

## **Romans 16:1-16 The importance of working together in ministry**

### **Introduction**

It would be so tempting to skip sections of the Bible like this. After all none of us read telephone directories for fun! A list of names and personal details doesn't sound like a particularly promising passage of Scripture to come to church to think about on a Sunday morning. Yet it reveals to us a lot about the author of the letter- Paul- in an age before the internet and all kinds of social media. Given his outstanding networking skills in his more mature years I think it likely that were he alive today he would be making the most of various forms of social media opportunities. As I have said before he hasn't been to Rome before. This church was planted by ordinary believers not leading figures like Peter or Paul. Despite the claims of the Romans Catholic Church neither of these major figures ever led this church as its pastor, though they may have attended it for a time when living in the city. For some of us who were born before the explosion of social media forms and internet based communications that world is one where we are less than totally at home or in some cases not comfortable with it and so we choose- as is our right- to stick with other forms of communication that work well for us. However, as we have seen in our new work in Panmurefield the majority of those attending events are of a generation familiar with and regular users of the newer means of communication. It is impossible to tell how things will turn out in the future, but as Christians anything that makes our job easier in terms of communicating our faith or in inviting people to opportunities for witness may be a good thing.

Paul has not been to Rome. There is no form of regular public communications. The postal system as we know it was still nineteen centuries away from invention. The state had its own imperial post for diplomatic mail but private citizens could not use its mail carriers. Telephones are not in common use till well into the twentieth century. In the light of this difficulty how did Paul know so many people in a church he had not visited? As you read his letters how did he come to know so many people in the Early Church? It was not just in the churches he planted that this was the case. What is very clear is that he must have made a lot of time to get to know people when fellowship opportunities arose. He did not just stick to chatting to his friends but made a real effort to build ties with other Christian men and women. I think this is an important point to pick up from this letter. Will you and I not wonder who someone is in church but go and say 'hello', introduce yourself. Don't worry too much about not noticing someone who has been around for a little while. We all have to start somewhere! In the Christian family we actually only accomplish the things we are intentional about. If we don't make an effort to speak to people, and that is harder for some of us by temperament than others, then it won't happen. All of us at times have been grateful for someone else making the point of talking with us –so why not do the same with someone else. Likewise we must not assume that because someone else is good at it that we can leave to a few excellent networkers. Here are a list of Christian men and women of whom we may know nothing except their names. But these were people who mattered to God and to Paul in God's service. We thank God for the work that each of them did in the capital city of the Roman Empire in advancing God's kingdom. Who were they? Paul will begin with a special focus on one Christian, a lady called Phoebe on whose behalf he will give a special commendation.

## **1. A personal commendation of Phoebe** (Romans 16:1-2)

(a) **The recommendation** (Romans 16:1) *I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchrea.* In the ancient world right up to the last century people obtained letters of recommendation from their employers and from their local churches when they were moving to another part of the country or even another country. In II Corinthians 3:1-3 Paul makes reference to this practice. *Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?* <sup>2</sup> *You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone.* <sup>3</sup> *You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.* Luke, in Acts 18:27, records that Apollos a fairly new convert but gifted speaker was given such a letter to show to believers in an area of Greece called Achaia, to confirm his credentials. He wrote: *When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brother encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him.* There were very few places to stay when people travelled, certainly not affordable accommodation. The Christians sought to assist fellow believers by providing hospitality for them when they passed through their communities. However, there were people of doubtful reputation who discovered this practice and tried to exploit the opportunities for free accommodation. The practice of asking for letters of commendation from a person's home church was intended to prevent this kind of thing happening (L.L. Morris, *Romans*, p.528). Phoebe clearly had a letter written by Paul to commend her to whoever she presented it on her travels.

One of our churches, Adelaide Place Baptist Church, Glasgow, has kept a number of nineteenth century letters of Christians who had moved to that city for work reasons and who had sought to join the church. Although most Baptist churches no longer look for such letters they do occasionally still come and it is always encouraging to read of the good contribution a brother or sister has made in a previous congregation. However, in the ancient world travel and relocation for work purposes had been something very few people had done –with the obvious exception of certain types of merchants and traders- due to the lack of security and the absence of means of transportation to convey them from one place to another. However, in the Roman Empire in the First Century AD there had been increasing peace and security which provided opportunities for people with the financial means to travel to do so. God in His sovereignty had opened up the way for the Early Christian missionaries to travel around the Mediterranean countries into North Africa and Europe on these new Roman roads as well as by the increased shipping fleets that connected ports in that region. In addition, the majority of people could speak a common and simplified form of the Greek language so outside of the more rural communities the missionaries would have been readily understood by the people that heard their open air evangelistic preaching or more formal talks in hired premises. When we add to this the fact that an unusually high proportion of the population were increasingly open to new ideas about faith and religious practices it was a most opportune time for missionary work just as the Early Church began. God's timing here was excellent.

Out of this lengthy list of names Paul had written why does he highlight this lady Phoebe? The obvious reason is that she is the carrier of the letter to Rome. Phoebe has a reason almost certainly connected with her business for travelling to Rome. It gives Paul an ideal opportunity to write a letter to the local Christian congregation informing them of his desire to visit them in the next few years on his way to start the work of Christian evangelism in Spain. In the providence of God this is almost certainly the most valuable item she ever carried in her travels in the Roman world. What do we know about her? In essence very little, but from the few clues available we can get an idea about some aspects of her life. First of all

her name Phoebe; It is the feminine form of Phoibos, a name for the Greek god Apollo. Immediately this indicates that her background was pagan and not Jewish. A large number of residents in the cities of the Roman Empire had their origins in slavery. New owners named their captives with familiar choices from their own cultural context rather than use their birth names (L.L. Morris, Romans, p. 528). There were some good owners who rewarded hard working slaves with their freedom after some years of service. The majority of these freed men and women chose to continue working with their former master on a salaried basis as it was difficult to trade independently in that social context. Phoebe is certainly a woman who both has her freedom to travel and the means to do so. It is most likely that she is a business woman like Lydia whom Paul encountered on his first visit to Philippi. Lydia was the leader of a ladies prayer gathering in that Roman colony. She was a Turkish business woman of considerable means who traded in purple cloth providing material at the premium end of the market (Acts 16:13-15). In Phoebe's case we have no knowledge of her particular occupation. She lived at Cenchrea, one of two ports for Corinth either side of the Isthmus of Corinth, a narrow strip of land that connected the landmass containing Corinth with the rest of Greece. It was an ideal place of residence for a trader or business person with links to other parts of the Roman Empire.



Greece and Western Turkey First Century AD

Most importantly Paul tells his readers Phoebe was a fellow Christian from a congregation in Cenchrea. What is more she is a significant leader in this congregation *a deacon of the church in Cenchrea* (Romans 16:1). Luke records Paul booking a passage on a boat to Syria from Cenchrea in Acts 18:18. The deacons at that time in the Early Church had a significant pastoral function (Acts 6:1-7) caring for the needy in the congregation. But this did not mean that some deacons could not engage in other ministries. Luke highlights Philip's work in evangelising in Samaria, for example. (*Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.* <sup>5</sup> Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there (Acts 8:4-5a) So Phoebe is clearly someone well known to Paul; she has been a respected leader and worker in the Church at Cenchrea prior to undertaking this important mission for Paul. The fact that Paul highlights her qualities here at the start of Romans 16 is a testimony to her dedication to the cause of Christ. What does Paul say about her to the congregation in Rome? (b) **The request** (Romans 16:2a) <sup>2</sup> I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of His people... He has explicitly told them that Phoebe is a fellow Christian and whom they should welcome into their midst and be hospitable to her. In practice this meant that she should be, where possible, provided with somewhere to stay for a few days in Rome. The ministry of hospitality was a prominent one in the Early Church. It was something other people noticed with respect. But not all professing believers were willing to do this. The short letter, 3 John

was written to an elder in a congregation called Gaius who was facing a real struggle with another leader (elder?) Diotrephes who wished to control that church and certainly was opposed to the hospitality culture associated with the Christina Churches of that day. John the Apostle wrote these words: *Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. <sup>6</sup>They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honours God. <sup>7</sup>It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. <sup>8</sup>We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth. <sup>9</sup>I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. <sup>10</sup>So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church (3 John vs5-10).* Paul assumes this practical form of Christian service is being exercised in Rome and elsewhere so we can be reasonably confident that it was a standard practice amongst these First Century Christians. Although this level of provision is less frequently required today it is good for us to exercise the ministry of hospitality in its varied forms. I never cease to be encouraged at the private acts of hospitality that I come across as members of the congregation provide care such as meals for people that would greatly benefit from it.

(c) **The reason for this request** (Romans 16:2b) *and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.* Paul gives us no hints as to what help she may require. Certainly before the age of maps and more recent technological aids a local guide directing you to places would be highly beneficial. Companionship might have been appreciated, although it is most likely that Phoebe would have travelled with a group of other people, possibly some of her employees, rather than travelling alone. Paul describes her as *the benefactor of many people.* In other words Phoebe was not only good through her business at making money, but she was also generous at sharing it with other people, especially pioneer missionaries like Paul. I thank God for the Christians I have known over the years whose generosity in blessing others was so greatly appreciated. The couple that came to mind while writing these words only had a modest income but chose very carefully other Christians who needed assistance and contributed in small but systematic ways over a number of years. I thank God for the many Christians down the years whose ministry in this way is known only to God and a few other individuals. Never think that a small blessing given to someone may not be appropriate. It may be that a small token of encouragement is more than appreciated by someone at the time you chose to bless them in that practical way.

## 2. **An acknowledgement of the extent of Paul's network of friendships** (Romans 16:3-16)

<sup>3</sup> *Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. <sup>4</sup>They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. <sup>5</sup>Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. <sup>6</sup>Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. <sup>7</sup>Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. <sup>8</sup>Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. <sup>9</sup>Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. <sup>10</sup>Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. <sup>11</sup>Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. <sup>12</sup>Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. <sup>13</sup>Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. <sup>14</sup>Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them. <sup>15</sup>Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord's people who are with them. <sup>16</sup>Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings. In a previous message I referred to the expulsion of Jews, in particular those who had professed faith in*

Christ, by the Roman Emperor Claudius. The Emperor Tiberius in 19AD had ordered Jews to leave Rome because of their evangelistic efforts amongst the pagan population, so Claudius's actions thirty years later were following an earlier order. We cannot be certain of the exact date of the expulsion order which had to be between 49 and 53AD, most likely to be dated 49-50AD (I.H. Marshall, *Acts*, p.293). Claudius who reigned from 41-54AD died in the latter year and as with previous expulsions of Jews there were those who returned to live in the city as soon as the danger had passed. Therefore, with Paul's letter being written more than a year after Claudius' death it is not surprising that some of the Jewish members of that congregation had now returned home to their home church and community. This explains why in the list in Romans 16 a number of Jewish followers of Jesus are listed.

(a) **The diversity of the church** The range of people in the Church at Rome as in any major city was large. Jews and Gentiles had served together well in this congregation, as far as we can tell, which was very different to those in some other places like southern Turkey (Galatians 2:11-3:1). What about the mix of Gentiles in the congregation? It has been suggested that some of the names like Ampliatus (16:8) Urbanus (16:9) Hermes (16:14) Philologus and Julia (16:15) were common names for slaves at that times. The first three of these names have a Latin origin and the others a Greek one, but if they were slaves it tells us something about their owners and nothing about them. If however, they had been free people the choice of names might reflect the cosmopolitan city in which they had grown up as much as their ethnic origins. Other names listed here are thought to have a higher social class background. The reference to *those who belong to the household of Aristobulus* (16:10) is traceable to a grandson of Herod the Great who lived in Rome. He was on friendly terms with the Emperor Claudius and his household staff which included Jews who were not excluded from Rome when the Emperor's edict was announced. Bible commentators appear to suggest that these slaves of Aristobulus were Jewish. What is clear is that in a household where royalty and Government officials mixed there were those who had come to faith in Christ. This is even more significant in the reference in verse eleven to *those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord*. Narcissus was a rich and powerful freedman who was a close friend of the Emperor Claudius. In his household, on his staff, there were people who had adopted the Christian faith as their own. What is most remarkable is the greeting at the end of Paul's letter to the Philippians he makes reference around this time to believers even in the Emperor's palace. Philippians 4:22 states: *All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household*. Claudius who was not anti-Jewish had only wanted to exclude Jews who believed in Jesus because there had been synagogue divisions in the city over the claims of those who claimed that Jesus was the promised Messiah. His purge of the capital city had definitely not worked. He had not grasped the diversity of the Christian Church. He had a stereotype image of Jewish followers of Jesus but it was a less than adequate definition. Now that he had died some of those he had expelled had come back. Greater tests would come in the next decade but the followers of Jesus had possibly come out stronger rather than weaker as a result of their response to this adversity. Maybe it had forced them to avoid prioritising differences of opinions or practices –or in their case especially the rules for table fellowship- so as to maintain their unity in the Gospel in the midst of diversity. Although core doctrinal beliefs must remain the same there are plenty of subjects over which Christians will disagree. Yet it ought to cause us to redouble our efforts to maintain healthy relationships even when we disagree on issues with fellow believers.

In Romans 16:13 it states: *Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too*. Who is he? Mark 15:21 gives us the answer. *A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross*. This Libyan Jew who helped Jesus carry the cross had clearly

come to a clear view about His identity. His son Rufus was a member of this congregation. Mark's Gospel, of course was written by Mark from information Peter gave him in Rome. Paul we note can assume that his first readers in Rome can identify all these people in their midst. There in a culture where women were less prominent than our own, Paul lists probably nine out of twenty-six individuals who are women. Priscilla (16:3), Mary (16:6), Junia (16:7), Tryphena and Tryphosa who may have been twin sisters and Persis (16:12); Rufus' mother (16:13), Julia and Nereus' sister (16:15); Nereus was a chamberlain of a royal couple Flavius Clemens and his wife Domitilla, the highest ranking believers in the Church in Rome to suffer in the persecution of Emperor Domitian in 95AD. He was executed and she banished to the island of Pontia for following Jesus. Domitilla was the granddaughter of famous Roman General Vespasian and niece of Domitian himself. (W. Barclay, *Romans*, p.237). Notice how describes these women: *They risked their lives for Me* (16:4a) *who worked very hard for you* (16:6, 16:12); *outstanding among the apostles* (16:7 Junia with husband Andronicus); one of the couples Priscilla and Aquila, a couple from northern Turkey were particularly close friends of Paul. They had worked with Paul in church-planting in Corinth (Acts 18:1-3) and then later in Ephesus (Acts 18:19-26), prior to their return to Rome. How we would like to know more about Andronicus and Julia who appear to have been followers of Jesus and committed to the cause from the very earliest days of the church in Jerusalem and whom Paul declares were *outstanding among the apostles*. What a testimony. What had they done over the years to receive such a description of their Christian service over the last two decades? An apostle who is extremely proud of this team of harder workers whose life stories and backgrounds reveal its diversity in these greetings.

(b) **The unity of the church** Yet although there is diversity there is an all pervasive unity as these Christians grasped very clearly that what they had in common was so much more than what could potentially divide them. Paul's words to the churches in Galatia were certainly lived out in this congregation in Rome. *So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,*<sup>27</sup> *for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*<sup>28</sup> *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3:26-28). In the Western world we focus as a society too much on me and my rights rather than on us and what is best for the family or the wider community. Here Paul speaks of these believers being united *in the Lord* (16:8, 11, twice in 12, 13); or *in Christ or in Christ Jesus* (16:3, 7, 10). The difference of the unity despite diversity in Rome compared to the cliques and groups in Corinth (I Corinthians 3) is a constant reminder that within our ranks we must *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*<sup>3</sup> *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace* (Ephesians 4:2-3). May God help us in this church to do everything in our power to live out the unity of the Gospel despite our diversity working together to accomplish all that God has called us to do in this community for His name's sake, Amen.