

From the names Paul mentions in his greetings a profile of early Christian congregations emerges, a profile that ought to serve as a summons for us today.

“The Churches in Rome and Corinth”

Romans 16:3-23

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Last Lord’s Day morning we considered Phoebe. She was from Cenchræe, near Corinth, and, as she was traveling to Rome, Paul entrusted his letter to her. He introduced her to the Roman congregation, as they would meet her when she arrived in the capital. What follows in the next paragraph is a list of names, first some Christians in the church in Rome to which Paul wrote his letter and then some Christians in the church in Corinth *from which* Paul wrote his letter. Alas, Paul adds all too little information about each one. Nevertheless, the sermon this morning is a kind of what historians of peoples and cultures call a prosopography, a study of a set or group of names, with a view to learning what can be learned about the people who bore them, in this case, the congregation of a Christian church. “Prosopography” comes from the Greek word πρόσωπον, meaning “face” or “person” and in English, too, those two words are close together. When we say that someone speaks “face to face” with someone else we mean they speak “person to person” with someone else. The idea is that the characteristics of an ancient group of people might be discerned by the consideration of even scanty information available concerning the names of the people who belonged to that group. [cf. W. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 55-63]

Obviously, if we knew much more about the people mentioned in the New Testament and here in Romans 16, we would have a better idea of the demographics and social characteristics of the Christian church in the first century. We would love to know, for example, how these folk became Christians and what kind of Christians they were, something of their personal struggles and their spiritual virtues. As it happens we have to make do with the information we have, which is not much. In the letters of Paul (omitting the three pastoral letters, the two to Timothy and the one to Titus) sixty-five individuals besides Paul are mentioned. In Acts another thirteen names are found and one anonymous household. So it is possible to draw up a prosopography of Pauline Christianity that contains nearly eighty names. The pastoral letters add a few more. What we can discern about those names – and, obviously, only the sketchiest information is provided about only some of them in the New Testament – helps us to understand something of the character of the Christian church in the first century. This morning, however, we are interested not in the eighty names, but only in the thirty-four names that make Paul’s list of greetings to be given here in chapter 16, the largest single collection of names anywhere in the New Testament.

Text Comment

v.3 Husband and wife Prisca and Aquila are mentioned in Acts as well, Luke referring to her by the more familiar, diminutive form of her name, Priscilla. Luke regularly uses the more popular or informal form of a name. For example, Luke speaks of Silas, while Paul calls the man, more formally, Silvanus. It is very like the difference between Rob and Robert.

Prisca and Aquila had lived in Rome, been ejected with all the other Jews by the edict of the emperor Claudius, moved to Corinth where Paul had met them and stayed in their home. It was in Corinth, if you remember, that this couple had met and befriended Apollos and introduced that brilliant new Christian into the deeper realms of Christian theology. Now they were back in Rome, the racial and political tensions having eased in the capital.

- v.4 We wish we knew how these two faithful Christians risked their necks for Paul. By the way, that is a literal translation of what Paul wrote: “risked their necks for me.” Our idiom originates here.
- v.4 By “Asia” is meant the Roman province in what is now west-central Turkey.
- v.6 There are six Marys in the New Testament, this one the last mentioned. It was a common Jewish female name. We don’t know how Paul knew of her ministry within the Roman church.
- v.7 Though the ESV makes a decision, we don’t know and can’t tell from the spelling whether the second of these two names is masculine or feminine. The ESV takes it as a woman’s name in which case they would in all likelihood be husband and wife. They were apparently Jews, which is in all likelihood all “my kinsmen” means. It is not impossible that they were Paul’s blood relatives, but the use of the same phrase later in this list of a number of other people strongly suggests that Paul means only that they were fellow Jews. At some point during Paul’s ministry they had shared a prison cell with him or perhaps they shared simply the experience of having been thrown in prison for their faith, not necessarily at the same time or in the same place as Paul.
- It is a fascinating detail that they were believers in Christ before Paul himself. Paul may be saying that they had a fine reputation among the apostles or that they were apostles themselves in the wider sense of the term, commissioned missionaries of the church and, for all we know, perhaps even eyewitnesses of the resurrection of the Lord. [R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 298n]
- v.8 Ampliatus was a common name among members of the imperial household and is found on a tomb in the Cemetery of Domitilla, one of the oldest Christian burial grounds in Rome, dating back to the end of the first century. It is certainly possible that this is, in fact, the tomb of the very Ampliatus mentioned here by Paul.
- v.9 Urbanus literally means “of or belonging to the city.” As Rome was *the* city of the world of that day it was a particularly common Roman name.
- v.10 Apelles was a sufficiently common Jewish name that Horace, the Roman writer, uses it as a typical Jewish name.

The great classical scholar, J.B. Lightfoot, suggested that the Aristobulus to whom Paul refers was the brother of Herod Agrippa I, the client king of the Romans in Palestine, whose sudden death is recorded in Acts 12. Both men were raised in Rome. Aristobulus, Herod's brother, remained in Rome as a private citizen. He is not greeted, but members of his family. Aristobulus probably was not a Christian himself, but members of his family were.

- v.11 Herodian marks this man out as a member of Herod's family, perhaps strengthening the case for the identity of Aristobulus in the previous verse. There was a prominent Narcissus who exercised great influence during the reign of the emperor Claudius but was executed by Nero. Paul might then be addressing Christians he knew who belonged to this man's family.
- v.12 Here are two women, perhaps even twins as it was not uncommon to give twins names derived from the same root. Both names are found in Roman inscriptions as are a number of others in this list.
- Persis means "Persian woman."
- v.13 Rufus, which means "red" was a common name. However, there is another Rufus in the NT, one of the sons of Simon of Cyrene, the man who bore Jesus' cross, as we read in Mark 15:21. It is tempting to think that this is the same man and that this explains how and why Paul knew his mother as well. Paul went back a long way with both of them, from their time together in the Holy Land.
- v.14 Up to this point Paul seems to have wanted to say something in commendation of each name mentioned. But finally there were too many. [Cranfield, ii, 786-787] For example, he called Persis "beloved" though, of course, all these people were beloved of God and Paul and he called Rufus "chosen in the Lord," again a designation that applies to every Christian. It is a human touch. Paul was running out of different ways to commend individual Christians. Patrobus was the name of a wealthy freed slave of Nero's. Was the Christian mentioned here a relative or client of that man who took his name, as was the custom? Hermes was a common name among slaves. In context it meant something like "Lucky" which is what every slave hoped to be.
- v.16 Paul says the same thing about a holy kiss 1 Cor. 16:20. The first mention of the "kiss of peace" as a part of Christian worship is found in Justin's *First Apology* [65]: "when we have ceased from our prayers, we greet one another with a kiss." It remains a part of the liturgy of the Eastern or Orthodox church and has been introduced in some Protestant churches, as you may sometime have experienced.
- v.17 Paul's warning regarding controversialists in the church we'll take up, Lord willing, next time.
- v.21 Now, what follows, is a list of people who are present with Paul in Corinth and want their greetings conveyed to their friends in the Roman church. Timothy, as you remember, was

a convert of Paul and then an associate. This is the Timothy to which two of Paul's letters were written. It is possible, but certainly not demonstrable, that Lucius is Luke the physician, the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. We do know that Luke was with Paul in Corinth at the time Romans was written. Sosipater may have been the Sopater – simply a more familiar form of the name – who we also know (from Acts 20:4) was with Paul in Corinth when Romans was written.

- v.22 Tertius is otherwise unknown to us but we know that at least on some other occasions Paul dictated his letters to secretaries and apparently Tertius served in that role in the writing of Romans. The formal style in Greek of Romans has led some scholars to suggest that Tertius was a professional secretary or amanuensis, or at least a well-educated man.
- v.23 A marble paving block dating from the first century uncovered at Corinth in 1929 bears the inscription: "Erastus, commissioner for public works, laid this pavement at his own expense." Commissioner for public works is not the same office as city treasurer, so if this is the same Erastus – a common enough name in any case – he would have had to have been promoted between the time the paving block was laid and the time Paul wrote Romans. Nothing unlikely in that.

The longer I live with the Bible the more amazing and wonderful and perfect this book seems to me. It addresses everything, if only we have eyes to see. It teaches us our holy faith, to be sure. We all know that. It contains the commandments by which we are to order our lives. We know that as well. But, in addition and in the most unexpected ways it opens the world to us, it unmaskes our prejudices, it informs our minds, it shapes our emotions, and it inspires our hearts. A deep reading of the Bible is something very like a personal conversation with the Lord himself, or, perhaps better, an opportunity to sit next to the Lord while he talks, and to take in not only what he says, but how he says it, with what look on his face, with what sparkle in his eyes, with what tone in his voice. We come away not only knowing things, but feeling things. We come away not only having been taught things, but having gathered things. Reading the Bible with an honest heart we learn not only how to think but how to feel about things, not only right doctrine but a proper sense of sympathy for others, appreciation for their accomplishments, and wonder at the mysteries of life that confront us whenever we observe the life of other human beings. Reading and studying the Bible is not only a matter of learning its doctrine and ethics, though it is certainly that, but absorbing its mind and heart, or, better, the mind and heart of the Holy Spirit who wrote this immeasurably wonderful book. You might think that there is not too much to be gained for your spiritual life, for your insight, for your sense of calling, from a list of names. But this is the Bible, brothers and sisters. This is a window on the church of the Lord Jesus Christ as it existed in the days of the apostles themselves

Some years ago now I remember that someone in the congregation took exception to the fact that we listed professional titles in the church directory. Dr. and Mrs. so and so, for example. The objection was the predictable one, maybe more predictable in America and still more in 21st century America: we are all the same in the Christian church and we shouldn't distinguish one from another by considerations that have nothing to do with a person's Christian faith. It was what we might call the "democratic" objection. As I remember the point was made that such

distinctions in a church directory represented on our part a failure to take God's grace seriously. We aren't doctors or professors before the Lord: we are all and only sinners saved by grace. As I remember in one or two iterations of the church directory we took out the titles to spare this individual's feelings. But we then decided that the omissions were a mistake and put the titles back in.

We are certainly all sinners saved by grace. Let no one take our crown in proclaiming and believing that fact! But does that mean that no earthly accomplishment or status ought to be acknowledged in the church? The Bible has an answer for that question too. There is one man and only one whose occupation is given in this long list of names. It is Erastus, who happened to hold an important and prestigious position in the city government of Corinth, an important city in the empire of those days. You can detect the pride in Paul's sending along the greeting of such a prominent man in the notice he makes of Erastus' position. What is more, several here are listed because they were people of means. Had they not been their names would probably never have surfaced in this list. We noticed last week that Phoebe must have been a woman of considerable means to make the trip to Rome that she did. Lydia, the businesswomen of Philippi introduced to us in Acts 16, was clearly a woman of some wealth, not only because of her particular business – purple dye was an expensive commodity – but because her house was large enough to accommodate several visitors. And here the same may be true of the mother of Rufus in v. 13 whom Paul seems to suggest may have been another of his benefactresses.

In the Bible it is not the case that earthly distinctions between believers are not made, that accomplishments are not noted, that men and women of rank are not identified as such and; it is not the case that wealthy people do not rise to the surface of a list of names like this in a way that poorer people may not. Therefore, if we are to have a biblical mind we must be happy to have such distinctions acknowledged. Our humility in Christ should be such that we can rejoice in the higher status of some brothers and sisters, or in their professional accomplishment, or in even their titles. I have always thought it remarkable that the Lord Jesus, knowing human nature as perfectly as he does, should have singled out three men out of the twelve to receive his special attention. Only Peter, James, and John witnessed his transfiguration – one of the most extraordinary events in all the years of his public ministry. Only those three men were invited to accompany him further into the Garden of Gethsemane the night of his betrayal. We naturally imagine that the other nine men must have resented their special place to some degree because we know we would have resented their being singled out for special attention! But the Lord did it anyway. We don't all enjoy precisely the same position in life, even in the church. And that is obviously the way it ought to be. It is surely a test of our grace and our humility and perhaps that's why Paul, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, doesn't scruple to mention the fact that Erastus held a high government office. It is a Christian thing to take note of and to take pride in one another's accomplishments.

Paul does here. Did you notice the way he drew attention and obviously admired the hard-work and the accomplishment of Mary in v. 6, of Urbanus in v. 9, of Tryphaena and Tryphosa and Persis in v. 12. These people were *workers, hard and effective workers and known for their industry in the gospel* and Paul felt it important to acknowledge that.

Well, so it is in other ways that this list of names teaches us about what the Roman church was like and so what our church ought to be like. A prosopography of Faith Presbyterian Church should reveal similar things about us! There is more here to learn about our life in the church, our view of one another, and our calling as Christians than you might at first realize.

I. First, take note of the cross-section of socio-economic status in the Roman congregation.

Though one cannot be sure in any particular case, the total number of names in Paul's list that are known to have been common among slaves in Rome in the first century and other historical data that confirms that there was a high percentage of slaves in the membership of the Christian church in those days and thereafter makes it a certainty that some of these Roman Christians mentioned by name were slaves. They were the property of other human beings.

While it has proved impossible to go beyond general estimates both of total population and slave population in the Roman world or Rome in particular, it is certain that slaves made up a substantial portion of the population. It is guessed that of the some 7.5 million inhabitants of Italy in the first century, some 2 to 3 million were slaves. [Cf. *OCD*, Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 221] The very wealthy in Rome might have hundreds of slaves which makes it more likely that a number of them would have been Christians as their number was burgeoning in those days. On the other hand, slaves themselves could hold positions of trust and authority and even become well-to-do as slaves, sufficiently so to own slaves themselves. And it was by no means uncommon for slaves to gain their freedom either by purchase or by the generosity of their owners. No doubt there were in the Roman church both slaves who lived quite comfortably and slaves whose lives were such as we tend to associate with the condition of slavery. But, no matter, slaves craved freedom then as now and for many it never came. Aristotle summed up the existence of most slaves in the ancient world with four words: work, punishment, and food.

But, so it seems from this list, if there were slaves, there were likewise members of noble, if not royal families as well. It seems plausible, given the number of such names, that some of these Christians were members, even prominent members of influential Roman families, such as those of Aristobulus and Narcissus. We know this was the case a few years later from other evidence in any case. And, of course, some had homes large enough to accommodate worship services, as, for example, Prisca and Aquila, as we read in v. 5 and Gaius as in v. 23.

When the Roman Christians gathered for worship slave owners sat next to slaves and when they left their services they went home to very different lives. And, of course, in a great many ways that has always been true in the Christian church and is today and is here at Faith Presbyterian. Our situations in life are very different, some much happier than others. But we gather for worship because what we share is so much more important, says so much more about us, and has so much more to do with ultimate things and our eternal destiny than those features that distinguish us from one another in this world. In Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free. And it was the worship service, the congregational fellowship of early Christian churches that demonstrated that fact to the world and reminded the Christians of it when they were tempted to forget. There was the slave sitting by the government officer; there was the

single mother chatting after service with several folk, one a slave, another a freedman, one wealthy, another poor.

These names, betokening such different lives in a worldly way, but all belonging to the church of Jesus Christ, is a window on reality, brothers and sisters. Our unity across every earthly barrier our Lord Jesus said in John 17 would be the public proof or demonstration of the reality of another world and another communion and another life which we Christians have already experienced in anticipation. Our differences are our glory and they are the substance of our witness and testimony to the world and the more of them we can cheerfully and enthusiastically accommodate in our fellowship the more perfectly we demonstrate the reality of divine grace and the world to come. It should be all our desire together to gather every kind of person into this church family, united not in any worldly way – economic or racial or ethnic or sexual or marital or political, not in those ways the same necessarily – but in our shared commitment to Jesus Christ, the Prince of Life and his salvation and his kingdom, all of us absolutely one.

II. Second, note the presence together of members of two populations that were notoriously alienated from one another in the Greco-Roman world, viz. Jews and Gentiles.

Some of the people in Paul's list were Jews. We know Prisca and Aquila were and so were those Paul describes as "his kinsmen." But quite likely others of these were as well, such as Apelles in v. 10 and Rufus and his mother in v. 13. The division between Jew and Gentile, *from both sides*, was one of the principal divides in first century society. Jews were often suspected, held in suspicion, and nearly as often hated by Roman Gentiles. Prisca and Aquila had been driven from Rome by a decree of the emperor Claudius that effectively blamed political problems of the day on the Jewish element. They were the scapegoats of Roman society in something like the same way they would be in German society in the 20th century.

But in the church, not without effort, difficulty and some failure mind you, that divide was overcome and that suspicion was laid to rest, and Jew and Gentile alike united in love and communion. We know, alas, very well that the church has often failed to overcome such deep divisions in the population, whether between blacks and whites in America or today in members of different tribes in African Christianity. But Paul takes it as a matter of course that such divisions, no matter how deep and long-standing, would dissolve away to nothing in the fellowship and worship of the Christian church. He notes that some are Jews and others Gentiles, but it matters not at all to him that they share the same church and ministry and mission.

This list of names becomes, in this way as well, our calling: a calling to reproduce in the church that same mixture, that same unity in defiance of the deepest divisions of our society. It is our calling to find that division that we feel most profoundly, that we struggle most to overcome in our minds and hearts – is it over politics, or race, or ethnicity, or gender, or age, or marital status, or whatever – and then overcome it in the name of Christ and by the power of his love. It ought to be obvious to anyone observing our life as a Christian congregation that the deepest divisions in society, the divisions that are rarely overcome anywhere else, are regularly and completely overcome in the church of Jesus Christ.

III. *And, finally, notice the mixture of men and women.*

Among those Paul singles out for praise are women as well as men, a good number of women. Among those Paul singles out for their hard work on the behalf of the gospel, more are women than men. Several wealthy women were obviously employing their means to bless other believers and support the work of the church and for that reason they were mentioned. I suspect most of those mentioned were single women insofar as their husbands are not named. They were either Christian women married to unbelieving men, or widows, or women who never married. No doubt there were many faithful wives and mothers in the Roman church as well; they just don't happen to get named by the apostle Paul, their life and work at home rendered them less visible, as it can do still today.

It was one of the revolutionary characteristics of first century Christianity that it made so much of its women, prided itself in their accomplishments, depended upon them for their labors, and treated them as equals before God and man. All of these people, women prominent among them, are praised for their contribution to gospel work. You don't find anything like this in the Greek or Roman writings of the period. Those who find the biblical teaching regarding the few important distinctions between men and women intolerably oppressive would do well to realize how profoundly the church liberated her women to lives of high purpose and to a measure of accomplishment that the entire church happily celebrated as her own. It was a good thing to be a woman in the Christian Church.

A few years ago a young woman visited the church. She'd come from churches that did not reserve church office to men and churches that had fewer families and many fewer families with a sizeable number of children. She was, in other words, a *modern* young Christian woman. She told me that she was looking to see if, conservative as our theology and practice was, we marginalized our women here as was the common complaint against the treatment of women in these churches that had moved away from the historic position of the church on men and women. She was very interested to learn that there were changing tables in the men's bathrooms as well as the women's. But she was alert to many other things: the participation of women in worship, the quality and measure of interaction between men and women after the service, and so on. I told her we welcomed her observation and that I would be glad to hear what conclusions she came to. As it happened she didn't stay but she also admitted that the women here impressed her.

Should we not hope that any who are observing us see how our women are treated, with what respect; what attention is paid to their opinions and how much is rested upon their industry not only in the fellowship of the church but in its work, ministry and witness. So it was in the Roman church long ago; so it must be today. Insofar as faithful Christian churches must repudiate much of the modern feminist ideal, it is all the more important that the church be seen to treasure her women and to treat them as equal to men and essential to the church's life and work and ministry in the world. It has, alas, not always been so. Let it be so here.

Think of these people in long ago Rome whose names you know because the Apostle Paul mentioned them in his great letter. You all have names. In that way, too, we are just like that congregation long ago. Each a person like yourself; each a committed worker in the kingdom of God. Some very like you in certain ways, some others not so much, but each a follower of Jesus

Christ. Each a committed worker in the kingdom of God. Each valued the other for the infinitely important things that they shared and defined them above all. Each a sinner saved by grace. So different and so much the same. Only the church manages this unity amidst diversity. She struggles to manage it, to be sure and often fails. But only the church so often manages to make a loving, caring family out of the most different sorts of people. This is the power and grace of God and the beauty of the gospel on display. May it be revealed here more and more to God's glory and our own happiness and to the strength and effectiveness of our witness to the world.