

Romans 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Romans chapter 16. I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Sancia, 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, for she has been a patron of many, and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 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. Greet also the church and their house. Greet my beloved Apinatus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners.

They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. Greet Amplius, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Appelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my kinsmen Herodian. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.

Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. Greet Esencritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobus, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and Olympus, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught.

Avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you. But I want you to be wise as to what is good, and innocent as to what is evil.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you, as do Lucius, and Jason, and Sosipater, my kinsmen.

[2 : 1 1] I, Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you. Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages, but has now been disclosed, and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith. To the only wise God, be glory forevermore, through Jesus Christ. Amen. Romans chapter 16, after the immensely rich theology of the letter, might seem a little anticlimactic. However, examined more closely, we may find several aspects of it that will reward our attention. The most immediate thing that might jump out at the reader of the chapter is the sheer number of the names that are mentioned. By my count, 26 people in Rome are mentioned by name. A few others are mentioned without being mentioned by name, such as the members of various households, or the mother of

Rufus. It seems astonishing that Paul would know so many Christians in a church that he had yet to visit. T.W. Manson suggested that Romans 16 was a letter to Ephesus, attached to the epistle to the Romans, so that the letter could be sent on to them. However, there are a number of problems or weaknesses with that position, several of which are identified by Peter Lamp in an article, The Roman Christians of Romans chapter 16. He notes that it would have been likely that Paul would have had many more co-workers to address in Ephesus. Having such an attached letter would also be without precedent in Paul's writing.

A letter composed entirely of greetings would be remarkable for Paul, who couldn't resist getting into theology. A number of the names in this chapter also aren't found in many of the thousands of inscriptions that we have from Ephesus, although they are found in Rome. And then besides the fact that the manuscripts of Romans that we have don't end with Romans chapter 15, there is also the fact that Romans 15 would be a very unnatural ending to the book. Nowhere else in Paul's letters does Paul address quite so many people. Yet Rome was different. Rome was a church that Paul had not yet visited.

Perhaps this is precisely why Paul can greet such a long list of people personally. Greeting so many people in other churches would seem to single out people in a way that might fuel rivalries and status conflicts. However, when Paul has yet to visit, he is freer to single out people that he already knows. These people that Paul already knew in Rome were an important initial connection that he had with the congregation, which he would be able to build upon over time.

Along with the names in this list of greetings, Paul often adds a brief statement describing his relationship to them or saying something about their character or their service. Especially in the case of the people mentioned who have worked alongside Paul in the past, such as Prisca and Aquila, Epinatus or Andronicus and Junia, these were obvious character references for Paul. These people could commend him to the Roman church. This is another reason why the chapter makes most sense as one addressed to Rome, along with the rest of the letter. Paul would not require such references for almost every other church to which he wrote. Interestingly, Paul does not greet these people directly, but instructs the recipients of the letter to convey his greetings to the people in question.

[5 : 45] Perhaps this suggests that, in the first instance, this would not have been read to an entire gathered congregation of Roman Christians. Before moving to consider any of the names in particular, we should consider the fact that there are so many of them, and what this might suggest about the character of the early church, and of the church in Rome more particularly. It seems as though many of the Christians in the church in Rome were migrants from the east. Then there is the fact that some Romans would have spent some time living away from the capital. In Acts chapter 18, we discover another reason why Paul might have encountered so many Roman Christians. In verses 2 to 3, we learn of Paul's first acquaintance with Priscilla, or Prisca as she is here called, and Aquila.

And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked, for they were tent makers by trade. A number of Roman Jews had been expelled from the city by Claudius, before returning later. As Paul had been teaching in synagogues all around the east during this period, he doubtless would have met many of them, including many who would have returned at a later point, perhaps after being converted through his ministry. There is also the possibility that some of the names on the list Paul knew, not by personal acquaintance, but by reputation. Besides this, there is the amount of travel that people could undertake in the first century Roman world. As Lamp observes, from the biblical details given concerning him alone, we know that Aquila had moved from Pontus to Rome, to Corinth, and to Ephesus, and then probably back to Rome again. It would not be at all surprising if he had moved back to Rome by the time that Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans. There is also the possibility that some of the persons mentioned might have been associated with each other. Epinatus, for instance, mentioned immediately after Prisca and Aquila, may have travelled back to Rome with them.

Especially if, like Paul, several of the people mentioned had done missionary work as well, we should not be surprised if their paths would have crossed with Paul's elsewhere. This does give us a sense of how cosmopolitan the early church could be, and how extensively networked. This should be a source of confidence for us as Christians when we consider the greater strength, spread, and possibility of confirming eyewitness testimony in such an environment, along with the greater coordination of the message of the churches across vast regions.

The chapter begins by commending Phoebe to the Romans. Phoebe is presumably the one who bears the letter to Rome. She is a servant of the church at Sanctria, someone noted for her ministry.

Sanctria was in the region of Corinth, the eastern port of the Corinthian Isthmus. She was most likely a businesswoman, whose own affairs gave her reason to travel to Rome, and who was sufficiently known to and trusted by Paul that he could send an epistle of such great importance with her. She is described as a servant of the church in Sanctria. She is an emissary of, or a respected envoy for, her church in this instance, and the Romans should receive her with honour as one who acts on behalf of her congregation in various ways. More particularly, Phoebe is described as a patroness of many, including Paul himself, in the verse that follows.

[9 : 05] The role of patrons was very important in the early church, and it seems that a culturally disproportionate number of these patrons of the church were women. They presumably funded the ministries and the ministers of the church and hosted their assemblies. A wealthy businesswoman like Phoebe likely hosted the Sancrian church in her house and showed hospitality to missionaries like Paul who passed through the city. This is also something that was true of Jesus' ministry, as witnessed in Luke chapter 8 verses 1 to 3. Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities. Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Cusa, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their means. Such persons would have been of considerable importance to the early church, and likely enjoyed considerable honour in their congregations. Phoebe is the first of a number of women mentioned in this chapter. There are 26 names mentioned in verses 3 to 16, nine women and 17 men. However, as lamp remarks, of those especially praised for their service. Six or seven are women, Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, and perhaps also Rufus' mother, while only five or three are men. Such a list implies that women were active, prominent, and honoured in many quarters of the life of the early church. Prisca and Aquila, a couple we first met in Corinth in Acts chapter 18, come first in the list of the Christians in Rome.

They were some of Paul's dearest friends who had risked much for him, and to whom the wider church owed a considerable debt. They host a congregation in their house, probably one of several such congregations in the city. Perhaps the most controversial name on the list is that of Junia, whose name has often been translated as Junias, a male name. While technically possible, this is almost certainly a mistranslation. In the early church, Junia was identified rightly, I believe, as a woman.

by people who clearly opposed women in pastoral ministry, something which many modern readers of Romans have used her name to support. Andronicus and Junia were most likely a married couple, or perhaps a brother and sister, who travelled together. We have description of such situations in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 verse 5. Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?

They are described as Paul's kinsmen. This may mean that they were relatives of Paul, or simply, perhaps more likely, that they were Jews. They also seem to have been in prison alongside Paul at some point, maybe in Ephesus. The detail that has particularly made Junia a figure of much prominence in debate is the description of the couple as outstanding or well-known among the apostles.

While the ESV's translation, well-known to the apostles, is possible, it is much more likely that Andronicus and Junia are included among the apostles in some sense. They clearly aren't members of the twelve, but they are possibly apostles in the sense suggested in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 verse 1, as witnesses of the resurrected Christ, maybe among the 500 persons who saw the risen Christ at one time.

[12 : 29] Going further than this becomes speculative very quickly, but considering how prominent and widespread debates concerning them are, there are some points that we should make concerning Junia, and the ways that other women in this list are used in contemporary debates about women in pastoral ministry. We should, at the very outset, notice the presence of a number of prominent women in the list.

Whatever positions we hold concerning pastoral ministry, we should note the prominence of the various ministries of women more generally, and the honour that Paul held such women in. We have much clearer teaching on these matters elsewhere in the New Testament, and we shouldn't need to rely on speculation about such passages. Making questions of women in pastoral ministry hang upon the uses of particular words and phraseology in such passages is stretching the evidence far further than it can actually support. In debates on such matters, it is telling how often the word leadership is focused upon. Romans 16 clearly shows women being prominent figures in their churches, being key workers, and being honoured for their faithful service. However, the need to make a case for women in pastoral ministry leads to a focus upon these women as so-called leaders, which is a category that seems to be a rather clumsily fitted one, unsuited to the service that the women here are actually performing. Perhaps one of the lessons we should learn from this passage is that leadership should not have such a monopoly on honour, and that other forms of service in the life of the church should receive much more recognition. We should be aware of importing our modern assumptions about individuals filling essentially gender-neutral roles for which their sex is a matter of indifference, assumptions that arise in no small part from our modern economic order. In most societies across history and cultures, a person's sex colours the way that the roles they perform are perceived, and how those roles function, even when the roles they perform are nominally the same as roles the other sex can perform. A number of the women mentioned here are also mentioned alongside their husbands, their children, or their siblings. Rather than individuals performing gender-neutral roles, in many of these situations we seem to have husband-wife teams, or families who are known for their service. Clement of Alexandria, writing around the year 200 AD, speaks of the apostles making their wives fellow workers alongside them, with the wives focusing on ministering to women, to which the apostles themselves would not have had such ready access. In the case of Rufus' mother, Paul describes a woman performing an explicitly gendered role of service, acting as a mother to him. The domestic setting for many of the ministries that Paul addresses here, in house churches, as married missionary couples, as families, etc. naturally allowed for women to enjoy much more prominence as the face of their communities, sometimes because there were relatively few male converts around. As the church assumed a growing public profile, and the informality of house churches was replaced with more formal offices and ordered communities, the ministry of male leaders naturally assumed much greater prominence on the broader stages that the church was moving into, a development that could strengthen the entire church in certain ways. Nevertheless, in local communities, the more domestic and communally grounded ministries of women would still have enjoyed considerable honour and prominence, even though their ministries would not have been as prominent on the broader stages. Looking through the names, there are some scattered clues to social status, to the regions of origin that people come from. Most of them were probably born outside Rome. Slave-born and free-born identities are sometimes hinted at, and in the case of Andronicus and Junia, their Jewish origin. It seems likely that the majority of the Roman church were slaves or freedmen or women. Throughout this list, Paul often uses the words in the Lord or in Christ, speaking for instance of

Andronicus and Junia as being in Christ before him. Christ is the new realm of his people's existence and the source of their identity. Before sending his companions greetings and signing off the letter, Paul gives an exhortation. He is concerned that the Romans watch out for the type of people who cause divisions and set up obstacles. Such people are not motivated by the truth and the love and service of Christ, but are just in it for their own appetites. However, they can lead many naive people astray. Paul writes very positively about the Romans themselves, but he wants them to be wise in discerning what is good, and completely averse to that which is evil. Alluding to the promise of Genesis chapter 3 verse 15, he promises that God will crush Satan under their feet shortly. The serpent will be attacking them in various ways, but Paul is assured that they will prove victorious. In verses 21 to 24, Paul conveys greetings from his fellow workers, and his amanuensis, tertius, conveys his.

Timothy is described as Paul's fellow worker, presumably something already well known by Christians in the eastern Mediterranean region. The references to Gaius and Erastus suggest the possibility that Paul was writing from Corinth. Also, Erastus' public office is evidence of individuals with higher social status among the early Christians.

The book ends with a grand doxology, summing up the meaning of the gospel. In the fullness of time, according to his eternal purpose, and in fulfillment of prophetic promise, Jesus the Messiah is being proclaimed as the world's true Lord, and the one in whom the reign of God is established. This message is being proclaimed throughout the nations, so that all nations might submit to him with the obedience of faith. This is the gospel. This God, who has established his glorious kingdom in his Son, Jesus Christ, is also able to establish his people, secure in the strength of the kingdom that he is making known at this present time. A question to consider. Putting together various clues that we get in this chapter and elsewhere, what might we imagine the Roman church in the late 50s AD was like.