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## SNAPSHOT OF A CHURCH

Romans 16:1-16, 21-23

By

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Romans, Lesson 106

Snapshot of a Church  
Romans 16:1-16, 21-23

When you come to a section of Scripture like Romans 16 with its long list of names, it's good to keep in mind Paul's words in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." These verses, along with the lists of genealogies in the Bible, are inspired by God for our spiritual profit to equip us for every good work. So rather than skip over them quickly, we need to think about, "What food for my soul is here for me?" You have to dig a bit, but when you do you come up with some nuggets that make the search worthwhile.

Paul isn't deliberately teaching here. Rather, he is greeting his friends in Rome and sending greetings from some who were with him in Corinth. But the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write these greetings to teach us. What we have here is a snapshot of these two churches that teaches us much about what our church ought to be. And the individuals greeted here can motivate and encourage each of us to be all that God wants us to be. We learn that...

The church is made up of ordinary, diverse people  
who know the Lord, are growing in Him,  
serve Him, and love one another.

I can't comment on every name, but I want to point out seven features of this snapshot. But before I do, let me say that this chapter dispels the notion that Paul was a non-relational theologian who was so wrapped up in his study that he didn't care about people. These verses show that Paul knew many of the saints in Rome by name and some of them closely, even though he had not yet visited Rome. The chapter brims with personal relationships that reflect Paul's love for people. The best theologians are those who can form loving relationships. Let's look at the snapshot:

1. The church is made up of ordinary, diverse people who are "in the Lord."

Paul commends to the Romans "our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea" (16:1). Most scholars think that she was the one who carried the letter to Rome. She was probably a single, wealthy business woman (she was a "helper" or "patroness" or "benefactor" of many, including Paul). Her name comes from Greek mythology, and so she was probably saved out of a Gentile pagan background.

In fact a majority of the names in this list are Gentile, indicating the Gentile majority in the church (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 918). And the majority of the names are those of either slaves or freedmen (freed slaves). Some in the list may have been a part of Caesar's household (see Phil. 4:22, written from Rome). Aristobulus (16:10) was a grandson of Herod the Great and was a close friend of the Emperor Claudius. He was not a believer. When he died, his slaves would have become the property of the emperor, but would still be called "the household of Aristobulus." The following name, Herodion, probably refers to a Jewish slave or freedman who was a part of that larger household of Aristobulus now in the emperor's service (see J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* [Zondervan], p. 175).

The household of Narcissus (16:11) also probably referred to the slaves belonging to a wealthy, wicked freedman who was also friends with the Emperor Claudius. When Nero came to the throne, his mother Agrippina forced Narcissus to commit suicide (three or four years before Romans was written), so his slaves also would be part of the royal household.

Tertius, Paul's secretary in Corinth (16:22), and Quartus, whom Paul simply calls "the brother" (16:23), were probably slaves. Their names mean "Third" and "Fourth." They weren't even the number one or number two slaves. Although they were third and fourth, they were members of the church (James Boice, *Romans: The New Humanity* [Baker], 4:1952, 1956). Tertius had the very important task of accurately recording Paul's dictated words. Quartus is no longer just the fourth nameless slave, but is "the brother," a noble designation.

In the same breath Paul mentions Erastus, the city treasurer, an important public position. An inscription has been found in Corinth mentioning an Erastus who was the public works adminis-

trator. It may refer to an earlier or later job of this same man who was now city treasurer. So in the church in Corinth you had low-level slaves right next to Erastus the important official.

Prisca and Aquila (16:3) were fellow tentmakers and fellow Jews with Paul, as were the others in this chapter whom he calls "my kinsmen" (16:7, 11, 21). As we've seen, there were tensions between the Gentile and Jewish segments of the church in Rome. Paul desperately wanted these diverse groups to work out their differences and grow in love as one body in Christ.

One other man who was probably a Jew was Rufus (16:13). A "Rufus" is also mentioned in Mark 15:21, where Mark says that his father was Simon of Cyrene, who was forced to carry Jesus' cross. Since Mark's gospel was probably written for the Romans, the Rufus there may be the one Paul greets here. If so, Rufus' father was a Jew from Cyrene (modern Libya), who had gone to Jerusalem for the Passover. Through his forced encounter with Christ and the cross, he came to faith in Jesus as His Savior and Lord. Luke mentions that when the gospel first went to Antioch, it was men from Cyprus and Cyrene who first preached it there (Acts 11:20). It's possible (although not certain) that Simon of Cyrene was one of those men. His son Rufus was now a prominent member of the church in Rome.

We don't know why Paul singles him out as "a choice man in the Lord." The Greek term is, "elect" or "chosen" in the Lord, which is true of all believers. John Piper suggests that maybe Paul and Rufus had had a long discussion about God's sovereign election. Also, perhaps they had talked about how God's sovereignty had brought Rufus' father in contact with Christ, so that the truth of election was now especially precious to him.

So the church in Rome was made up of these ordinary but diverse people. Some were slaves, others were blue collar workers, and still others were wealthy. Some were men, but Paul mentions a number of women. What drew them together and united them? We find the answer in a phrase that Paul repeats eleven times in these verses: "in the Lord" or "in Christ." He asks the Romans to receive Phoebe "in the Lord" (16:2). He commends Prisca and Aquila as his "fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (16:3). He says that Andronicus and Junias "were in Christ before me" (16:7). He calls

Ampliatius “my beloved in the Lord” (16:8). Urbanus is “our fellow worker in Christ” (16:9). Apelles is “the approved in Christ” (16:10). Perhaps he had endured some difficult trial in a commendable way. Paul sends greetings to those of the household of Narcissus, “who are in the Lord” (16:11). Tryphaena and Tryphosa are “workers in the Lord” (16:12). Persis the beloved “has worked hard in the Lord” (16:12). Rufus is “chosen in the Lord” (16:13). And Tertius, Paul’s secretary, sends his greetings “in the Lord” (16:22).

As we’ve seen in Romans, being “in Christ” through faith is the most important designation that can be true of anyone. Paul begins Romans 8 by stating (8:1), “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” He ends that chapter by saying (8:39) that there is nothing that “will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Whether you are wealthy or poor, ordinary or important, male or female, no matter what your background, those eternal blessings are offered to you in Christ Jesus if you will trust in Him as your Savior. What a tribute to the glorious gospel that saves ordinary, diverse people from every walk of life and places them “in Christ”!

2. The church is made up of ordinary people growing to know the Lord through sound doctrine.

It’s significant that although Romans is the most doctrinally deep letter in the New Testament, it was written to help common people, many of them slaves, to know Christ and grow in their walk with Him. Leon Morris (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Apollos/Eerdmans], p. 527) observes,

It was a letter to real people and, as far as we can see, to ordinary people; it was not written to professional theologians (although through the centuries scholars have found the epistle a happy hunting ground). As we consider the weighty matters Paul deals with, we are apt to overlook the fact that it was addressed to people like Ampliatius and Tryphena and Rufus. Clearly Paul expected this kind of person to be helped by what he wrote, a fact which modern experts sometimes overlook.

We live in a day when doctrine is shoved aside because supposedly it is either divisive or impractical. But Paul would have vig-

ously disagreed. He spends 11 chapters laying a solid doctrinal foundation before he gets around to the so-called practical section of this letter. And as noted, it was written for ordinary Christians, not just for theologians or scholars. It takes some mental effort to grapple with these profound truths, but it's well worth the work!

3. The church is made up of diverse people who are deepening their relationships with one another in the Lord.

There are over 30 names in these two sections and it's likely that Paul knew most of them personally. He mentions four of them as being especially close ("my beloved" or "the beloved"; 16:5, 8, 9, 12), including Epaphroditus, who was the first convert in Asia. He calls Phoebe "our sister" (16:1) and Quartus "the brother" (16:23). He mentions Rufus' mother as being his own mother (16:13). Apparently she had ministered to Paul as a mother would, perhaps when he was ill. Prisca and Aquila had risked their lives for Paul. We don't know when this happened, but obviously there was a close bond between them because of this. He also directs the believers in Rome to greet one another with a holy kiss (16:16), a common custom in that culture (1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14). It would have been men with men and women with women. It's a *holy* kiss! Be careful about being too physical in greeting members of the opposite sex!

All of these personal, warm greetings reflect the love between Paul and these believers and between all believers. It's amazing that he could remember all of these names! Clearly, he took a personal interest in people, and so should we. We are not called to be Christians in isolation, but rather in relationship with one another. I realize that some of you have been burned in relationships and that makes you hesitant to risk getting burned again. But Paul got burned too (2 Tim. 1:15; 4:10, 14), but that didn't keep him from pursuing close relationships with other believers.

4. The church is made up of people who are family and thus are hospitable and helpful toward one another.

Paul urges the church to extend hospitality to Phoebe, whom he calls "our sister." She was family. Quartus was "the brother." Prisca and Aquila opened their home to host the gatherings of the church (16:5), which they also did in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19).

Probably the two groups mentioned in 16:14 & 15 represented other house churches, which could perhaps hold as many as 70 or 80 people (Moo, p. 919). In Corinth, Gaius apparently hosted a church in his house (16:23).

For at least the first two centuries, churches had to meet in homes due to persecution. There is a renewed interest in house churches in our day as well. They have the advantage of forming close relationships, allowing for closer shepherding, and involving every member in ministry. They have the disadvantages of lacking solid teaching getting off track doctrinally if they lack trained leaders. They can also spawn relational conflicts that come from being overly involved in one another's personal affairs. Also, if they don't maintain an emphasis on outreach and healthy growth by division, they can become ingrown. Our home fellowships provide all of these advantages and disadvantages!. But they're worth the risk. I encourage you to plug in to one. This snapshot also reveals that...

5. The church is made up of people who work hard together for the Lord.

Paul repeatedly mentions how these people were involved in serving the Lord. Phoebe was "a servant of the church in Cenchrea," a port city near Corinth (16:1). She may have held an official position as a deaconess (1 Tim. 3:11), although some scholars dispute this. But even though she probably was busy as a single business woman, she was devoted to serving the church.

Paul calls Prisca and Aquila "my fellow workers in Christ Jesus." Paul had met them in Corinth, where they worked together as tentmakers after they had been forced to leave Rome when Claudius expelled the Jews (Acts 18:1-3). By the way, Paul always calls her Prisca, the more formal name. Luke uses Priscilla, which was the diminutive nickname (like Liz for Elizabeth). They later accompanied Paul to Ephesus, where after Paul left they helped Apollos get straightened out in his doctrine (Acts 18:24-26). Now they had moved back to Rome. Still later, they would move back to Ephesus again (2 Tim. 4:19). Wherever they went, their hearts were for building up the church. Husbands and wives can find great joy in working together for the Lord. Husbands, if you and your wife host a home fellowship, help her with the work!

Paul also mentions Mary, “who has worked hard for you” (16:6). He calls Urbanus “our fellow worker in Christ” (16:9). Tryphaena and Tryphosa (probably sisters, whose names mean Delicate and Dainty) were not fragile—they were “workers in the Lord” (16:12)! Persis (another woman) “has worked hard in the Lord” (16:12). And he calls Timothy “my fellow worker” (16:21).

As we saw in chapter 12, every believer has been given at least one spiritual gift that he or she is to use in serving the Lord. There should be no benchwarmers in the body of Christ. First Peter 4:10-11 puts it like this:

As each one has received a *special* gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, *is to do so* as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves *is to do so* as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

So the church is made up of ordinary, diverse people who are “in Christ.” These ordinary people are growing to know the Lord through sound doctrine, such as the Epistle to the Romans. They are deepening their relationships with one another, being hospitable and helpful to one another as family. They work hard together for the Lord.

6. The church is made up of both men and women who serve the Lord, but in different roles and capacities.

In the male-dominated culture of that day, it is significant that Paul mentions four women who worked hard in the Lord (16:6, 12), plus Prisca who along with her husband Aquila were “fellow workers in Christ Jesus” (16:3). Paul entrusted probably the only copy of this precious letter to a woman, Phoebe, for safe delivery to Rome. In all, Paul mentions seven women by name, plus Rufus’ mother (16:13) and Nereus’ sister (16:15). Obviously Paul believed that women have an important role to play in serving the Lord.

But at the same time, we need to be careful not to “overinterpret this evidence” (Moo, p. 927). Those who argue for erasing all role distinctions in the church bring up two matters to support their cause. First, Prisca is mentioned before her husband in four



out of six references in Scripture, which was against the common custom. We don't know why. She may have been the more dominant personality of the two, the more gifted, the more socially prominent, or the one who was most significant in their home-based ministry (Moo, p. 919, note 11).

Second, although scholars for centuries have been divided over whether Junias (16:7) was a man or a woman, most today argue that it refers to the wife of Andronicus. "Outstanding among the apostles" could mean that the apostles regarded this couple as outstanding, or more likely it means that among those who were apostles, this couple stood out. So feminists argue that we have here a female apostle.

But if this is so, Paul was using "apostles" to refer to traveling missionaries (Moo, p. 924), not to those with special authority over the churches as was given to the twelve and to Paul. But to build a case on an unclear reference here to argue that Paul is going against what he clearly states in other contexts about men being in roles of teaching and leadership in the local church (1 Tim. 2:8-15; 1 Cor. 11:3-16; 14:34-38) is not sound interpretation (Moo, p. 927; Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 797).

So the point is, women can and should have significant ministries in the local church and in the cause of world missions in biblically appropriate roles. In his book, *What's the Difference?* ([Crossway], pp. 57-58) John Piper lists dozens of ministries that women can serve in. But the roles of teaching men and overall leadership in the church are restricted to men.

7. The church is made up of whole families that have come to faith in Christ through the gospel.

Paul mentions two households (16:10, 11), which referred to both the biological family members and the servants, plus Rufus' mother and Nereus' sister (16:13, 15). In the Book of Acts, we see whole households coming to faith (2:39, "you and your children"; 10:1-48, Cornelius; 16:15, Lydia; 16:31-34, the Philippian jailer). If you're in one of our home fellowships, you're familiar with the concept that Pastor Tom Mercer sets forth in his book, *8 to 15: Your World Delivered*. He says that we all have between 8 and 15 people that we have natural bridges to, whether as biological family

or people that we rub shoulders with every day. They're the ones that we should pray for and, as God opens the door, share the gospel with. So make a prayer list of these 8-15 people and ask God to show them their need of Christ and to give you an opportunity to tell them the good news.

### Conclusion

None of the people listed in Romans 16 were famous or powerful in the world's eyes. None of them knew that their names would be enshrined in Scripture for millions of Christians down through the ages to read. Even though our names will never be in Scripture and none of us will probably be recognized or remembered by the world, God knows your name and you are important to Him. He sent His Son to rescue you from sin and judgment. He has given you an important role to play in His kingdom purposes. It may be to be a loving homemaker and to rear your children to love and follow Christ. It may be to set a godly example as a loving husband and father. It may include serving in some capacity in the local church or in the cause of world missions. It may be to tell your neighbor the good news of Jesus Christ and to explain to him (or her) how he can have his sins forgiven and go to heaven.

Whatever your gifts and calling, the most important thing is that you know that Christ has saved you from eternal judgment because you have put your trust in Him as Savior and Lord. Then look for ways that you can serve the Lord, as these people did. Read through the descriptions again and ask yourself, "How would Paul have described me if he had known me?"

William Barclay observes (*The Letter to the Romans* [Westminster, rev. ed.], p. 220), "It is a great thing to go down to history as the man with the open house or as the man with the brotherly heart. Some day people will sum us up in one sentence. What will that sentence be?"

## Application Questions

1. How would Paul have described you if you were in this list? How would you like to be described?
2. If Paul wrote a letter to Flagstaff Christian Fellowship, what would he say? How would he commend or correct us?
3. Many churches now have women pastors and elders. Which Scriptures would you use to argue against this?
4. Can you share the gospel clearly when you get the chance? Make a list of your "8 to 15" and begin to pray for opportunities to share the gospel with them.

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