collected the scroll from Paul at the house of Gaius in Corinth, and then embarked at the port of Lechaion in order to travel to a port on the western coast of Italy, from where she would make her way by road to a contact address in Rome, most likely the home of Prisca and Aquila. The journey would have taken about two

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weeks. Phoebe is unlikely to have traveled alone. On her arrival, presumably Prisca and Aquila would have invited all the known believers in Rome to gather for the reading of the letter. It is likely that Phoebe's 'envoy' to the Romans, bringing news from Paul and the sending church. It is likely, too, that the envoy-letter bearer would read and explain Paul's words to the gathered groups.

### *b) A Servant (16:1b)*

*...a servant of the church at Cenchreae...*

But Phoebe is more than an ordinary believer; she is a 'servant,' or 'deacon.' The word Paul uses here, *diakonos*, is one that is applicable to any Christian, for every Christian is a 'servant' or 'minister' of the risen Christ and of other Christians. Paul may, then, simply be highlighting the fact that Phoebe has effected 'served' the church to which she belongs. Others, noting that Paul often applies the term to himself and his coworkers, think that the title here marks Phoebe as the leader and preacher of the church. The meaning of *διακονος* (*diakonos*) is demonstrably quite general: 'servant,' especially servant of Christ. Depending on the context, this term can then refer to Christian workers of many different kinds. But there is no warrant to import the reference that the term has when used, e.g., of Paul himself, to Phoebe here. The qualification of *diakonos* by 'of the church' (note, this is the first occurrence of *ἐκκλησια*, *ekklēsia* in Romans) suggests, rather, that Phoebe held at Cenchreae the 'office' of 'deacon' as Paul describes it in 1 Tim. 3:8-12 (cp. Phil. 1:1). We put 'office' in quotation marks because it is very likely that regular offices in local Christian churches were still in the process of being established, as people who regularly ministered in a certain way were gradually recognized officially by the congregation and given a regular title.

Paul next commends Phoebe as 'a servant' beloved by those she served in her home church at Cenchreae, and probably in the mother church at Corinth as well. 'Servant' translates *diakonos*, the term from which we get *deacon*. The Greek word here is neuter and was used in the church as a general term for servant before the offices of deacon and deaconess were developed. When *diakonos* obviously refers to a church office, it is usually transliterated as 'deacon' (see, e.g., Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:10, 13). During the first few centuries of the church, the role of a woman 'servant' (*diakonos*) was to care for fellow believers who were sick, for the poor, for strangers passing through, and for the imprisoned. They also were responsible for helping baptize and disciple new women converts and to instruct children and other women.

Paul's brief commendation has received no small amount of attention by those trying to glean from the New Testament an understanding of the role of women in the life of the church. Phoebe is identified as our sister in the faith and a servant of the church in Corinth. This described 'servant of the church' comes from the Greek word *diakonia* and is rendered in some translations as 'deaconess.' Many churches in our day are organized by elders, ministers, deacons, and deaconesses, who are female deacons. Over the years there have been disputes, even within Reformed communities, about whether the office of deaconess should be an ordained office.

There is no connotative description of the term *church office* to be found anywhere in the New Testament. The concept of *church office* is something we extrapolate from the examples given to us biblically. The most generic term for a church worker in the New Testament is *diakonia*, which describes a position of service to which all of us in ministry are called. The New Testament is replete with examples of women being deeply involved in the life of the church as

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well as in the ministry of the apostolic expansion of the church, though no woman was selected to the office of apostle, and restrictions were placed on women in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus. Nevertheless, we see that women were profoundly involved in the life of the church. Women were the last to remain at the cross and the first to greet the risen Savior in the garden at the tomb.

We see throughout Paul's greetings his profound appreciation for the assistance he received from women who were serving the cause of Christ and the church in very significant ways. What the church does today in terms of ordination is a different matter. The point is that we must not underestimate the very important role that women have in the life of the church of Christ.

### 2. 'Welcome ... a Patron' (16:2)

#### a) *Welcome (16:2a)*

<sup>2</sup>...that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you...

Paul's purpose in commending Phoebe is twofold. First, he wants the Roman Christians to 'receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints.' 'Receiving' includes, of course, welcoming Phoebe into fellowship. But it would also mean assisting her to find lodging, food, and the like. The verb is *προσδεχομαι* (*prosdechomai*), different from the verb Paul uses in 14:1 and 15:7 (*προσλαμβανω*, *proslambanō*). The qualification 'in the Lord'/'in Christ' is typical of the personal greetings and references of this chapter. We should avoid seeking some exact nuance for the phrase; by it Paul simply means that the Roman Christians are to give Phoebe a 'Christian' welcome. The additional qualification, 'in a manner worthy of the saints,' expands on this same point. Paul's second purpose in commending Phoebe is that the Roman Christians would 'assist (*παριστημι*, *paristēmi*) her in the matter in which she has need of you.' The 'matter' on which Phoebe requires assistance cannot be determined, although it is possible that a legal dispute is involved. The Greek word for 'matter' is *πραγμα* (*pragma*), a very general term meaning 'act, deed, matter.' But in Cor. 6:1 it is used to describe a legal dispute: and this meaning would fit this context well.

In addition to introducing Phoebe as a trusted person, the intent of Paul's 'commendation' of her was that the Roman Christians should 'welcome' and 'help [her] in whatever she may need.' In other words, they are being asked to provide her with lodgings and provisions during her stay in Rome. Paul directs the Christians in Rome to receive Phoebe in the Lord in a manner worth of the saints. She is to be assisted in whatever she needs because of the high honor bestowed on her as a helper of many.

Whether or not Phoebe held some official title or not, Paul commended her as a highly-proven 'servant' of Christ and implored the church at Rome 'to receive her in the Lord.' Paul knew that the journey from Corinth to Rome would not be easy, and would involve considerable sea as well as land travel. When this special lady arrived in Rome and presented believers there with Paul's letter, they must have realized his great trust in her even before they read this personal commendation. It would be immediately evident that she deserved their greatest appreciation and respect. Phoebe was to be received into fellowship 'in a manner worthy of the saints,' that is, as a true and faithful believer.

Paul requested that the Roman church 'help' Phoebe 'in whatever matter she may have need of' from them. 'Matter' is from *pragma*, from which we get *pragmatic*, and refers to anything that

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was done or carried out. It was often used of business transactions, and probably carries that idea here. Paul not only was giving a commendation of Phoebe as a faithful Christian but also was giving a letter of reference, as it were, in regard to whatever business ‘matter’ she may have had in Rome.

### *b) A Patron (16:2b)*

*...for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.*

Paul adds another reason for the Roman Christians to receive and help Phoebe when she comes to them: ‘she has herself also been a benefactor of many, and of myself. Considerable debate surrounds the word translated here as ‘benefactor.’ The Greek word *προστατις* (*prostatis*) is found only here in biblical Greek. It comes from a verb that means 1) ‘care for, give aid to, or 2) ‘direct, preside over.’ The best alternative is to give to *prostatis* the meaning that it often has in secular Greek: ‘patron,’ ‘benefactor.’ A ‘patron’ was one who came to the aid of others, especially foreigners, by providing housing and financial aid and by representing their interests before local authorities. Cenchreae’s status as a busy seaport would make it imperative that a Christian in its church take up this ministry on behalf of visiting Christians. Phoebe, then was probably a woman of high social standing and some wealth, who put her status, resources, and time at the services of traveling Christians, like Paul, who needed help and support. Paul now urges the Romans to reciprocate.

Paul’s commendation of Phoebe is reinforced by his speaking of her as a ‘helper,’ which translates *prostatis*, which was commonly used to signify a patron, a wealthy person who encouraged and financially supported an organization or cause, as in a patron of the arts. In other words, Phoebe was no ordinary ‘helper,’ but one of high esteem and integrity and likely was a businesswoman of considerable wealth. She used her influence and her financial means, as well as her personal time and effort, as ‘a helper of many’ fellow believers, ‘and of myself [Paul] as well.’ That statement says as much about Paul as it does about Phoebe.

Phoebe was a ‘helper’ of many, a word (*prostatis*) that meant ‘patroness’ and ‘benefactress,’ suggesting that she was a woman of means who, among other acts of ‘services,’ provided lodgings and provisions for traveling Christian workers. Indeed, Paul is requesting that the Romans minister to Phoebe in the very way she has ‘helped’ many (including him?).

## **B. Greetings to Roman Christians (Romans 16:3-16)**

At the end of his letters, Paul habitually asks the Christians to whom he writes to ‘greet one another’ (Phil. 4:21a; Titus 3:15b), often by means of a ‘holy kiss’ (cp. 1 Cor. 16:20b; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Th. 5:26). He does so here in Romans also (v. 16a). But what is remarkable about this section is that Paul precedes this customary general exhortation with commands that the church in Rome greet on his behalf 26 individuals, two ‘families,’ and at least three ‘house churches.’ As many have conjectured, Paul’s extensive request for greetings in Romans 16 may reflect his desire to mention all the Christians in Rome he knows – a procedure plainly impossible in those letters directed to churches where he has ministered. But the large number of greetings may also have a role in Paul’s strategy in Romans. For it is clear that one of the motives in Paul’s writing is to secure a welcome for himself when he comes to visit the church and seek support for his Spanish mission. A public recognition – the request for greetings were probably read aloud to the assembled church – of those Christians in Rome whom Paul already knows would encourage

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them to think favorably of him and remind the church as a whole of the number of ‘supporters’ he already has.

Paul’s greeting of so many prompts the question as to how Paul knew their names and circumstances. Were they people Paul had known previously in other churches but who have now settled in Rome? True, Paul knew particular people like Prisca and Aquila, but it seems unlikely that he knew everyone he names. More likely is the suggesting that Paul had recently received news from Rome telling him of the current situation including the names of key members. Whatever the case, Paul now exhorts the Roman Christians to ‘greet’ various named people, beginning with his close friends and former hosts Prisca and Aquila and concluding with a general encouragement to ‘greet one another with a holy kiss’ (v. 16).

In urging these ‘greetings’ Paul provides both the names and information about those to be ‘greeted.’ This he does in no other letter, suggesting that these persons do not know one another and that, in effect Paul is introducing them to one another. In other words, the people named had previously met in separate groups and were perhaps meeting together for the first time, gathered – as it were – to hear the apostle’s letter read to them. At the same time, the nature of the information Paul gives is warmly commendatory, and serves to legitimize those persons. Most likely there were many other Roman Christians beyond the persons named, their families, and others ‘with’ them who belonged to various groups and meetings in Rome. But Paul singles out twenty-six for his imprimatur, his seal of theological approval. ‘Take note of these people,’ Paul is saying. ‘I am confident in their grasp of the gospel and in their personal integrity.’

Further, his silence about the names of others is highly suggestive. By inference these are not to be looked to for example and leadership. Furthermore, the contrast must be noted between the named persons Paul is endorsing (vv. 3-16) and the passage immediately following where Paul urges the Romans to ‘take note of those who create dissensions and erect stumbling-blocks against the teaching you learned’ (vv. 17-20). The Letter to the Romans in large measure has been directed to correcting the influential but erroneous beliefs of these ‘dissenters.’

Two conclusions can be drawn from a study of the names in this passage: 1) a majority of the names are Gentile (confirming the mainly Gentile makeup of the church at Rome); and 2) the majority of the names are those of slaves and ‘freedmen’ (slaves who had been given their freedom), or the descendants of slaves/freedmen. Another point that the list makes clear is the pattern of church organization in Rome, for Paul identifies at least three, and perhaps five, separate house churches (vv. 5, 14, 16; cp. also vv. 10, 11). Early Christians did not have large public facilities for meeting, so they used their own houses. And since even the largest house of the wealthiest Christian would hold no more than seventy or eighty for worship, growth beyond that point required that the Christians split up into house churches.

### 1. Close Personal Greetings (16:3-7)

Paul begins sixteen sentences in a row with the second person plural imperative ‘greet’ (*ασπάζομαι, aspazomai*). And, with the exception of the last of these imperatives, with its reciprocal (‘one another’) construction, it is clear that Paul is asking the Roman Christians to convey his own greetings to the respective individuals and groups.

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### a) *Prisca and Aquila (16:3-5a)*

#### (1) Their History (16:3a)

<sup>3</sup>*Greet Prisca and Aquila...*

The first sentence, in which Paul conveys greetings to Prisca and Aquila, is the longest in the list. This is probably because the couple was in the best position to mediate Paul's ministry to the church in Rome. For Paul had been especially close to this missionary wife-and-husband team. Luke prefers 'Priscilla,' the diminutive form of 'Prisca.' We do not know why Priscilla/Prisca comes first in four of the six NT mentions of the couple. Scholars have suggested that she may have been the more dominant of the two, the more gifted, the one who brought most money into the marriage, or the one who was the most significant for their 'home-based' ministry.

Prisca (also known as Priscilla) and Aquila were Jews from Pontus, who plied the same tent-making trade as Paul (Acts 18:1-3), and who may have been traveling traders on account of their successive location in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Rome, and Ephesus. The details of their 'risks' taken for Paul are not known. Prisca's name usually comes before her husband's and implies greater wealth or status, or perhaps a more prominent role in Paul's circle of mission associates. Prisca and Aquila appear to have been among Paul's closest supporters and friends. They played a critical role in teaching the gifted Alexandrian Jew, Apollos (Acts 18:26).

Paul first had met them at Corinth, on his second missionary journey. Luke tells us that Prisca and Aquila, who was originally from Pontus, had 'come from Italy ... because Claudius had issued a decree that all Jews must leave Rome' (Acts 18:2). In addition to their commitment to Christ, they had in common with Paul a secular trade: tent-making (Acts 18:3). After ministering with Paul for some time in Corinth, Paul dropped them off at Ephesus to begin the work there (Acts 18:18). They were instrumental in bringing Apollos to a better understanding of Christ (Acts 18:26); and Paul joined them in Ephesus for a lengthy ministry (cp. 1 Cor. 16:19). We do not know when they returned to Rome. But it is only natural that they would want to return to their home after Claudius' decree of banishment lapsed at his death (54 AD). Whether they returned specifically to resurrect a business, or to help prepare the way for Paul's coming, it is impossible to say.

Paul first met this Jewish Christian couple on his first visit to Corinth, to which Prisca, whose diminutive name was Priscilla, and Aquila had fled from Rome when all Jews were expelled by the Emperor Claudius. It is possible that she was a Gentile, and perhaps a Roman citizen like Paul, and Aquila a Jew, but the expulsion would have applied to both of them, even if only one was Jewish. This remarkable couple is mentioned six times in the New Testament, three times by Luke in the book of Acts and three times by Paul, here and in 1 Corinthians 16:19 and 2 Timothy 4:19. It is interesting that in four of those six references, Priscilla's name is given first. No reason for that unexpected order is given in the texts themselves. She may have been the more dominant and active of the two, or, as some have suggested, she may have had a higher social standing. No single explanation seems satisfactory, however, because both Luke and Paul use the names in both orders.

#### (2) Their Work (16:3b-4)

*...my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, <sup>4</sup>who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well.*

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What Paul emphasizes as the basis for his greeting is not, of course, any of these prosaic details, but their commitment to both ministry and to Paul. They are ‘fellow workers’ (*συνεργοί, sunergoi*), called to labor in the cause of the gospel along with Paul. In the course of that co-laboring, they ‘risked their neck’ on behalf of Paul’s soul; that is, they saved his life. When this happened we have no way of knowing, although one naturally thinks of the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41). We do not know whether these thanks from the Gentile churches are due specifically to Prisca and Aquila’s rescue of Paul, the ‘apostle to the Gentiles,’ or, more generally, to their significant ministry in these churches over many years.

They were much more than fellow workers with Paul, for whom they ‘risked their own necks.’ Probably more than once, they put their own lives in jeopardy to protect Paul’s. From a human perspective, they prevented Paul’s life and ministry from being cut short before he had fulfilled his role in God’s plan. They obviously rendered selfless service to many other Christians as well, because Paul goes on to make the remarkable statement that to them ‘not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.’ Wherever they traveled and lived, that Jewish couple ministered unstintingly and without prejudice.

We do not have a specific record of the risks they took for the apostle, but from the Acts record of Paul’s sojourn in Ephesus we know the time was a tumultuous one and that his life was in danger more than once.

### (3) Their House-Church (16:5a)

<sup>5</sup>*Greet also the church in their house.*

And this ministry continues, as hints at the beginning of v. 5. Here, Paul adds, after his threefold description of Prisca and Aquila, a second object to the main verb ‘greet’: ‘the church of their house.’ This means ‘the church that meets in their house.’ Prisca and Aquila are apparently (as their travels also suggest) a fairly wealthy couple; thus they are able to provide a decent-sized meeting room for a group of Christians in Rome.

Paul also sends a greeting to the church that was in their house. In the first-century community there were not only the *ekesia*, the churches, but *ekklēsioli*, little churches that met in homes. There were home churches in the first century because there were no other places to meet. Those with larger homes would open them so people could assemble together for worship and instruction. The family of Priscilla and Aquila did that.

### b) *Epaenetus and Mary (16:5b-6)*

#### (1) Epaenetus (16:5b)

*Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.*

Epaenetus is mentioned nowhere else in the NT. By calling him ‘my beloved one,’ Paul suggests that he knows him personally. The characterization, while undoubtedly sincere, is also semi-formalized (the term is virtually equivalent here, and in vv. 8, 9, and 12, to *ἀδελφος, adelphos*, ‘fellow-believer’). In calling him the ‘first fruits of Asia,’ Paul indicates that he was the first convert in the Roman province of Asia, whose cultural center was Ephesus. Paul may, then, mention him here because he was brought to faith through the ministry of Prisca and Aquila, and has now come with them to Rome (as a business associate” or ministry worker?).

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It is likely that Epaenetus was especially ‘beloved’ of Paul for the very reason that he was ‘the first convert from Asia,’ no sometimes referred to as Asia Minor, the general area of modern Turkey. Because Paul speaks of this man so affectionately, it could well be that he came to Christ through the preaching of Paul and was lovingly disciple by him. ‘First convert’ translates *aparchē*, which literally means firstfruit. This believer was the ‘first convert from Asia’ who became part of Paul’s ‘offering of the Gentiles’ to the Lord (15:16). Through the intervening years, Paul had kept track of Epaenetus and was pleased that he now was part of the church at Rome.

### (2) Mary (16:6)

<sup>6</sup>*Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.*

‘Mary’ is a very common name, especially among Jews. For this reason, most commentators think that she is Jewish. But the name is also used of Gentiles, so we cannot be certain about her ethnic status. Mary, Paul says, is one who has ‘worked hard (*πολλα, polla*) for you.’

We do not know where Mary came from, how or when she was converted, or anything else about her except that she had ‘worked hard’ for the church at Rome. *Kopiaō* (‘worked hard’) carries the idea of toiling at a task to the point of weariness and exhaustion. The phrasing of this verse suggests that Mary may not have been known to Paul personally and that he knew of her hard work from the reports of others, perhaps Aquila and Priscilla. The context also suggests that she had ministered to the church at Rome for some time, and possibly was a founding member who labored selflessly to establish and develop the fellowship of Christians in the capital of the empire.

### c) *Andronicus and Junia (16:7)*

#### (1) Kinsmen (16:7a)

<sup>7</sup>*Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen...*

Paul now sends greetings to two fellow Jews (*συγγενεις, suggeneis*), who, as Paul’s description indicates, had considerable stature in the early church. Andronicus is a common Greek name, so he must have been a ‘Hellenistic’ Jew. The identity of Andronicus’ ‘partner’ is a matter of considerable debate. The problem arises from the fact that the Greek form used here *Iounian*, depending on how it is accented, could refer either: 1) to a man with the name Junianus, found here in its contracted form ‘Junias’; or 2) to a woman with the name of Junia. Interpreters from the thirteenth to the middle of the twentieth century general favored the masculine identification. But it appears that commentators before the thirteenth century were unanimous in favor of the feminine identification; and scholars have recently again inclined decisively to this same view. And probably with good reason. For while a contracted form of Junianus would fit quite well in this list of greetings (for Paul uses several other such contractions), we have no evidence elsewhere for this contracted form of the name. On the other hand, the Latin ‘Junia’ was a very common name. Probably, then, ‘Junia’ was the wife of Andronicus (note the other husband and wife pairs in this list, Prisca and Aquila (v. 3) and (probably), Philologus and Julia (v. 15).

Andronicus and Junias had a special and perhaps unique relationship to Paul. Because Junias may be a woman’s name, these two might have been husband and wife. And because many of the individuals mentioned in this passage were Jews, ‘kinsmen’ indicates not only that they were fellow Jews but probably means also that they, along with Herodion (v. 11) and Jason and

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Sosipater (v. 21) were Paul's relatives. If that is true, Paul must have felt a special warmth in seeing his 'kinsmen' in the flesh become his 'kinsmen' in spirit.

### (2) Prisoners (16:7b)

*...and my fellow prisoners.*

In addition to their natural relationship ('kindred'), Paul shared with Andronicus and Junia also a spiritual relationship, in both ministry and suffering. For they were Paul's 'fellow prisoners.' Implied is that their imprisonment, like those of Paul's that we know about, were for the sake of the gospel. But whether they were in prison with Paul at the same time or simply shared with him this kind of experience in the service of the Lord is impossible to say.

Besides being Paul's kinsmen, these two believers were at some time, perhaps even then, his 'fellow prisoners.' Because Paul was often in prison (see 2 Cor. 11:23), their shared imprisonment could have been in any number of places. We can be sure that, like Paul they were prisoners because of their faith. If they shared the same or adjoining cells, that imprisonment would have deepened and strengthened their personal and spiritual bond with each other.

### (3) Apostles (16:7c)

*They are well known to the apostles...*

In two relative clauses Paul draws the attention of the Roman Christians to the stature of this husband and wife ministry team. The first description might mean that Andronicus and Junia were 'esteemed by the apostles.' But it is more natural to translated 'esteemed among the apostles.' Paul often uses the title 'apostle' in a 'looser' sense: sometimes simply to denote a 'messenger' or 'emissary' and sometimes to denote a 'commissioned missionary.' So 'apostle' here probably means 'traveling missionary.'

The phrase 'outstanding among the apostles' could have one of several meanings. It obviously does not refer to the office of apostle. The term itself means simply 'sent ones,' and in that sense refers to any believer whom the Lord sends forth in ministry. It seems likely that the meaning here is that Andronicus and Junias performed 'outstanding' service in the Lord's work while working 'among,' and possibly under, some of the ordained apostles, such as Paul and Peter.

Paul's description of them as 'apostles' suggests that they were among 'all the apostles' to whom the resurrected Jesus 'appeared' (1 Cor. 15:7) and who subsequently became itinerant missionaries. In this regard they were 'eminent.' As 'kinsmen' or relatives of Paul it is possible they may have shared their faith with the pre-Christian Paul. Their presence in Rome implies strong involvement in missionary work there.

### (4) Converts (16:7d)

*...and they were in Christ before me.*

Andronicus and Junia are, most likely, husband and wife. They were 'in Christ' before Paul, suggesting they had been among the disciples of Jesus. Although Jews ('kinsmen' of Paul), their names are Greek, suggesting they had come originally from the Diaspora rather than from Palestine (cp. Acts 6:1).

Since Paul, in the second relative clause, acknowledged that they were 'in Christ' before him, we might infer that Andronicus and Junia were among those early 'Hellenistic' Jews in Jerusalem

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and that, like Peter and his wife (cp. 1 Cor. 9:5), they moved about in the eastern Mediterranean (where they encountered and perhaps were imprisoned with Paul), seeking to bring men and women to faith in Christ.

That interpretation is supported by Paul's remark that those two believers 'were in Christ before me,' that is they were converted to Christ before he was. At the time of Paul's conversion, most converts were still living in or near Jerusalem, where several of the Twelve were leaders in the church. If, therefore, Paul's two kinsmen were converted before he was, it is likely that they lived in Jerusalem and performed their 'outstanding' service among the 'apostles' in that city. Because those two believers were converted before Paul, it is quite possible that they had suffered persecution under Paul (then named Saul), whose great zeal against the church would not have been diminished by their being his relatives.

### 2. Other Personal Greetings (16:8-15)

#### a) *Christian Individuals (16:8-10a)*

##### (1) Ampliatius (16:8)

<sup>8</sup>*Greet Ampliatius, my beloved in the Lord.*

From history and archeology we learn that 'Ampliatius' was a common name among slaves. And because slaves were not allowed to bear the name of free men, this 'beloved' friend of Paul must have been, and possibly still was, a slave. In one of the earliest Christian catacombs near Rome, the name 'Ampliatius' can still be seen on a beautifully decorated tomb. Because free Romans always had three names, the fact that this grave marker contains only a single name could be further evidence that the Ampliatius mentioned here by Paul was, or had been a slave. But the fact that his tomb was elaborately decorated indicates that he was held in special high esteem by his fellow Christians and was one of their 'beloved' brethren as well as Paul's.

'Ampliatius' was probably a slave or freedman and may be the Ampliatius referred to in a catacomb inscription.

##### (2) Urbanus (16:9a)

<sup>9</sup>*Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ...*

'Urbanus' is also probably a slave or freedman but, unlike Epaenetus and Ampliatius ('my beloved one,' vv. 5, 8) and Prisca and Aquila ('my fellow workers,' v. 3), Paul may have known him only by reputation ('our fellow worker').

'Urbanus' was a common Roman name, suggesting that he may have been a Roman citizen. Paul speaks of him as 'our fellow worker in Christ,' but gives no indication of how or where he ministered for Christ.

##### (3) Stachys (16:9b)

*...and my beloved Stachys.*

We know nothing about 'Stachys.' Unlike 'Urbanus,' the name 'Stachys,' which means 'ear of corn,' was Greek and uncommon. Since he is called 'beloved,' he would have been closely associated with Paul, but we do not know where or in what relationship. Many of those to whom Paul sends greetings were not outstanding leaders in the early church. That fact reveals the

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apostle's deep and sincere love for fellow believers and for fellow workers in particular, no matter how little known they were or how insignificant their service was from a purely human perspective.

### (4) Apelles (16:10a)

<sup>10</sup>*Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ.*

'Apelles' is a relatively rare name, and we know nothing else about him. Paul honors him by saying that he is 'approved' in Christ. By this Paul might mean that he had proved himself in a difficult test of faith or, simply, that he was a respected believer. The Greek term *δοκιμιον* (*dokimion*) often denotes the proven character that results from a test. But in Romans 14:18 it seems to mean simply 'approved,' 'esteemed.'

We know nothing about Paul's relationship to 'Apelles,' and cannot be certain how the two were personally acquainted. But whether from his own experience with this man or from reliable reports from others, Paul recognized Apelles as being 'approved in Christ.' *Dokimos* ('approved') carries the idea of being tried and tested, and was used of precious metals, such as gold and silver, that passed tests for purity.

### *b) Prominent Households (16:10b-11)*

#### (1) Aristobulus (16:10b)

*Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus.*

'Those who are of Aristobulus' are probably members, especially slaves, of the household of a man named Aristobulus. By not greeting Aristobulus directly, Paul implies that he was not a believer. Indeed, he may be dead since there is some reason to identify this Aristobulus with the brother of King Herod Agrippa I; and this Aristobulus died in AD 48 or 49. Agrippa went to Rome, accompanied by his brother, as a hostage. Aristobulus never held public office. This identification is supported by most commentators since Aristobulus is a rare name in Rome.

Because he is not greeted, it seems certain he was not a Christian. The Greek phrase says only 'of Aristobulus,' the word 'household' being implied. How many of his household were Christians, and whether they were family members, servants, or both we are not told. From his careful study of New Testament times, the noted biblical scholar J. B. Lightfoot suggests that Aristobulus may have been the brother of Herod Agrippa I and the grandson of Herod the Great. If so, he would have been a close ally of the Emperor Claudius. When Aristobulus died, his household—including his wife, children, slaves, and possessions—would have become the property of the emperor, although they would still have been referred to as 'the household of Aristobulus.' It is therefore possible that this group of believers could have been part of the imperial household.

Scholars debate whether this Aristobulus may have been grandson of Herod the Great and brother of King Agrippa I. Arguably Paul would have hinted accordingly if this were the case.

#### (2) Herodion (16:11a)

<sup>11</sup>*Greet my kinsman Herodion.*

The identification of Aristobulus with the Herodian family gains some strength from the fact that Paul next greets a man who was apparently a freedman (and a Jew) in the service of one of the

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Herods. This, at least, is the only likely explanation of the name ‘Herodion,’ which is otherwise unattested in Rome.

As the name indicates, ‘Herodion’ was related to the Herod family in some way and therefore may have been associated with the household of Aristobulus.

### (3) Narcissus (16:11b)

*Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus.*

Paul may continue to think of Roman Christians who were socially prominent or who had connections with those who were. For Narcissus is the name of a well-known freedman who served the Emperor Claudius and who committed suicide just before Paul wrote Romans. As in v. 10, the people Paul greets will have been members of Narcissus’ household.

Like Aristobulus, ‘Narcissus’ was probably not a believer, but some of those of his household were ‘in the Lord.’ Some scholars believe with J. B. Lightfoot that, like Aristobulus, the ‘Narcissus’ mentioned here was closely connected to the Emperor Claudius as his secretary. Because all contact with the emperor had to be channeled through the secretary, he became extremely wealthy through the many bribes he received for granting access to, or simply for corresponding with, the emperor. It is therefore possible that at least two households within the palace had Christians in them. If so, those believers may have been among the saints ‘of Caesar’s household’ who joined Paul, then imprisoned in Rome, in sending greetings to the church at Philippi (Phil. 4:22).

It is possible that the family and slaves of Narcissus were ‘in the Lord’ but not Narcissus himself. Aristobulus also may not have been a believer but only his household.

### *c) Christian Workers (16:12-13)*

#### (1) Tryphaena and Tryphosa (16:12a)

<sup>12</sup>*Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa.*

‘Tryphaena and Tryphosa’ were probably slaves or freedwomen (both names are found at about Paul’s time for servants in the imperial household) and may have been sisters. It was common to give children names from the same Greek root. Their names come from a word that means ‘delicate’ or ‘dainty’; but it is unclear whether Paul deliberately intended the irony involved in calling them ‘those who worked (*κοπιαω, κοπιῶ*) in the Lord.’

‘Tryphaena and Tryphosa’ were possibly twin sisters, whose names mean ‘delicate’ and ‘dainty,’ respectively. Those words may have characterized their lives before salvation, but spiritually they were active and faithful ‘workers in the Lord.’

‘Tryphaena and Tryphosa’ were probably twins who were given names that go together. Their names mean ‘dainty’ and ‘delicate.’ Paul employs some playful irony here because he calls them ‘workers in the Lord,’ using a word that means to labor to the point of exhaustion. Dainty and delicate, yes—but ‘dynamite comes in small packages.’

#### (2) Persis (16:12b)

*Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.*

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‘Persis’ was probably also a slave or freedwoman. The name comes from ‘Persia’ and perhaps denotes a slave captured in that region.

‘Persis’ doubtless received her name from her native land of Persia. Not only was she ‘the beloved,’ suggesting (by the definite article ‘the’) she was loved by everyone who knew her, but she also was one who had ‘worked hard in the Lord.’ Because the work of Tryphaena and Tryphosa is spoken of in the present tense and that of Persis in the past tense, it may have been that the first two were younger women and still active and that Persis was an older saint who had already lived her most productive years. But all three were noted for their work for and ‘in the Lord.’

### (3) Rufus (16:13a)

<sup>13</sup>*Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord;*

#### (a) Identity

Who was the ‘Rufus’ of verse 13? Mark 15:21 identifies Simon of Cyrene as the father of Alexander and Rufus. Couple this with the fact that Mark wrote his Gospel to Rome and we conclude that Rufus was the son of Simon of Cyrene who carried Jesus’ cross.

Jesus’ cross beam was carried by Simon of Cyrene, who is identified as the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21). It was unusual for Mark to insert that kind of detail in his narrative, and we have to wonder why he did it. Mark’s Gospel was sent to the church at Rome. Mark was likely aware that Rufus and perhaps his brother Alexander were members of the church at Rome when the Gospel was sent there. Mark, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, honored these local church members, the sons of the man who had carried the cross of Jesus.

We learn from Mark’s gospel, which was written *in* Rome after Paul wrote this letter to Rome, that Simon of Cyrene, a city on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, who was pressed into service by the soldiers to carry Jesus’ cross, was ‘the father of Alexander and Rufus’ (Mark 15:21). Mark would have had no reason to include the names of Alexander and Rufus unless they were known to the church at large (through the wide distribution of Paul’s letter to Rome) or at least known to the church in Rome. Scholars therefore agree that the Rufus mentioned here by Paul was one of those sons of Simon, who may have been brought to saving faith in Christ through that contact with Him on the way to Calvary. If so, he must have died before the Roman epistle was written, else he surely would have been greeted and commended by Paul. If Simon, the man privileged to have carried Jesus’ cross and to have walked beside Him to Calvary, had become a believer, he would have been among the most honored men in the early church. It is obvious that his wife, the ‘mother’ of Rufus, believed, and it seems safe to assume from this text that Alexander likewise was converted, giving reason for Mark to mention him along with his brother. Alexander either was dead or did not live in Rome at the time, else Paul would have greeted him.

‘Rufus’ may be the son of Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross of Christ part of the way to Golgotha. Mark identifies Simon as ‘the father of Alexander and Rufus’ (Mark 15:21), perhaps to connect him with two well-known Christians in Rome, from where Mark is probably written. Rufus was, however, a fairly common name.

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### (b) Chosen

Paul speaks of Rufus as ‘a choice in the Lord.’ *Eklectos* (‘choice’) has the literal meaning of chosen, or elected. Paul could hardly be speaking about his being chosen for salvation, since, as made clear earlier in the epistle, every believer is ‘predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son’ (8:29). In that sense, every Christian is equally chosen ‘in [Christ] before the foundation of the world’ (Eph. 1:4). The idea here is that Rufus was ‘choice’ in the general sense in which that word is used today. He was an extraordinary Christian, known for his love and work for the Lord and for the Lord’s people.

Rufus is described as ‘chosen in the Lord.’ In this context it is unlikely that Paul means that Rufus is one of the elect, because all of them were elect. The context indicates that Rufus had a particular role and influence with the apostle and with the apostolic community in Rome.

In calling Rufus ‘the elect one,’ Paul may intend to single him out as a specially ‘outstanding’ or ‘choice’ believer. But probably Paul simply means that he was a Christian, ‘chosen’ as all Christians are.

### (4) Rufus’s Mother (16:13b)

*...also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well.*

Paul also sends greetings to Rufus’s mother, presumably the wife of Simon of Cyrene, whom Paul calls his own mother. Paul was not speaking literally here; rather, he considered her his mother in the faith.

The greeting to ‘his mother and mine’ does mean Rufus was Paul’s natural brother but that Rufus’ ‘mother,’ somewhere in and some way during Paul’s travels and ministry, had cared for the apostle as if he were her own son. Like many other Jews converted at or soon after Pentecost, Simon and his family may have chosen to stay in Jerusalem and therefore have had the opportunity to know and befriend Paul during his visits there.

Paul also greets Rufus’s mother, who he says ‘has been a mother to me as well.’ When did she ‘mother’ Paul? In Antioch when he was getting started? In some small town after a beating? At times Paul no doubt felt he could use a little mothering. Paul received back more than he gave.

Paul also conveys greetings to Rufus’s mother, who had on some occasion also apparently provided hospitality and care to Paul.

### d) *House Churches (16:14-15)*

#### (1) Asyncritus et al. (16:14)

<sup>14</sup>*Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them.*

We know nothing specifically about ‘Asyncritus, Phelgon, Hermes, Patrobas,’ and ‘Hermas’ except that Hermes was probably a slave or freedman, since ‘Hermes’ is among the commonest of slave-names. The additional phrase ‘and those with them’ refers to other Christians who met in the same house church as they did.

Paul makes no comment about ‘Asyncritus, Phelgon, Hermes, Patrobas,’ and ‘Hermas.’ The mention of ‘the brethren with them’ indicates that the five men named here were leaders of one of the many assemblies of believers in Rome. In this context, ‘brethren’ would include all believers there, including women.

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### (2) Philologus et al. (16:15)

<sup>15</sup>*Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.*

The pairing of the masculine ‘Philologus’ with the feminine ‘Julia’ suggests to most commentators that they were husband and wife. ‘Nereus’ (a masculine name) and ‘his sister’ may then have been their children. They, too, have apparently made their house available for Christians to meet in. Paul knows only one other member of their house church by name, ‘Olympas,’ mentioning the others only generally: ‘all the saints with them’ (as in v. 14).

Paul’s greetings in verse 15 were to another such assembly of saints, in which ‘Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas’ were outstanding members and leaders.

### 3. General Church Greetings (16:16)

#### a) *Internal Greetings (16:16a)*

<sup>16</sup>*Greet one another with a holy kiss.*

Having conveyed greetings to perhaps every individual believer and house church that Paul knew about in Rome, he now adds a final catchall: ‘Greet one another with a holy kiss.’ Such requests are standard at the end of Paul’s letters (cp. 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Th. 5:26; cp. 1 Pe. 5:14). The kiss was a common form of greeting in the ancient world generally and in Judaism especially. Evidence from the second century indicates that the ‘kiss of peace’ had by that time entered into the typical Christian liturgy as a standard feature.

Paul ends this section with the admonition, ‘Greet one another with a holy kiss.’ The practice of embracing and kissing friends on the forehead or cheek was common in Old Testament times. Men would sometimes be kissed on the beard. Such kisses were in no way romantic, much less erotic, and kissing on the mouth was rare, except for married couples.

The ‘holy kiss’ was the custom, particularly at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Upon completion of the Lord’s Supper meal, the people would customarily greet one another with a kiss on the cheek. We still see that form of greeting in the Middle East today. We do not know when or why that custom passed out of practice in the church, but it must be considered as a custom, not as a principle.

Warmhearted Paul’s loving example challenges us. If our hearts beat with something of the pulse of the Apostle Paul, we will be ‘people persons’ who are affectionate to each other. This is the very plain meaning of verse 16, which completes Paul’s individual greetings to Rome: ‘Greet one another with a holy kiss.’ It is Biblical to express love and affection, even to the point of an embrace and a kiss. What a difference authentic Christian affection can make in a cold, indifferent world.

#### b) *External Greetings (16:16b)*

*All the churches of Christ greet you.*

Paul also often passes on greetings from other churches. Only here, however, are the greetings sent, generally, from ‘all the churches of Christ.’ The designation is probably not universal, however; Paul refers to those churches that he had been instrumental in planting in his ministry ‘from Jerusalem’ to Illyricum.’ By conveying greetings from so many of the churches, Paul

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again hints at his strategy to bring the Roman church into the sphere of churches that known and support him.

Paul extends greetings in behalf of ‘all the churches of Christ,’ doubtless referring to congregations he had recently visited. We know from the New Testament that there were differences of opinions in the early church, even among the most spiritual leaders, including the apostles. Even serious factionalism, such as that in the church at Corinth, was not unknown, but there were no denominations as we know them today, no splinter groups within the body of orthodox believers. They all simply were ‘the churches of Christ.’ Those believers, Jews and Gentiles, wealthy and poor, slave and free, famous and unknown, enjoyed in Christ a depth of fellowship and partnership the world has no way of understanding.

### 4. Greeting Lessons

#### *a) Moo*

As interesting as these greetings might have been for the first-century Christians (for who does not like to hear his or her name read aloud and honored?), modern readers are to be forgiven for thinking that this section of Romans is not the most edifying in the letter. We don’t learn much about Christian theology or the Christian life from a list of names! But there are two indirect lessons to be learned from it. First, Paul’s reference to co-workers (vv. 3, 9; cp. v. 7) reminds us that Paul was not a ‘long ranger’ kind of missionary. At every point in his ministry, Paul depended on a significant number of others who were working along with him. And if Paul needed such help, how much more do we. There is no room in modern ministry for the lone ranger approach either.

Second, Paul’s mention of nine women in this list reminds us (if we needed the reminder) that women played an important role in the early church. Moreover, five of these women – Prisca (v. 3), Junia (v. 7), Tryphaena and Tryphosa (v. 12), and Persis (v. 12) – are commended for their labor ‘in the Lord.’ Ministry in the early church was never confined to men; these greetings and other similar passages show that women engaged in ministries that were just as important as those of men. We have created many problems for ourselves by confining ‘ministry’ to what certain full-time Christian workers do. But it is important that we not over-interpret this evidence either. For nothing Paul says in this passage (even in v. 7) conflicts with limitations on some kinds of women’s ministry with respect to men such as are suggested by 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and other texts.

#### *b) Barnett*

Five observations may be made about those to be ‘greeted.’

First, we are struck by the repetition of reference to various persons as ‘beloved’ or being ‘in Christ’ or ‘serving the Lord.’ The common linkage of these persons to Christ is striking. Deep Christian commitment is implied by these references.

Second, Paul’s lengthiest ‘greetings’ are reserved for Prisca and Aquila and Andronicus and Junia, and they are singled out on account of their (likely) involvement in the Pauline mission. This is consistent with Paul’s method of securing theological stability in churches by identifying trusted and reputable leaders (cp. 1 Cor. 16:15-18). At the same time it is evident that Paul’s mission was no solo effort, but that many were involved, in varying ways and different levels.

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Third, apart from the commendation and introduction of Phoebe ‘the deacon of the church in Cenchreae,’ there is no mention of any office-bearer in this chapter, including among the Roman Christians. For all practical purposes, then, Christianity was a lay movement at that time. This would change towards the end of the New Testament period into the era of the so-called ‘apostolic fathers.’

Fourth, we are struck by the references to women involved in various forms of ministry. Phoebe is the honored bearer of the letter, and perhaps its expositor (vv. 1-2). Prisca’s name appears before her husband Aquila’s, suggesting some kind of practical pre-eminence. Junia, with her husband Andronicus, was an ‘eminent apostle,’ or missionary. Along with Phoebe, Prisca and Junia we also note Mary (‘who worked hard among you’), Tryphosa and Tryphaena, who were ‘workers in the Lord,’ Persis the sister (‘who worked hard in the Lord’), and Rufus’ mother (who cared for Paul. In an age when most women were uneducated and barred from religious leadership, the prominence of women in the mission to the Gentiles must have been striking.

Fifth, the twenty-six names reflect Greek, Roman, and Jewish origin. The general impression is one of relative affluence. Some of these are most likely traders (e.g., Prisca and Aquila). Others have aristocratic (Jewish) names (e.g., Aristobulus and Herodion). All are directly or indirectly addressed in terms of ‘households.’ The presence in Rome of Prisca and Aquila and Andronicus and Junia speak of people traveling throughout the Empire. Clearly these arrivals contributed significantly to the shape and directly of the new movement in Rome.

For next time: Read Romans 16:17-27.