

## The Church is People

### Romans 16:1-15

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What is a church? There are lots of ways to describe a church: it's the gathered redeemed; the representation of God on earth; the pillar and foundation of the truth—all true. But at its most essential level, a church is people. People. Real human beings. For all the ink spilt philosophizing about who the church is or what it should be, what is often overlooked is that the church is people.

*The church is people.* Our church is people. We are not primarily an organization or a ministry or a charitable nonprofit, we are people. People are the church. The church is people.

One person who understood this was the Apostle Paul. Paul was no ivory tower apostle who wrote great theology but disdained people. Nor was he a celebrity apostle who gave great sermons and wrote great books but was never seen around people. Paul loved people as individuals. I think of the Philippian jailer who was about to take his own life thinking Paul had escaped. Paul yelled, *we're here!* He went to the Philippian jailer's home. The family all received Christ. Over and over, Paul loved people because he believed Jesus loved and died for them.

We feel this apostolic love come through interpersonally in Romans 16—the last chapter of Romans. If our Romans series was a flight, the flaps are deployed, and the wheels are down. We are about to land this thing. But not too soon as we want to wring out of Romans everything we can. And Chapter 16 is different from any other chapter in Romans and different from any other chapter of any letter Paul writes.

Paul greets by name 26 different people at the church at Rome. 26! Here's the thing: he's never been there. Some he knows personally. Many he knows of and greets them as well. Let me read the text.

*"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, 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 in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, 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 Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena 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 Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you"* (Romans 16:1-16).

Let's spend a little time on the three most famous names here and then learn from the others more generally.

## Phoebe

We start with Phoebe and we note that Phoebe is the only one here NOT greeted, but rather given a commendation. *"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, 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"* (Romans 16:1-2).

Phoebe is described here as a sister and a servant and supporter. **Sister** means that she was a woman and she was a Christian. It is quite a privilege to be called a sister by an apostle. She is called a **supporter**, or as the ESV translates it, *patron*. A supporter, most likely financially. This would indicate she was well-to-do, enough to be a financial supporter of Paul's ministry, the church at Cenchrae, and Paul says, many others as well. I think if you went to Phoebe's house, on her refrigerator were the magnet photos of many ministries and missionaries. We are not told how she came into this level of wealth. She may have been a businesswoman, perhaps like Lydia, the seller of purple from Thyatira who was living in Philippi. Paul met her at the Philippian river where he had gone to pray. She became a Christian and a supporter of gospel ministry.

History is filled with such women. Women of means and women of generous spirit who steward their wealth for kingdom purposes. I think of Lady Townshend who funded George Whitefield as another example. Even Jesus himself was supported by such women, *"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 Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means"* (Luke 8:1-3). Praise God for the generous spirit of women who love God and use money to advance kingdom causes.

Sister. Supporter. **Servant**. One clear example of her servant spirit is that Paul urges them to welcome her in the Lord as she is likely carrying this letter to the Romans there herself. If you've written the greatest theological paper of all time, you don't let just anyone deliver it. Paul had high trust in her. She was a dear *servant* of the church.

A few comments on this as there is debate about this statement. *"Phoebe a servant of the church at Cenchrae"* (Romans 16:1). The Greek word for servant is *diakonos*. This word is used many times in the New Testament to celebrate servanthood, which we all see as a Christian virtue. But it also is the word used for the office of deacon in 1 Timothy 3. Hence, the NIV and NLT translating it *deacon* but ESV, KJV, and NASB going with *servant*. In truth, no one is sure. At a minimum, it is praising her for her servant spirit, at a maximum it is indicating an office like deacon for women, often called a deaconess.

Either way, I think we would all agree that the serving spirit of our sisters in our church (and probably every church) often outshines the men. Our church rides on the backs of godly women who balance their busy lives to give time and energy to make this church go. Praise God for the many, many Phoebes among us.

## Pricilla and Aquilla

*"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 that meets in their house"* (Romans 16:3-5).

If you haven't read the book of Acts, these might be unfamiliar names to you, but they figure prominently in the story. It is often noted that Prisca, short for Priscilla, the wife, is consistently mentioned before Aquilla the husband. That's odd for the culture of that day. It's speculated that she was more well known or gifted to explain this. Again, we don't know. But as a man pretty much only known now as the husband of Jennifer, I can relate.

This couple provides a wonderful example of a couple wholly devoted to gospel ministry. They were tentmakers, like Paul, and apparently successful at it. They travelled extensively, and their home in Rome was large enough to host a house church in it. Remember, we are talking about the first century. There is *Little House on the Prairie* and then there's the *Little House on the Mediterranean*. The normal ancient home was a tiny house compared to even a modest modern home. Only the wealthy would have had a home that could host more than a few people. Aquilla and Priscilla did. They had a home in Rome but lived abroad. They served with Paul in Corinth and Ephesus. Famously in Ephesus they met Apollos, a great orator and religious man to whom they explained the gospel. Apollos became a great leader in the early church, and many believe, wrote the book of Hebrews. They were that kind of impact couple. They loved the Lord and loved the gospel. Tentmaking was their side hustle; the gospel was their passion.

I'll pause and ask the couples of our church, how much kingdom serving is going on in your marriage? So many Christian couples' marriages lack energy because they lack a motivating, uniting principle. Cheap substitutes are the Cubs and wine tasting parties. Your marriage needs a worthy common passion. What better passion to unite a marriage than mutual gospel ministry for Jesus Christ? I think many Christian marriages would be substantially improved if the shared interest was serving Jesus together. Perhaps we should market our serving opportunities this way: *Does your marriage stink? Have we got a missions trip for you!* All married couples, learn from Aquilla and Priscilla.

## Rufus

*"Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well."*

The reason Rufus is fascinating requires some New Testament Sherlock Holmes. If we go back to when Jesus was struggling to carry his cross, here is what Mark's gospel says, *"And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross"* (Mark 15:21).

Simon of Cyrene carries Jesus' cross from the city out to Golgotha. It's noted by Mark that Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus. A curious detail to include! Why? Where did Mark write his gospel? In Rome, under the guidance of Peter. Why would Mark include Simon's kids? One very solid possibility is that there in Rome among the Roman Christians was Rufus himself. Imagine having an eyewitness to Jesus' crucifixion in your church? How often must someone have come up to him and said, *tell me what happened. What did you see?* Later, Paul writes Romans and says, *Greet Rufus*. Do we know for sure this is the same Rufus? No. Is it possible? Perhaps. A cautious yes. There is fascinating early church biography here in Romans 16.

Rather than go one by one through 26 people, let's step back and see the forest here. What do we learn from Romans 16?

### **The Church Spans All Classes and Categories of Society: *The Gospel is For Everyone!***

There are 26 individuals listed here. Two families. At least five house churches. One set of twins, *Tryphaena and Tryphosa*. Greek names. Latin names. Roman names. Jewish names. Gentile names. Wealthy people. Slaves and freed men and women. Eight of the names are female names. There are very highly connected people in Roman society and even some from the imperial Roman house.<sup>1</sup>

You look at the membership list for the church at Rome and it's a melting pot of every class, gender, race, social status, rich and poor, the famous, the never-heard-of-'em, and everyone in between.

If all you had was the book of Romans, not only could you have a deep theology of the gospel (chapters 1-11), you get to chapter 16, and you must conclude that the gospel is for everyone and the church is for everyone! There's arguably no category NOT mentioned here.

This is a tremendous truth that must be repeated over and over. The gospel is not a gospel merely for the rich, the poor, the powerful, the helpless, the well placed or the untouchables, it is a *gospel for everyone*. No matter who you are, your skin color, your story, your status, Jesus died for you. The Roman church reflects the cosmopolitan makeup of its city.

Now you know where I am going. If I have said it once, I have said it a hundred times, we can know the vitality of our church by whether it looks like our community. And since we are in this incredibly diverse community, we should celebrate the gospel's diverse effectiveness and appeal as we see that diversity in our congregation. All are welcome to the gospel of Jesus. Paul celebrates this diversity by greeting everyone in every category! So must we.

### **God Sees Us Corporately and Individually**

I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this one but a reminder of the glorious doctrine of *union with Christ*. This key doctrine of Romans is how God saved us. When Adam sinned, we all sinned with him. But by union with Jesus, when Jesus died and rose again, we died and rose with him. This language is corporate. We're all in this together.

This may seem a bit impersonal, like we are just a number to God; one of the masses of people he saved. But then you get to Romans 16 and when God wrote his book, he included individuals *by name*. In the Old Testament, genealogies. In the New Testament, Romans 16. This echoes the parable of Jesus describing the Good Shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to find and care for the one. Each of these names represents a person. A life. Jesus loves "the church," and he loves each person in the church. Jesus is not a rancher, he's a shepherd. He knows and loves you by name.

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<sup>1</sup> See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans* (Ada, MI: Baker Publishing House, 1998), 792, 797.

## Great Theology Includes Loving Other Christians

Over the years, I have had run-ins with many a self-impressed theologian. They love to talk theology. They are passionate for truth. They will argue every piece of theological lint. I have also observed that often these warriors for truth struggle to get along with people. They are abrasive. Condescending. They know it all except how to love people. They fail to realize that love is theological too.

Here we have the greatest theologian who ever lived—Paul. Right here in the greatest theological treatise ever written, filling an entire chapter with love language reflecting deep and meaningful friendships with others.

Mark it down. If you can't love and serve along with other Christians, your theology is trash. Love is the ultimate indication of who has their theology right. *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing"* (1 Corinthians 13:1-2).

## Let's Get Verbal in Our Love and Encouraging Language!

Twenty-six names! Everyone gets a greeting. Many of them get more than just a greeting, they get affirming, loving words applied to them. *Beloved Epaphroditus... Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord... My fellow workers... A mother to me.* Who talks like this? Apparently mature Christians do. Paul did. The Holy Spirit inspired him to write this.

I think many of us are way too reserved in your love language to each other. When was the last time you said to a non-family member, fellow Christian, *I love you*? Men especially, we don't throw out the love word much to each other. I remember, years ago, a man in our church even struggled to tell his young children, *I love you*. It is a warped masculinity that isn't comfortable with words like, *beloved, love, brother, sister, mother, I love you*. Of course, the problem could be that we actually don't love fellow Christians. That's an issue for another day.

Today I'm urging us to get comfier with love language and urging us to say it, text it, write it down, like Paul did. Men, what other male Christian in your life should you be saying, *I love you* to? Would you do it? I throw it down as a challenge.

## What Could be Better Than Being Named in the Book of Romans?

How special to have your name in the Bible, right? What better book could there be to have your name in? There is one. There is a better book to have your name in, even better than Romans and even better than the Bible:

*"And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done... And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire"* (Revelation 20:12, 15).

The book of life is the book of names of every person who has received Christ as their Savior. Someday, that list of names will be read. Those who are in the book are welcomed into eternal life with God and great joy forever. Those who are not are punished forever. The difference is not who was good and who was not. Every name in there is a sinner. The

difference is those in the book of life have trusted and believed in Jesus as their Savior. Is your name listed in that book? *Is Jesus my Lord and Savior?* If not, put your trust in him as Savior and Lord today.

We know Phoebe's there. More importantly, she's in that book. We know Aquilla and Priscilla are there. More importantly, they are in that book. We know Rufus is there. Let's make sure our name is there, too.

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