

Friends, Romans, Countrymen

📖 Romans 16:1-16

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Romans 16 is the most neglected chapter of this epistle and that because of the long list of names, all of whom we know nothing more from the NT for certain, excepting Priscilla and Aquila, and yet here we discover the more intimate and personal nuances of the apostle Paul toward the people God intertwined in his life. More than just Paul's converts, these were Paul's friends, traveling companions and ministry partners. In all there are 35 people named; nine of these were with Paul at Corinth when he wrote the letter and 26 were at Rome. 17 of the identified are men and seven are women. Two other unnamed brethren are mentioned and two other women. "How we wish we had the details of the stories behind each of these names!"¹ Two households are mentioned by name and three house churches. Most of the names are Gentile, reflecting the Gentile majority at the Church in Rome, and most of those are of slaves and freedmen and freedwomen.²

What is the significance of this? There are several things we should note. First, Paul was more than a soul winner, he was a friend maker. As Wiersbe says, "It shows that Paul was a friend maker as well as a soul winner. He did not try to live an isolated life; he had friends in the Lord, and he appreciated them. They were a help to him personally and to his ministry. While there may be a place for the secluded saint who lives alone with God, it is my conviction that most of us need each other."³ It was these converts become friends who extended the apostle Paul's ministry so that it went much further than the apostle alone could take it. Second, Paul appreciated women. We mention this specifically because the apostle is often criticized for hating women because he said things like 1 Cor 14:34, "The women are to keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves" and 1 Tim 2:12, "But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet." Yet here the woman hater Paul commends seven women by name and two other unnamed for their service in the Lord, help to him and even mothering of him. It seems then that the only criticism one can level at the apostle Paul is that he did not live according to the standards of 20th and 21st century feminism. The problem then is not with the apostle Paul but with the standards of feminism. And if someone does not recognize this, says Paul, he is not recognized. Third, the majority of those who responded to Paul's ministry were Gentiles. We know this because the majority of the names are Greek names. A few are Hebrew, but the majority are Greek and that is to be expected of the apostle to the Gentiles. He

was a Jew among Gentiles which seems so odd considering Paul's pre-conversion background as a Pharisee of Pharisees. Fourth, we see that the genius Paul was also quite personal, socially engaging, appreciative of others as well as a team player. Paul knew that the body of Christ did not just consist of Paul but of all spiritually gifted believers working together as a unit. He therefore mentions many of his co-workers, co-travelers and co-prisoners whom God brought into his life.

May we, too, learn to appreciate the believers God has intertwined in our lives, may we hold one another dear and minister together to maximize the ministry here that we all share in and extend it to the world outside these four walls.

We meet in 16:1-2 a woman named **Phoebe**. You see that she was from the church **at Cenchrea**, the port city of Corinth on the Saronic Gulf side (east). Corinth lays along the isthmus across which lay the *diolkos* or haul across, a four mile stretch that sailors hauled across their boats and goods rather than sail the 200 miles around the Peloponnesian Peninsula. Evidently **Phoebe** was won to Christ by Paul sometime during his first year and a half of ministry at Corinth.⁴ In verse 1 he says **I commend to you our sister Phoebe**. The word **commend** is *συνιστημι*. It means "to bring together as friends or in a trusting relationship by commending/recommending, present, introduce/recommend someone to someone else." Paul was giving the saints at Rome his personal recommendation of **Phoebe**. "Letters of commendation were common in Paul's day (cf. 2 Cor. 3:1)."⁵ They served as modes of introduction. She evidently was going to Rome on behalf of the apostle Paul.

She is said to be **a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea**. The word **servant** is the feminine *διακονος* which means "one who serves as an intermediary in a transaction, *agent, intermediary, courier*." Some have concluded that this supports the office of deaconess. For example, A. T. Robertson says, "Besides, right in the midst of the discussion in 1 Tim. 3:8-13 Paul has a discussion of *γυναικας* [*gunaikas*] (verse 11) either as women as deaconesses or as the wives of deacons (less likely though possible)."⁶ "The strict separation of the sexes made something like deaconesses necessary for baptism, visiting the women, etc."⁷ While it's true that women serve well in these areas the evidence for a distinct office of deaconess is scant. Probably the apostle had in mind the more general idea of a servant. The end of verse 2 describes **Phoebe as a helper of many, and of myself as well**. It seems best to view her as one who was continually serving in her local **church...at Cenchrea** and on many occasions the apostle Paul. On this occasion she is being commended by the apostle Paul for her service to him.

The particular service Phoebe carried out is being courier of the epistle to the Romans (ΠΡΟΣ ΡΩΜΑΙΟΥΣ). Therefore, while we have no original manuscripts extant today we know that this woman held the original manuscript of Romans in her own two hands. "Nothing else is known of her, though her name (Φοιβη [*Phoibē*]) means bright or radiant."⁸ She is the first of seven women mentioned by name in this chapter. Again, "Notice that the ministry of women in the Roman church is quite evident in this chapter. Paul referred to nine prominent women: Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus' mother, Julia, and Nereus' sister."⁹ Women

served right alongside the apostle Paul and were a great help to him. To him, as he says in verse 1, she is **our sister**. The Greek word *αδελφην* means “a female who comes from the same womb.” And obviously Paul does not mean the same physical womb and therefore he refers to the same spiritual womb, born of God as all believers and therefore showing the close familial relationship that all believers share (John 1:12-13).

In 16:2, what Paul recommends the saints at Rome do is **receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints**. “This word *ἅγιος* [*hagios*] had come to be the accepted term for followers of Christ.”¹⁰ The words **worthy of** refer to one as having weight, value. All saints are valued as such by God and our valuation ought to reflect his. Therefore, they ought to **receive her** or welcome her **in the Lord**. And further they are to **help her in whatever matter she may have need of you**. The words **help her** mean “to be at her disposal.” The point is that they should be at her disposal for any tasks that she may have need of while at Rome. The reason then stated is that **she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well**. The word **helper** is *προστατις* and means “a woman in a supportive role, *patron, benefactor*.” Used only here in the NT and supportive of our conclusion that she was not in an office of deaconess but one who volunteered to help in many capacities and perhaps had significant means as a wealthy patroness or influential noble. In any case, “The word illustrates her work as *διακονον* [*diakonon*] and is perhaps suggested here by *παραστήτε* [*parastēte*], just before.”¹¹ She was standing by to help others and they should help her in whatever she may need while in Rome.

Turning from **Phoebe** in 16:3 we meet **Prisca and Aquila**. Paul says **Greet** them. This word *ασπασασθε* is used 23 times in this chapter, a full third of its uses in the NT. It means “greet so as to call to remembrance.” We would say something like, “Tell them hello for me.” It means that the one doing the greeting wants to keep up relations.

The first that Paul wants to keep up relations with are **Prisca and Aquila**. This is the first of probably three husband-wife pairs that Paul greets. The others being in verse 7, Andronicus and Junias and verse 15 Philologus and Julia. However, only in this husband-wife pair does Paul mention the wife’s name first. When he first met them at Corinth in Acts 18:2 he mentioned the husband first but upon learning that she was from a prominent family of Rome, Paul customarily referred to her first (Acts 18:18, 26; 2 Tim 4:19), although not always (cf 1 Cor 16:19). The husband, Aquila, was a Jew of Pontus and he lived with **Prisca**, the diminutive of Priscilla, at Rome until they were expelled by Claudius during the riots. This resulted in their meeting Paul at Corinth where they worked together in the leather-making trade. This is where most get the idea that Paul made tents. But the word actually refers to one who makes all kinds of leather goods and wares. We suppose that through their working relationship Paul shared the gospel with them and they believed. He must have been quite fond of them because when he left for Ephesus he took them with him and left them at Ephesus to form a ministry base for his soon hoped-for return. While they were there they heard a very eloquent Jew named Apollos speaking in the synagogue whose doctrine was deficient. Afterward they took him aside and explained to him more fully the things that had transpired and eventually sent him to Corinth. Later Claudius allowed the Jews to return and so **Prisca and Aquila** returned to Rome only later to join up with Paul at Ephesus again. Therefore, as Paul says at

the end of verse 3 they were his co-workers in Christ Jesus. Paul had enough people working against him. It was good to have this couple working with him. Their business with him was **Christ Jesus**.

In 16:4 we find what they did for the apostle Paul and others and his appreciation for them as well as others and their appreciation. They were missionaries extraordinaire. He says, **who for my life**, that is, **for my soul, risked their own necks**. The word **risked** technically means "laid down their necks" as under the axe of the executioner. Where they may have laid down their necks for the axe of the executioner we don't know. Perhaps at Ephesus when the riot of Demetrius in Acts 19 drove Paul to the great theatre for investigation. We don't know but Paul says that he **thanks** them. He felt obligated to them for their sacrifice for him. Dearly beloved by Paul. And not only Paul gave them thanks **But also all the churches of the Gentiles**. Prisca and Aquila had a huge missionary impact for if they had not risked their own necks for the apostle Paul then all the Gentile churches would have suffered. So in that way they had sacrificially given to **all the churches of the Gentiles**. These churches, of course, had Jews, but they were predominately Gentile. Prisca and Aquila were a Gentile and a Jew couple and so together they made a great team working in churches that had very delicate Gentile-Jew issues.

And 16:5a they also had a church in their house. Paul says, **also greet the church that is in their house**. So at Rome they had a house church. For the most part the early church met in homes (cf 1 Cor 16:19; Phil 2; Col 4:15), although some wealthy Christians like Gaius at Corinth had a large enough home for all the saints in the city to meet and Paul rented a school in Ephesus from Tyrannus in order to teach larger gatherings. Later in the 2nd century house churches were modified so that one portion was reserved for living and another portion for church. When Constantine proclaimed Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, buildings were constructed for churches for the first time. The bottom line is that where we meet is not a matter of principle but of practice. Neither is wrong. We have many today telling us that meeting in a building is wrong and we must meet in a house. This is wrong. Jesus taught from a boat, a hillside, at a riverside, a house, a synagogue, the temple and even while journeying. There is no designated place we must meet. It is a matter of practice and not principle. Only principles are binding. Therefore, neither is wrong. But we would be right to say that for the most part the early church met in homes and that "The several house churches in one city would constitute the church in that city (1 Cor. 1:2)."¹² The church at Prisca and Aquila's home was therefore one among many house churches that constituted the church in Rome.

In 16:5b we meet **Epaenetus**. He is simply said to be **beloved** of Paul. "Four persons are called "beloved" by Paul: Epenetus (Rom. 16:5), Amplias (Rom. 16:8), Stachys (Rom. 16:9), and Persis (Rom. 16:12)."¹³ Beloved means one who holds a special relationship to someone. The special relationship Paul had with Epaenetus is that he was **the first convert to Christ from Asia**. **Asia** is not the continent but the province in what is today Western Turkey. The capital of this province was Ephesus and Paul came there on his third missionary journey. This man was the first of Paul's converts in this province. The literal Greek says not **first convert** but "first fruit." The point

is that when Paul came into the province and this man believed it was a sure sign that a harvest was to follow. At Ephesus there was a great harvest. All seven churches in Rev 2-3 were established while Paul was at Ephesus. So pervasive was the gospel that Luke says “all Asia heard the word of God.” Population estimates at the time were around 350,000. Epaeetus was the first among them to come **to Christ**. The expression **to Christ** is literally “into Christ.” **Epaeetus** came **into Christ** when he first believed the gospel, just as all who believe the gospel go out of Adam and **into Christ**.

In 16:6 we meet another **Mary** or possibly Mariam. It is a Hebrew name and thereby a Jewish woman. She is the third woman mentioned so far. Paul says, she **worked hard for you**. The Greek says “she poured much into you.” She evidently poured a lot into the believers at Rome; so much that Paul knew.

In 16:7, **Greet Andronicus and Junias**. This is probably another husband-wife pair but we can't be certain because **Junias** is disputed in the manuscripts. **Andronicus** “...is a Greek name found even in the imperial household.”¹⁴ If so, then Paul's gospel reached all the way into Caesar's palace. Paul refers to them as **my kinsmen**. The Greek word *συγγενής* can refer to the same family, tribe or nation. We can't tell but probably they were a husband-wife pair of the same tribe as Paul, the tribe of Benjamin, but if not then certainly of the same Jewish nation. We take note of the fact that just because a Jew believes in Jesus does not mean that person is no longer Jewish. If anything that person completes his Jewishness. In any case, not only were they his **kinsmen** but they were also his **fellow prisoners**. We don't know when. 2 Cor 11:23 says Paul was in prison times beyond number. On at least one of these times they had been in prison with Paul. They were therefore outstanding believers as Paul now remarks, **outstanding among the apostles**. Literally, “Stamped, marked (ἐπι σῆμα [*epi sēma*]).”¹⁵ There are several options available as to what it means to be “marked” among the apostles. Ryrice things it simply means “Better, well known to the apostles”¹⁶ Others want to take it further and say that they were not of the twelve but of a more general class of apostles who saw the resurrected Lord. This is possible since the later part of the verse says they **were in Christ before** Paul. They may have come to Christ early on and even been witnesses of his resurrection. If so, they would be classed more generally among the apostles as Barnabas, Silas and others who saw the resurrected Lord. In any case they were either **outstanding** as apostles or their reputation was outstanding to the apostles. What we can tell for sure is Paul says they were **in Christ before me**. This means they had come to faith in Christ prior to Acts 9. Much to the dismay of mid-Acts dispensationalists, the fact they were **in Christ** prior to Acts 9 shows that the Church had begun prior to Acts 9. Acts 2 is the only logical conclusion.

In 16:8 Paul says **Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord**, as **Epaeetus** in verse 5, **Stachys** in verse 9 and **Persis** in verse 12. Four in this chapter are said to be **Beloved** by Paul. To be **beloved** means to have a special relationship. We don't know the source of the special relationship Paul had with **Ampliatus**, only the fact of the special relationship, though we will say that it is okay to have a more special relationship with some believers than others. Paul did and Jesus did and it is normal.

In 16:9 Paul says **Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ**. The name **Urbanus** was “A common Roman slave name found among members of the household” (Sanday and Headlam).¹⁷ Since Paul says **our fellow worker** he is probably referring to the apostle’s fellow worker. He is **in Christ** as are all in this list. We may not know them now but we will know them in the hereafter. All these people you will know because we are all in the same family. In verse 9 we also find **Stachys**, beloved as **Epaenetus, Ampliatus and Persis**. The name **Stachys** was “A Greek name, rare, but among members of the imperial household.”¹⁸ If so, then again we see that Paul’s gospel reached even into Caesar’s palace.

In 16:10 **Greet Apelles**, “A name among Jews and a famous tragic actor also.”¹⁹ Probably a Jew but certainly the **approved in Christ**. The word **approved** is *δοκιμος* and means one who has been tested and approved as genuine. He evidently faced some great test, counted it all joy, persevered in faith. Also **in Christ** as everyone in this chapter. Then in 16:10 we meet **those of the household of Aristobulus**, household in italics but probably correct. Paul greeted not **Aristobulus** but **those of Aristobulus**, that is, those who lived in his house. These were slaves. Many slaves believed in the first century and in this way found freedom. **Aristobulus** is the name of a grandson of Herod the Great. It may be him, though if it was he would have been dead by this time. In any case, the important thing is that Paul greeted only those slaves of this household.

In 16:11 we meet **Herodion**, another of Paul’s **kinsmen**, and so either a family member or of the same tribe, the tribe of Benjamin, or simply a fellow Jew. **Herodion** also related to the house of Herod the Great. In 16:11b Paul greets **those of the household of Narcissus**.²⁰ **Household** in italics again but correct, they are **those of Narcissus**, that is, slaves, **who are in the Lord**. Christianity was popular among slaves as they realized that **in the Lord** they could find freedom, probably much in the same way modern day prisoners find freedom **in the Lord**; enclosed behind bars and stone but free in their minds and souls.

In 16:12, **Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa** – “Tryphena (v. 12, “dainty”) and Tryphosa (“delicate”) may have been sisters.”²¹ “...possibly even twins.”²² More women are added to Paul’s list. They are said to have been **workers in the Lord**. “Four women were said to have worked hard.” Ministry is hard work. It carries all four stresses; mental, emotional, spiritual and physical. It has been noted that of all work it is the only one that carries all four stresses.

In 16:13, **Greek Rufus, a choice man in the Lord**. “Whether **Rufus** is the same person mentioned in Mark 15:21 or not is uncertain. If so, then he, as a son of Simon of Cyrene, was a North African.”²³ It’s “...A very common slave name.” Paul calls him **choice**. It is the Greek word *εκλεκτον* which is often transliterated as “elect” and some prefer to go that route. But the word does not mean elect but select. It is a reference to quality not station. As A. T. Robertson says, “Not “the elect,” but “the select.”²⁴ In other words, this man had a premium quality about him that Paul valued highly. Also **greet...his mother**, who Paul said, was also **mine**. **Rufus’** mother was obviously not Paul’s birth mother but one who had been like a mother to him, who had given him motherly care. Such a strange remark for one who is claimed to have hated women.

In 16:14, **Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them.** The fact that all five are mentioned together indicates they shared something in common. Probably they were the leaders of a house church as indicated by the expression **and the brethren with them.** All the names are common slave names. For a third time, Christianity was popular among slaves since it made them freed in a sense. This is consistent with Paul who said in 1 Cor 1:26 of those who were called, “not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble.” Christianity has always developed a strong following in the weaker, poorer classes of people. It has been called a poor man’s religion. That is because in Christ we become infinitely wealthy.

In 16:15, **Greet Philologus and Julia.** They are likely another husband-wife pair. This would make them the third in addition to Priscilla and Aquila in verse 3 and possibly Andronicus and Junias in verse 7. Together with **Nereus and his sister, and Olympus, and all the saints who are with them** indicates this is another house church. Again, house churches were typical but all the house churches in one city constituted the church of that city. So with the conclusion of verse 15 we have seen the first 26 names; 17 men, two unnamed, seven women, two unnamed, countless other saints unnamed. To them all Paul sends greetings.

In 16:16, **Greet one another with a holy kiss.** This was the standard customary salutation. In their culture it was to them what shaking hands is to us; though men only kissed men and women only kissed women. This, of course, is not any **kiss** but a **holy kiss**, set apart. “The “holy kiss” (Paul’s term, Rom. 16:16) was an expression of Christian love and was apparently restricted to one’s own sex.”²⁵

As a final salutation Paul says, **All the churches of Christ send greetings.** “Of all these individuals only Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament for certain; yet Paul knew them all individually and sent personal greetings to them and their associates.”²⁶

“This list shows the parts that people played in Paul’s ministry and the ministry of the churches. Phebe was a “succourer” [servant] of many. Priscilla and Aquila were “helpers” and “laid down their own necks” for Paul. The conversion of Epenetus led to the salvation of others in Asia. Mary “bestowed much labor.” Andronicus and Junias went to prison with Paul.”²⁷ Both men and women, singles and married, were involved in ministry with Paul. Are you involved in this ministry? Ministry is not a one man show. Ministry is not sitting and soaking. Ministry is meeting the needs of others, evangelism and training. There are many ways you can help others, reach out with the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection, freely bestowed on all who believe and extend our reach with the training through the audio and livestream ministry. If you want to minister rather than simply be ministered to, if you want to be a partaker in these things as these people were partakers in Paul’s ministry then let’s do it.

This chapter shows how the spiritually gifted worked and lived in the Lord among one another, the body of Christ woven together as a spiritual tapestry and the great friendships that develop from sharing in ministry among us.

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- ¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 565.
- ² Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 15:33.
- ³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 565.
- ⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 565.
- ⁵ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 16:1.
- ⁶ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 16:1.
- ⁷ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 16:1.
- ⁸ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 16:1.
- ⁹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 16:1.
- ¹⁰ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 16:2.
- ¹¹ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 16:2.
- ¹² Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible: New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update*, Expanded ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 1813.
- ¹³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 565.
- ¹⁴ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 16:7.
- ¹⁵ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 16:7.
- ¹⁶ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible: New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update*, Expanded ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 1813.
- ¹⁷ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 16:9.
- ¹⁸ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 16:9.
- ¹⁹ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 16:10.
- ²⁰ "There was a famous freedman of this name who was put to death by Agrippa. Perhaps members of his household."
- ²¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 16:8.
- ²² John A. Witmer, "Romans," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 500.
- ²³ John A. Witmer, "Romans," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 500.

²⁴ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 16:13.

²⁵ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible: New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update*, Expanded ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 1983.

²⁶ John A. Witmer, "Romans," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 501.

²⁷ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 566.