

All in the Family

by Ray C. Stedman

We have finally reached the last chapter in our study in Romans. Some of you are old enough to remember when we started! I am not going to finish it today, however. The last paragraph is reserved for next Sunday and our Communion service. Many people ignore this chapter, I think, because they see in it nothing but a list of names of people long since dead and gone. But in many ways this is one of the most exciting chapters in Romans, as I think you will see.

There is something in all of us that wants to see our names preserved. Years ago I visited the Natural Bridge of Virginia. There were thousands of names and initials scratched on the rocks, but high up on the side of it, above almost every other name, was scratched “George Washington.” Even the father of our country felt the urge to gain a kind of immortality by carving his name on the rock.

But here in Romans 16 is a list of names of men and women who never knew that they were going to be famous. I am sure that if they had known that mention in one of Paul’s letters was to give them undying fame, there would have been a long line of people outside his door urging him to include them in the letter. But these names are mentioned only because they were personal friends of Paul’s in Rome, to whom he was writing, or they were with him in the city of Corinth, from which he wrote.

In these first 24 verses there are 33 names mentioned. Nine of these people were with Paul – eight men and one woman. There are 24 names mentioned in Rome – 17 men and 7 women. There are two households mentioned, and two unnamed women – the mother of Rufus and the sister of Nereus – as well as some unnamed brethren. So there is quite a list of people the apostle knew per-

sonally in Rome, though he himself had not yet visited that city – these are people he had known somewhere else in the Roman Empire. We tend to think of those ancient days as a time of limited travel, and they were. It took weeks to reach cities that we now reach in less than an hour by plane. Nevertheless, these people got around, and here is a record of that fact.

This passage has three simple divisions:

- First, Paul’s greetings to the brothers and sisters at Rome (the first 16 verses),
- Then a brief warning about phony Christians who were there in Rome, and
- Then greetings from the brothers who were with Paul as he wrote.

The letter to the Romans was carried by a traveling businesswoman, Phoebe, and she is introduced to us in the opening verses of this chapter:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me. {Rom 16:1-2 NIV}

The whole church can be grateful to this woman for her faithfulness. She bore and preserved this letter all along that hazardous journey from Corinth to Rome. She is called by the apostle “a servant of the church in Cenchreae.” Cenchreae was the port of Corinth, located about nine miles

east of the city. Evidently, a Christian church had grown up there, and Phoebe was a deacon in it. (That is really the term, not deaconess, as the King James Version puts it. That is a sexist term. The word is the same for male or female.) That does not mean that she held some governmental office in that church; we sometimes read present-day meanings into these words. It means that she had assumed a ministry on behalf of the church. She represented them in some labor, and whether it was material, physical, or spiritual, she was very faithful in it. So Paul commends her to these Christians in Rome, and asks them not only to receive her, but to help her. "She has been a help to many others," he says, "and to me."

You cannot read Chapter 16 of Romans without being impressed by the number of women Paul mentions – many more than in any other literature of that day. Women occupy a prominent place in these letters of the New Testament. Evidently, they handled very important tasks within the church, according to the gifts they had. There is strong suggestion here that Phoebe was a teacher or an evangelist – a laborer for the gospel with Paul. We do not know much more about her, but her name has been preserved forever because of this mention.

Paul now turns to greet those he knew in Rome, and he begins with a very well known husband and wife team, Verses 3-4:

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

Greet also the church that meets at their house. {Rom 16:3-5 NIV}

We meet this couple in other letters of Paul. We see them first in Chapter 18 of Acts, where Luke tells us they were Jews, tentmakers by trade, who were driven out of Rome by the decree of the Emperor Claudius. (That is a historical mention, dated in 52 A.D.) They went to Corinth, took up their trade there, and met this strange young Jew, also a tentmaker, who had come from the north. Evidently, Saul of Tarsus moved in with them and soon led them to Christ. Theirs was probably the first home in Corinth that started a church. Luke tells us that after two years there, Paul left to go to the great city of Ephesus, and Priscilla and Aquila went with him. Again, they took up the trade of

tentmaking and again opened up a church in their home.

They also ministered in the synagogue, for Luke tells us that one morning they heard a mighty and eloquent man named Apollos preaching, but it was evident to them that he did not understand the fullness of the gospel, for he preached only what John the Baptist taught, that "One was coming, who would do mighty things." After the service they invited him home to dinner (That is a wonderful thing to do for a preacher!) and instructed him more fully. Because of their ministry to him, Apollos went on to Corinth, where he had a mighty ministry in the Word of God. Incidentally, of the six times their names are mentioned, four times Priscilla's name is put first – which indicates that she had the gift of teaching, rather than her husband. Now they are in Rome, having traveled from Corinth and Ephesus. Paul greets them, and reminds the church that they had risked their lives for him. That was probably in that uproar that broke out in the city of Ephesus, recorded in the latter part of Acts, when the whole city was upset, and a mob was intent on taking Paul's life. He reveals the fact that everywhere this couple went they had a church in their home.

In these early days, Christians did not meet in buildings like we have now. In fact, for 300 years there is no mention of church buildings in Scripture. What a relief, not to be bothered with a church building program! People just got together where they could for larger meetings. But here in Rome there were at least three, and probably many more, house churches where Christians gathered and one of them was in the home of Priscilla and Aquila.

Paul goes on to mention two other friends, Verses 5-6:

Greet my dear friend Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.

Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. {Rom 16:5-6 NIV}

Epaenetus was never forgotten, for he was the first one to believe the gospel when Paul came to the province of Asia, of which Ephesus was the capital. You never forget that first one you lead to Christ. No matter how many others follow, you never forget the firstfruits. We do not know what

Epaenetus was doing in Rome, but he was cherished because he was the first to exercise faith in Asia. And associated with him is Mary, whom Paul calls “Mary the toiler.” She is one of the group of unknown women in the Gospels who had the gift of helps. She could not teach or preach or evangelize, but she could work, and she did. Paul is very careful to remember these women and men who had the gift of helps.

Then he mentions some relatives and friends, Verses 7-10:

Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord.

Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys.

Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ. {Rom 16:7-10a NIV}

Andronicus and Junias were relatives of Paul, and since he says they were “in Christ before me,” this takes us back to the very first days of the church, back to the ministry of Stephen in Jerusalem. What it must have meant to the young Saul of Tarsus, who was breathing forth threatenings and slaughter against the Christians there, to learn that two of his own kinsmen had become Christians! Undoubtedly the prayers of Andronicus and Junias affected the apostle. It is hard to tell whether this is a husband and wife team, or two brothers. It all depends on the name “Junias.” If it is “Junias” with an “s,” as we have it here, it is a male; if it is “Junia,” as the King James Version has it, it is female. But whoever they were, they were Jews, relatives of Paul, who had become Christians. There is a wistful note here as Paul remembers that they were in Christ before him, and no doubt they were praying for him. Somewhere along the line they shared a prison term with him. There is no better place to make friends than in jail. You have to get to know your fellow-inmates – there is no escaping them! They became fast friends, as well as relatives, and Paul speaks highly of them. He says that even the twelve apostles in Jerusalem held them in high regard. What they were doing in Rome we do not know – doubtless they were leaders in the church there.

Ampliatus in an interesting name. In the cemetery at Domitilla, found among the catacombs

in Rome, there is a highly decorated tomb with the single name “Ampliatus,” written on it. A single name like this implies that the man was a slave, but as the tomb is rather ornate, it indicates that he was a Christian, and highly respected by the leaders in Rome. We cannot be sure that he was the same person Paul mentions here, but he most likely is. Therefore this man, though a slave, had a great ministry among the brethren in Rome.

Urbanus and Stachys we know no more about than what Paul mentions here. Somewhere, Urbanus joined Paul’s team, and also “his dear friend Stachys,” and that is all we know. But I have always been fascinated by this man Apelles, whom Paul says has been “tested and approved in Christ.” (I wish that is what I would merit on my tombstone. Would not that be a great inscription, “Tested and approved in Christ”?) This man will forever be known as one who endured a testing of his faith and who stood against the pressure. Thus he has been approved in Christ. His name means “called,” and he certainly proved himself to be one whom God had called.

In the latter part of Verse 10 and in Verse 11 two groups are mentioned, involving Christians and, perhaps, non-Christians as well:

Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus.

Greet Herodion, my relative.

Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. {Rom 16:10b-11 NIV}

Dr. William Barclay, probably the best commentator of all to get at the background of Biblical stories, tells us that Aristobulus may have been the grandson of King Herod the Great, who lived in Rome. He was behind the scenes politically, but was the close friend of the Emperor Claudius. When Aristobulus died, his household, i.e., his servants and slaves, became the property of the emperor (and by this time Nero was on the throne, succeeding Claudius, who had been murdered), but his household was still known as the household of Aristobulus. It is this group, probably, that Paul is referring to. If so, it means that even in the royal household there were a number of Christian servants and slaves who exercised great influence on the leaders of Rome – even the emperor himself. This is supported, I think, by the fact that Paul mentions his relative, Herodion, in connection with

these servants. You can see from his name that this man had connections with the family of Herod. This is also a hint to us that Paul himself had some connection with the ruling family of the Jews. His relative, Herodion, had become a Christian, and was living there in Rome as part of the household of either Aristobulus or Narcissus.

The most famous Narcissus we know in Roman history was a former slave who became the personal secretary of the Emperor Claudius. He gained much wealth, because he was in charge of the correspondence of the emperor. (His palm had to be greased before a letter got through to the emperor.) When Claudius was murdered, Nero took over, and he also took over the household of Narcissus. Shortly after Nero came to the throne, he forced Narcissus to commit suicide, as he did many men. But it is very clear from this mention here that there were Christians among his household. "Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord." Already, in the heart of the Roman Empire, a Christian witness had been established, and Paul sends greetings to the slaves and servants in the house of Nero.

Next, we get another band of hard-working ladies, and also another hidden romantic story, Verses 12-13:

Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa [I have always enjoyed those names!] those women who work hard in the Lord.

Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.

Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. {Rom 16:12-13 NIV}

These words of Paul open up hidden vistas that bring the whole flavor and color of this first-century Christian life home to us. Here were Tryphaena and Tryphosa. I can just imagine them knitting and darning and crocheting, these dear maiden sisters who worked very hard. We do not know what they did, but there is a delicate irony here. When Paul wrote this he probably smiled to himself, for their names mean "dainty" and "delicate" – yet they were hard workers. Their names are suggestive that they were probably aristocrats, women who were born to a high class. And yet, they who did not have to work for a livelihood worked hard in the service of the Lord.

We know nothing about Paul's dear friend Persis, other than that she too had worked with him somewhere, perhaps traveling in his company of evangelists.

In Verse 13 we have Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who had been a mother to the apostle too. There seems to be little doubt that Rufus, along with his brother Alexander, mentioned in the Gospel of Mark, were the sons of Simon of Cyrene. In the Gospels we are told that as our Lord was making his way down the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, on his way to the cross, he was so weak from loss of blood that he tripped and fell. The Roman soldiers laid hold of a passing stranger whom they compelled to bear the cross to Calvary. That man was Simon of Cyrene, a Jew coming into the city for the Passover. His home was in North Africa, and he evidently had little or no interest in the things of Christ until he was forced to carry the cross of Jesus. Though we do not know the details, it is evident that this man became a Christian and there is a hint in the book of Acts that he was present on the day of Pentecost.

His two sons, Alexander and Rufus, became outstanding men in the Christian community. There is an Alexander who comes to the rescue of Paul in the city of Ephesus, at the time of the outcry there. There is a Rufus here in Rome, who is well known, and Paul sends his greetings to him, and reminds him also that Rufus' mother had been his mother too, at some time. This again takes us back to the earliest days of the gospel ministry when perhaps young Saul of Tarsus, coming to Jerusalem to sit at the feet of Gamaliel, the great Jewish teacher, had probably stayed in the home of Simon of Cyrene and his two sons, Alexander and Rufus. Later they became Christians, and Paul cherished them as friends he had known even before his own Christian days. We cannot be certain of all those details, but much is suggested by this.

Then in Verse 14 we find a businessmen's group:

Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers with them. {Rom 16:14 NIV}

Here is a kind of male commune, all with Greek names, suggesting that these were young businessmen who had come to Rome and formed a group. They had all become Christians and had

another house church going in their bachelors' quarters there. Paul sends his greetings to them and all the brothers with them.

Then a final group, perhaps another house church in Rome, Verse 15:

Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them.

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All the churches of Christ send greetings. {Rom 16:15-16 NIV}

Philologus means "a lover of the word," and this was probably a nickname given to him, just as Barnabas was called "the son of consolation," even though that was not his name. Here was a man who loved the Word of God, and gathered with him these men and women – Julia, Nereus and his sister.

Nereus is another fascinating name. Dr. Barclay suggests that he may have been the housekeeper of a prominent Roman citizen named Flavius Clemens, later to become Consul of Rome, the highest political office in the city, who, in 95 A.D., was condemned to death by the Emperor Domitian because he was a Christian. His wife, Domatilla, also a Christian, was banished by the emperor. Here is a hint that in the household of Flavius Clemens was a Christian slave, Nereus, who was undoubtedly a great influence in leading this prominent Roman citizen to Christ, and who would later give his life as a martyr for the cause of Christ.

We can see from these names that Roman society had already been infiltrated by the gospel before Paul ever arrived in the city. That is why, at the beginning of this letter, he says, their "faith is being reported all over the world," {Rom 1:8 NIV}. These prominent Christians had already penetrated society from top to bottom.

That is the way Christianity should work. I do not think it makes its best progress by massive campaigns. I think it makes its best progress when it infiltrates all levels of society and brings them all together in the church of Christ.

Now we have this warning paragraph. Paul is evidently thinking of his own trip to Jerusalem and the threat that awaits him from the Judaizers there, Verses 17-20:

I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way, contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. {Rom 16:17-20 NIV}

There is a very helpful passage here on what to do about problems within the church:

- Here is a group of people who are professing Christians, but, who, to judge by the apostle's language, are not truly believers. The danger, as Paul outlines it, is that they create factions within a church – that is, little dissident groups that gather about and emphasize one particular point of doctrine or teaching, to the exclusion of everything else. That is always a problem within the church when people think one particular thing is most important. We have people today who emphasize tongues, or prophecy, or some phase of teaching that they think is the mark of a true believer, to the exclusion of everything else. Paul warns about this.
- The second thing they do is introduce practices or ceremonies that Paul calls "obstacles to faith," certain rituals or practices that these groups insist are the marks of true Christianity. They build a sense of superiority. They say, "If you have this mark, then you really are a Christian." Their motives, Paul says, are not to serve Christ, even though they say they do. These factions are really out to advance themselves, to get a following, to gain prestige. You can tell by the way they act that is what they want. Their methods are to come on with smooth and plausible talk. They always use scriptural language. They always appear to be the most dedicated and devoted of believers. Have you noticed how many of the cults today are trying to go back to the Scriptures, arguing from them a groundwork for their faith?

- Another method is flattery. They make Christians feel important. They lift them up above the rest and give them a peculiar mark of distinction, and flatter their egos as being members of the true church. These factions always cause division.

When some group like this appears, many of us tend to want to rush in and excommunicate them, read them out from the pulpit, or violently attack them. Paul does not say to do any of those things. His advice is to keep away from them. Ignore them. “You Christians in Rome have a reputation for obedience. You have a spirit of wanting to obey what the Lord says. Now here is your word from the Lord: Do not follow them; do not get involved with these separatist groups. When you obey this, God will work. The God of peace, who will preserve the peace of the church, will also crush Satan under your feet.” Something will happen to open the eyes of people to the unscriptural position of these groups, and they will lose their following. The peace will be preserved without a lot of warfare and dissension.

In Verses 21-23 we have the greetings of those who are with Paul in Corinth:

Timothy, my fellow worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my relatives.

I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord.

Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings.

Erastus, who is the city’s director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you his greetings. {Rom 16:21-24 NIV}

That brings us to the final paragraph when, as was his custom, Paul takes his pen and writes the last words himself.

Up to this point he has been dictating this letter to a man who identifies himself in Verse 22: “I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord.” Evidently, the apostle said something to him, such as, “Tertius, you’ve written this whole thing and you must have writer’s cramps by now. Just write another line and send your own greetings.” The name indicates that he, too, was a slave,

because his name means “Third.” In slave families they did not bother to think up names; they just numbered the children, First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, etc. Here are Third and Fourth of a family of slaves. (His brother, Quartus, Fourth, is mentioned in Verse 23.) They are educated slaves who have become Christians. They can read and write, and are part of this group in Corinth.

You can picture them gathered in the home of Gaius, this gracious, genial, generous host of the city, mentioned in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Gaius opened his house to the entire Christian community, so here is Paul, sitting there with his friends. Tertius is writing down the letter, and the others are gathered around listening to Paul as he dictates, and profiting much from the writing of these great truths. With Paul, of course, is his dear son in the faith, Timothy, whom we know so well from the two letters addressed to him. Paul spoke of him always in the highest terms; his beloved son in the faith, who had stayed with him so long and remained faithful to the end. The very last letter Paul wrote from his prison cell in Rome was to Timothy.

Paul also mentions Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater, his relatives.

Here in Romans 16 are six members of Paul’s family, kinsmen who are now Christians. Some were Christians before him, but some Paul influenced toward Christ. They come from various places. Lucius appears to be the same one who comes from Cyrene, mentioned in Chapter 13 of Acts as one of the teachers in the city of Antioch. Jason was evidently Paul’s host when the apostle went to the city of Thessalonica, in Macedonia. Paul stayed in Jason’s home when a riot broke out in the city. Sosipater may be the man from Beroea, mentioned in Acts 20 as “Sopater.” Paul met him in Macedonia and may have accompanied him to Jerusalem with the offering to the churches there.

The final name is Erastus, director of public works in the city of Corinth. You can see how the gospel penetrated all levels of society, with slaves, public officials, consuls, leaders of the empire, all sharing an equal ground of fellowship in the church of Jesus Christ. All class distinctions disappeared within the church and that is what happens whenever the church works.

I think the thing we need to remember from this list of names is that these Christians were noted for

their steady, tested commitment, their faithfulness to the gospel.

I must say that I am troubled today when I see Christians succumbing so easily to the world's philosophy of life – live for your own pleasure, try to retire as early as possible so you can do as little as you can. I think that is a deadly philosophy. The early Christians did not believe that.

Four things ring clearly throughout their lives:

- One, they were not their own. “You are not your own; you are bought with a price,” {1 Cor 6:19b-20a NIV}. They believed that. They did not have a right to direct their lives any longer. God had sent them into the world, and God would take them through it.
- Second, they believed that life is a battle, a battle to the death. It is not a picnic. They were engaged in warfare that never ended until they left this life, so they kept on fighting.
- Third, they believed that there is need for rest and leisure at times, but only to restore them to go back into the battle. They never envisaged retiring and enjoying themselves for the remaining years of their lives. They only envisaged getting adequate rest in order to come back and fight through to the end.

- Finally, they understood that the gifts of the Holy Spirit among them opened up a ministry for every single believer. No Christian was without a ministry. Some of these dear people had only the gift of helps (although I should not say “only” the gift of helps, for that is a great gift.) They could not teach or preach but they could help, and they did, right to the end.

I think this passage reminds us that God has called us all to a ministry, and we all have to give an account for what we have done with our gifts. We had better find out what they are and get to work, get involved in the battle, because God has not called us to a picnic ground. He has called us to a battleground.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for these names of men and women who long ago preceded us in the pilgrimage of life. And what a testimony they left us. Men and women who were tested, tried, and approved, who stayed steadfast in the long martyrdom of life itself. We pray that you will grant to us, Lord, similar faith that we too may share with you in a time of testing, a time of rebuke and pressure and persecution and trouble, and stand steadfast to the end, for your name's sake. Until you see fit to remove us, Lord, keep us at the work. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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