



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Odds and Ends

#### Romans 16:1-23

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Chapter 15 is basically the end of Romans, but there's still one more chapter. In Chapter 16 Paul (and a handful of his friends) send their greetings to the brothers and sisters in Rome, Paul gives one final instruction, and then closes with a doxology. We'll look at that final doxology next week. This week I want to look at the rest of Chapter 16 and the odds and ends we find there.

At first glance this all may just seem like a list of names of people we don't know. It might seem irrelevant to us. But if we're really paying attention some interesting things crop up here. The difficult thing is that in most cases we get just enough information to make us curious. It reminds me of watching *Star Trek* as a kid. During the credits at the end they'd show stills from other episodes. I've seen them all now, but back then I hadn't. They were intriguing. A still shot that had so much to it, but that was almost completely a mystery: Oh! That's Spock. He's doing a mind-meld. But why? Oh! That's Kirk and McCoy, but why are they dressed that way and what's the cool-looking set all about? Oh! Hey...it's an alien and I have no idea who it is or what's going on. But then, "Oh! I remember *that* episode! Romans 16 is a little like that.

So, first, verse 1 and 2:

**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.**

Most Bible scholars agree that Phoebe was the person who delivered Paul's letter to Rome. He was in Corinth when he wrote it and, as he says, she was a "servant" of the church at Cenchreae. Corinth was a major port city on the isthmus that joined mainland Greece with the Peloponnesus—the large peninsula that makes up southern Greece. Today's there's a canal that cuts through that narrow isthmus, but in Paul's day there was a port at each side and ships would be hauled out of the water (or their goods unloaded and reloaded) and dragged to across. Cenchreae was the eastern of those two ports, about five or six kilometres from Corinth proper. Phoebe was a prominent person in the church there and Paul urges the Roman Christians to welcome her as a fellow follower of Jesus and he describes her using two words. The second word, which is pretty uncontroversial is that she has been a *patron*—of Paul and of many others. Some translations call her a "benefactor". Patron is probably the better option, because the Greek word means more than just someone who gives financial support. Phoebe would have been a woman with some social standing and who used not just her wealth, but also that social standing for the benefit of Paul, maybe other apostles or missionaries, as well as the local church. It's very likely that the church in Cenchreae met in her home. Paul and the other Corinthian Christians owed her a great deal and he wants the Roman Christians to know what sort of person she is.

The other word Paul uses to describe her is somewhat controversial and we see that in the variety of ways it's translated. The ESV describes her as a "servant" of the church in Cenchreae. Other translations read "minister" or "deacon" or "deaconess". The Greek word is *diakonos*. It can mean either "servant"—Paul describes himself as a *diakonos* of Jesus the Messiah—or it can refer to someone who was what we call a "deacon" in the church. The role of deacon has evolved from the

First Century, but deacons are called deacons because their ministry in the Church is primarily a *servant* ministry. The first deacons were appointed to support the apostles by doing much of the grunt-work of the church. In Acts, Luke talks about them waiting on tables. The apostles served as teachers and governors of the church and the ministry of the deacons was to do the work that supported the apostles.

Women served alongside the men in that diaconal capacity. It doesn't mean that the female deacons did all the same things as the male deacons. The order was the same, but what we read in the Church Fathers indicates that the women deacons served primarily amongst the women and children of the church, especially serving in places in the home where non-relative men were not usually permitted. Women deacons baptised women—or, at least, prepared them for baptism—and catechised women and children. The reason we struggle with the issue of whether or not we should have female deacons today is due to the way the office of deacon evolved. It was originally an essentially lay role. It was also a non-authoritative role. Deacons didn't govern the church or preach and their teaching role was limited. As the role of deacons evolved and the diaconate became a stepping stone to ordination as a priest or elder, a separate order of deaconesses was created. This was about three hundred years later. But in Paul's day we see both men and women in the diaconate. Again, it was a servant role. So Phoebe was both a benefactor of the Corinthian church, but also a servant. The two are not mutually exclusive!

Now, moving on to verses 3 to 16. There are, if I counted right, twenty-five people mentioned here by name, plus one person's unnamed mother. Let's read through the whole list of greetings.

**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 Epaphroditus, 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.**

And let's also jump down to verses 21-23. Paul wasn't the only one who wanted to send greetings.

**Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen.**

**I Tertius, who wrote this letter [he was Paul's scribe or secretary], 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.**

We know little, if anything, about most of these people. If you were paying attention you might have noticed that neither Aristobulus nor

Narcissus were actually Christians. They were the heads of important Roman houses, either in which Christians lived or in which Christians met for worship. Narcissus was a close friend of the Emperor Claudius. He committed suicide in A.D. 54, when Claudius died. We meet a few of these people in other parts of the New Testament. Prisca (a shortened form of Priscilla) and Aquila are mentioned in Acts 18 and Rufus in Mark 15:21 (assuming he's the same Rufus). Mary was an extremely common Jewish name, but there's a chance—probably a very small one—that this Mary could be one of the Marys named in the Gospels.

But this list of strangers does give us some insight into Paul and into the Roman church. We get a powerful sense of the affection he felt for these people. He had friends and even family who were there, but this list of people represents all sorts and Paul's great desire was to spend time with them and to work for Jesus with them. Naming all these people wasn't just a formality. He wasn't just trying to butter them up to get them ready for a visit. He saw these people as fellow ministers of the good news about Jesus. It's a good reminder to us that we are all fellow ministers of the gospel. Christians often get the idea that the bishops and the priests and the deacons are the ministers of the gospel and we're here to minister to you or to do all the work. But that's not true. As Paul has stressed before, we are a body and we each have an important and integral part to play. As Bill Hedges used to say, "Shepherds don't make sheep. Sheep make sheep." We talked about this at our vestry meeting last week. Evangelism—proclaiming the good news about the crucified and risen Jesus—is the duty and calling of every last one of us.

It's a safe bet that Paul names each of the churches or congregations in Rome. Remember that they met in homes in relatively small groups. He

mentions five here. First, there was a church that met with Prisca and Aquila, two others that met in or at least included people from the great houses of Aristobulus and Narcissus, a fourth group of people connected to Asyncritus, and another group connected to Philologus. We don't know how many people were part of each of these groups, but it probably safe to say that combined, the Roman Christians numbered somewhere between a few dozen to as many as a hundred.

Paul sends them greetings in the name of Jesus the Messiah from the other churches and he urges them to greet each other with a holy kiss. The "kiss of peace" was an important part of the liturgy early on, maybe even as early as Paul's day. Our shaking hands or hugging our neighbours and wishing them the peace of the Lord is our modern, Western version of that tradition. In their culture it was normal for people to greet each other with a kiss on the cheek—or both cheeks. Our culture is more reserved in how we greet each other. Whatever we do, though, Paul's highlighting the unity of the Church. All these different people from different backgrounds, Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, were part of one family, a family defined around the person of Jesus the Messiah. Greeting each other this way went against the cultural norms. Jews didn't kiss Gentiles. Slaves didn't kiss free people. But all of that changed in Jesus. It's entirely possible that with the fragmentation in the church, they had stopped greeting each other this way. Paul has urged them to live out the unity that was theirs in Jesus. This was a tangible way of doing that.

But before we move on to Paul's final instructions there's Junia. In verse 7, Paul sends greetings to Andronicus and Junia, whom he says are his kinspeople—that might simply mean that they are Jews, but since he names other Jews in the list, it probably

means they're close relatives. He notes that they've done time in prison with him and also that they were in Christ before he was. But most controversially, he says that they are well known among the apostles. The ESV butchers this unnecessarily, translating it as being well known *to* the apostles. The RSV, on which the ESV is based, translated the name Junia as masculine and then adds that they are *men* of note among the apostles. Both of these torture the Greek text because the translators were assuming that a woman couldn't be an apostle. The natural reading of name translated "Junia" is feminine and there's no warrant to add that either of the two was a man or that they were known *to* the apostles rather than known as or among the apostles.

The key to sorting this difficult out is in understanding what Paul meant by "apostle". It's important for clarifying the text here, but I think it's also worthwhile visiting this considering that there's a popular and widespread heretical movement today that claims to be reviving the office of Apostle. Most commonly it seems to go by the name of the "New Apostolic Reformation". Some of you, at least, have no doubt heard about it. There are churches in our community that have dabbled in it and at least a couple of that have embraced it, even going to so far as to have pastors who claim to be apostles. They lack a basic understanding of what an apostle was in the New Testament, but then it shouldn't be surprising for a movement that has revived multiple ancient heresies. So what was an apostle? How could a woman be one? And why a modern-day pastor be one, despite his claims?

The Greek word *apostolos* has the basic sense of one who has been sent, but what gave it shape for the New Testament writers was the Hebrew word *shaliach*, which referred to someone who was an emissary for someone else. It was a secular word

with no particular religious overtones. A man could send a *shaliach* out to act as his agent doing business—or he could send a slave as a *shaliach*. A king could send a *shaliach* to represent him. And God could send a prophet to act as his *shaliach*. Paul and the other New Testament writers were drawing on this concept when they used the word we translate as *apostle*. An apostle was not just one who was sent. An apostle was an agent or emissary. We don't have time this morning to get into the different ways this could be used and applied. The key way that's important here is that the apostles were emissaries of Jesus the Messiah. And yet as we see Paul use the term—he uses it more than any other writer—there's more to it than just being an emissary of Jesus or being a missionary sent out to proclaim the good news. It's telling that, for example, Apollos, who was certainly an emissary of Jesus, is never called an apostle. Timothy as well. Timothy is a "brother", a "servant" of Jesus, and even "God's coworker", but not an apostle. This is because to be an apostle, you had to have actually been an eyewitness to the resurrected Jesus and sent by him directly. This is why Paul describes himself as the last of the apostles. All of the others had been there during the forty days between Jesus' resurrection and ascension. After Jesus ascended there could be no new apostles. Except Paul. The risen Jesus had come to him on the Damascus Road, revealed himself, and commissioned Paul. So an apostle was one who had seen the risen Jesus and been sent out as an emissary of the gospel. Luke says that five hundred saw Jesus. We don't know if all five hundred would have been considered apostles. It doesn't seem so. It wasn't just seeing Jesus, it was the commissioning as well. But Andronicus and Junia were amongst these apostles. This husband and wife (or possibly brother and sister) had seen Jesus and had been sent. So, yes, it was possible for a woman to be an apostle. That said, a woman could not

be an apostle on her own. She had to be part of a husband and wife team as in this case. We can deduce this from the fact that a *shaliach* could not have been a woman. Legally speaking, it was impossible. A man yes. A male slave, yes. But a woman could not legally serve in the capacity of a *shaliach*. She could be part of a husband and wife team as in this case, but could not fill the role on her own. Of course, the other thing this tells us is that anyone who claims to be an apostle today is picking your pocket. To be an apostle took more than being sent. You had to have been a witness to the resurrection. My observation has been that these modern-day folks who claim to be apostles are making the claim to enhance their authority. Most of them also claim to be prophets. Brothers and Sisters, don't be taken in. First, they aren't apostles. Second, no Christian preacher or pastor has authority apart from the authority inherent in the word of God. Paul was the last of the apostles.

Now, the last part of the odds and ends. Look at Paul's final instructions in verses 17-20:

**I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by fair and flattering words they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded. For while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, I would have you wise as to what is good and guileless as to what is evil; then the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**

Brothers and Sisters, be discerning. Doctrinal integrity is important. Don't listen to those who aren't preaching the gospel or who are preaching false gospels. If a preacher isn't

consistently preaching Jesus, consistently preaching the cross, consistently preaching that Jesus is Lord, and consistently preaching submission to him in faith find a different preacher. The same goes if a preacher is preaching health and wealth instead of preaching sacrifice. But, interestingly enough, Paul's focus here isn't on the doctrine. False doctrine tends to reveal itself in false practice and that's what Paul points to. He's been hammering away at this issue of unity and now he points out the fact that false teachers have a strong tendency to undermine that unity—they create division, he says, and difficulties. The Greek word is *skandalon*—the same word Matthew uses to describe Peter's tempting Jesus to give up his mission.

Paul pinpoints the problem: These false teachers aren't so much interested in serving the Lord Christ—they don't acknowledge him as Lord and they aren't submitting to him in faith and hope. They're serving their own appetites. Paul gives a similar warning in Philippians and talks about such teachers, saying: they walk as enemies of the cross of Christ, that their god is their belly, and that their minds are set on earthly things. Hard times were coming. Persecution was coming. Paul knew it. And followers of Jesus were only going to be able to face that persecution if they were truly submitting to Jesus and ready to give their all as a sacrifice for his sake and for the sake of his kingdom. Think of those First Century Christians thrown to the lions for their uncompromising faith in Jesus. Think of the Christians crucified by Nero and burned alive to light his garden parties. Caesar tried to snuff out the flame of Christianity, but the witness of those faithful martyrs wound up fanning the flame until even Caesar himself knelt in submission to Jesus. That was how the Church was to survive and even grow: by facing persecution strong in faith and strong in hope, knowing that Jesus is Lord. But not everyone

thought that way. Think of Prisca and Aquilla. Paul writes here that they risked their necks for the sake of the gospel. But there were and still are plenty of preachers and plenty of Christians who would rather remain comfortable. They won't risk anything. They won't proclaim the gospel if it means losing friends or family. They will offer a pinch of incense to Caesar if it means maintaining their respectability in our increasingly anti-Christian society. They will talk about unity, but it's not the unity that comes naturally from our union with Jesus, but a man-made unity with those who compromise the gospel and capitulate with the false lords and idols of the age.

Brothers and Sisters, do not walk that path. Have discernment. Submit to Jesus despite the hardships that may come, knowing that he has won the battle and that he will vindicate his people. As Paul wrote at the end of Chapter 15: May the God of peace be with you. Remember, Paul spoke of that peace not as he gave himself over to worldly comfort. Not as he gave himself over to complacency. No. He spoke of God's peace as he headed off on a difficult and dangerous journey into the lion's den. But he went with peace knowing that he was doing gospel work and he knew that despite what happens, Jesus is Lord and God will vindicate his people. Let us do the same.

Let us pray: Father as we prayed in the Collect, grant us your Holy Spirit to direct and rule our hearts. Focus us on Jesus and on his kingdom that we might serve him and him alone and find our very being in him. Give us discernment to recognize false teaching and those who proclaim false gospels. And, finally, Father, give us your peace as we do the gospel work you have given us to do, challenging the false lords and idols of the age and lifting high the cross. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.