

SO MANY (ORDINARY) PEOPLE
ROMANS 16:1-16

In Elmer Bendiner's book, *Fall of Fortresses*, he recounts an air raid of Kassel, Germany, in the plane for which he was the navigator, the B-17 *Tondelayo*. More than three decades after the event, he and the pilot met to remember the war together. Eventually they talked about July 30, 1943, a day in which the *Tondelayo* had been shot up badly. What was particularly remarkable about that trip was that a 20mm shell had pierced their gas tank and had not exploded — an astounding providence that saved their lives. Bendiner tells of his conversation with the pilot, Bohn Fawkes:



I reflected on the miracle of a 20-mm. shell piercing the fuel tank without touching off an explosion.

Now Bohn licked his chops so that I could see that a revelation was on the verge. It was not the case of an unexploded shell in a gas tank, he said. It was not so simple a miracle. At the time Bohn too had thought it was no more than that. On the morning following Kassel, while I slept late and missed my breakfast, Bohn had gone down to ask our crew chief for that shell, as a souvenir of unbelievable luck. Marsden told Bohn that there had been not just one shell but eleven of them in the gas tanks—eleven unexploded shells where only one would have sufficed to blast us out of the sky with no time for chutes. It was as if the sea had been parted for us....

Bohn was told that the shells had been sent to the armorers to be defused. The armorers told him that Intelligence had picked them up. They could not say why.

The professorial captain of intelligence confirmed the story. Eleven shells were in fact found in *Tondelayo's* tanks. No, he could not give one to Bohn. Sorry, he could not say why.

Eventually the captain broke down...[and told Bohn the story.] He swore Bohn to secrecy.

The armorers who opened each of those shells had found no explosive charge. They were as clean as a whistle and as harmless. Empty? Not quite, said the captain....

One was not empty. It contained a carefully rolled piece of paper. On it was a scrawl in Czech. The intelligence captain had scoured Kimbolton for a man who could read Czech....Translated, the note read: "This is all we can do for you now." [Elmer Bendiner, *The Fall of Fortresses*, 130.]

The Czech saboteur obviously wanted to do good for the Allies, but he had no idea of the life he gave those men in that B-17 that day. Perhaps it seemed to him just a simple thing — maybe even insignificant — was it even worth the risk and the effort? It was.

At times, as we serve in the church, we may also wonder about the significance of what we do. Is it worth it? Am I making a difference? Am I really helping anyone? Am I being useful to the Lord?

In a passage that seems to be on the fringes of what might be “profitable” in Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16-17), Paul greets particular people in the Roman church. In fact, in these 16 verses, he sends greetings to 24 people by name, two other people that he does not name, and five groups (including three churches, vv. 5, 14-15). And in the following verses, he will also send greetings from an additional eight people. How should we think of all those names and what is the significance of those names?

We will draw several principles from this passage, but as an overview, we do well to remember that as Francis Schaeffer said, There are “no little people” in Christ’s church. “The Scripture emphasizes that much can come from little if the little is truly consecrated to God.” That is exactly what Paul exemplifies in all his greetings in these verses. The lesson for us from this passage is:

TREAT EVERY CHURCH MEMBER AS VITAL TO THE CHURCH.

In these verses Paul teaches us of **the importance of every member** to the body of Christ:

- 1. The Importance of Phoebe (vv. 1-2)**
- 2. The Importance of the List (vv. 3-16)**
- 3. Some Important Principles**

1. The Importance of Phoebe (vv. 1-2) — she exemplifies the importance of “little people”

- **Paul’s affirmation of Phoebe (v. 1a)**
 - ✓ To commend someone is to affirm them to bring them into a trusted relationship of friendship; it is to say, “I vouch for this person’s authenticity; you can trust him/her.”
 - ✓ This kind of commendation was common in the early church; letters were sent from one church to another to affirm the credibility of the believers carrying the letters so they would be accepted into the church in the area to which they were traveling. E.g., Acts 18:27; **2 Cor. 3:1**; 12:11.
 - ✓ Paul is commending Phoebe because she is traveling to Rome; *apparently*, while Paul was in Corinth, Phoebe heard of his plans to go to Rome and Spain, and she wanted to join the ministry there. Since Paul is first going to Jerusalem, Phoebe takes the letter to Rome for Paul and waits. Paul includes this note to affirm her credibility of her to the Roman church.
- **Phoebe’s work in the church (v. 1b)**
 - ✓ Everything we know about Phoebe is in these two verses.
 - ✓ Phoebe is evidently a prosperous Gentile woman — her name is derived from pagan mythology, so it is unlikely she is a Jew. Because of her freedom to travel, she may be a freewoman and because Paul says that she has ***been a helper of many*** (v. 2 — a “patron”), so she may have been a prosperous businesswoman.
 - ✓ Despite her apparent significant position, he calls her a ***servant of the church***.
 - There has been much debate about whether or not she was a “deaconess” or merely a “servant” (the word can be translated either way). My inclination is that he is pointing to her service because the word was usually used that way (Col. 1:7; 1 Tim. 4:6) and because with all the names he mentions, he only points to the work they did and not to any official role.
 - Regardless of how we take it, we should understand that Paul thinks highly of her work — that she was committed to caring for the entire church. There were no limitations on her service.
 - ✓ We know very little about the church in ***Cenchrea*** other than it was a thriving port community that had prosperous trade with cities like Ephesus and Thessalonica. It was a neighbor of Corinth (7-9 miles away), and likely had the same cultural temptations the Corinthian church had.
 - ✓ So in a challenging culture (and possibly difficult church), Phoebe was a faithful servant of Christ.
- **The church’s ministry to Phoebe (v. 2)**
 - ✓ In addition to commending Phoebe to the Roman church, Paul says to ***receive her...***
 - He obviously intends them to read that as something like, “welcome and treat her well.”

- He also adds that they are to receive her **in the Lord**. Their reception of Phoebe is based on their common relationship in the Lord (*kurios*, Master). Christ is Master of both the Romans and Phoebe and they are to treat her as a fellow servant of the Master; this also subtly reminds the Romans that they are not superior to Phoebe — all are simply slaves of the Master.
- And he also adds that they are to receive her **in a manner worthy of the saints** — that is, there is an appropriate way for believers to care for one another, and they should do that for her (even though they did not yet know her). Paul talked about this care for and ministry to one another in **12:9ff** — this is a practical manifestation of that care.
- ✓ Their reception of her was also specifically to **help her in whatever she may have need**. The word “help” has the idea of “standing by” to help someone (e.g., **2 Tim. 4:17**). It is also intentionally open-ended: “I don’t know what all she might need, just help her however you can...”
- ✓ It is only appropriate for the Romans to do this because that was what she did — **helper**; “she gave with an open hand, so it is appropriate that you also give freely.” Perhaps Paul is even anticipating that she has need because she has given so generously to others and **Paul**. The inference might even be something like, “she gave to others and me; you can help me by helping her.”
- ✓ He seems to be emphasizing the mutuality of care for one another — I need you and you need me.

2. The Importance of the List (vv. 3-16)

- The list of names in this section is larger than any other written by Paul (only Col. 4:7ff approaches it).
- Many of these verses begin with the verb **Greet** (as in **v. 3**). The word is used 59x in the NT and 21x in this chapter (35% of all uses in the NT)! It is more than just “say ‘hi,’” but includes “be hospitable.”
- The first he “greet” are his long-time friends **Prisca and Aquila** (**v. 3**). They had been in Rome, were expelled with the other Jews by Claudius (**Acts 18:2**), traveled with Paul, helping him in both Ephesus and Corinth, and then moved back to Rome (though later they appear in Ephesus again, 2 Tim. 4:19).
 - ✓ Paul identifies them as **fellow-workers** — but what is significant is that they are working together with Paul **in Christ Jesus** — their connection with him is through Christ (like Phoebe, v. 2). And isn’t that indicative of the sweetness of fellowship believers have with one another even when they don’t know one another?
 - ✓ Paul is particularly attached to them because they **risked** death (**v. 4**) to care for him. We do not know what they did, just that they endangered themselves.
 - *Following Christ is inherently risky*. If we want safety on earth, then we shouldn’t follow Christ; but if we want safety in eternity, then we dare not let anything keep us from following Christ.
 - *Believers are more concerned about caring for other believers than protecting themselves from risk*. That was not only true of P&A, but others as well (**Phil. 2:30**; 2 Tim. 3:10-12; **1 Pt. 4:12**).
 - Note that this risk was well-known in the early church (v. 4b) — it should stimulate **thanks**.

- **The church that is in their house** (v. 5) is a reference to a house church in Rome; at times the churches in a city would meet as a “whole church” (1 Cor. 14:23), but generally it was too large to meet in one location, so they met in various homes. Two other house churches are mentioned (vv. 14–15).
- **Epaenetus** was presumably led to Christ by Paul in Asia, which makes him especially **beloved** by Paul. Paul says something similar in 1 Cor. 16:15; these were the first of many and thus a special joy for him.
- We do not know the identity of **Mary** (v. 6) — it was a very common name both in Judaism and Gentile culture. What is notable about her is not her identity but her work: we don’t know *what* she did, but we do know that she **worked hard** — struggled and toiled. That’s the nature of ministry (1 Cor. 15:58).
- **Andronicus and Junias** (v. 7) were likely a husband and wife team (Junias can be either male or female). Paul identifies them as **kinsmen** — probably not relatives, but fellow Jews. They also were fellow prisoners, though we don’t know if at the same time and place as Paul; he was imprisoned 7x, so there are many places where they might have been with him (maybe just, “also imprisoned”). And they were **outstanding among the apostles**, probably “exceptional among those who have been sent by God (for missions?)” since there were no female apostles.
- We know nothing about **Ampliatius, Urbanus, or Stachys** (vv. 8-9) other than they were likely Gentiles and they had a beloved relationship with Paul.
- In v. 10, Paul calls **Apelles** “approved.” It is the word that denotes he has been tested and found genuine. We don’t know anything else about him or what he did; perhaps there is a hint in that he seems to be part of the household of **Aristobulus**. It is likely that Aristobulus is the grandson of Herod the Great and the brother of Agrippa I; he died in Rome between 45-48 A.D. and after his death his household would have been still connected to the royal household and evidently a number of them trusted Christ and were well-known in the Roman church.
- Similarly, in v. 11, **Herodion** was likely also a member of the Herodians — a political party that were “supporters of Jewish aspirations for a national kingdom who favored Herodian rule vs. direct Rom. rule; political supporters of Antipas.” [ZPEB] That connection makes further sense in that he seems connected to the **household of Narcissus** — Narcissus had been put to death by Emperor Claudius; and as with Aristobulus, there were evidently members of his household who were Christians (**in the Lord**).
- **Verse 12** contains the names of three women (perhaps **Tryphaena and Tryphosa** were sisters or twins). We know nothing of them except they all worked hard for the cause of Christ (**worked hard** is the same word that is used of Mary, v. 6).
- There is one other **Rufus** (v. 13) in Scripture (Mk. 15:21 — the son of Simon of Cyrene); no idea if they are the same men. What is notable is that he is a “choice” man — either “exceptional” in his work for Christ, or “chosen” (elected to salvation) — it’s unclear. His mother was also a “mother” to Paul.
- **Verses 14-15** include lists two groups of believers, both consisting of men and women, and house churches with whom they are affiliated. We can only tell from the names that some were slaves and some were free; their only link was that they had a common community of worship and service.

- Paul concludes his list of names with two final comments (v. 16):
 - ✓ ***Greet one another with a holy kiss*** — greetings by kissing were common in that day and culture (even as it still is in some contemporary cultures); but even while it was common, Paul was clear to say that such greetings needed to be “sanctified” — ***holy***. Tertullian calls it the “kiss of peace.” It’s simply a way to affirm the affection and delight the members should have with one another. Don’t merely “greet” one another, but warmly embrace and be affectionate with one another. At GBC we would say, “give one another a holy hug...”
 - ✓ ***All the churches greet you*** — not only was Paul sending his greetings to all these people, but all the churches with whom he was affiliated were also sending greetings. Likely he has in mind the churches that participated in the offering he was taking to Jerusalem (15:25ff; Acts 20:3-5). This might also be a subtle way of saying that he wants Rome to be part of this group of supporters.
- What should we think about this long list of names? How is this a help to us?

3. Some Important Principles

- Note all the different aspects of this list of names:
 - ✓ He “greet” 26 individuals (24 by name) — 17 men and 9 women.
 - ✓ He identifies two “families” (households) and three house churches.
 - ✓ He mentions two couples, two people of political distinction, and five slaves.
 - ✓ He mentions at least three fellow Jews, and there perhaps were even more.
 - ✓ So we have in the list of people in the Roman church a very diverse group of people that would ordinarily would be opposed to each other; it’s hard to imagine any other reason than Christ for bringing them together.
- Despite the variety of names in the list, there are some common themes: Stott emphasizes the unity of this diverse group of people, observing, “Four times Paul describes his friends as being *in Christ* (3, 7, 9, 10) and five times as *in the Lord* (8, 11, twice in 12, 13). Twice he uses the family language of ‘sister’ and ‘brother’ (1, 14). In addition, he is not inhibited from calling people ‘beloved’ or ‘my beloved’ (5, 8, 9, 12). He also mentions two experiences which strengthen Christian unity, namely being fellow workers (3, 9) and fellow sufferers (4, 7).”
- The common themes in this passage lead us to some principles about relationships in the body and how we care for one another.
- ***Some members may be less well-known, but no one is unknown.*** This ought to comfort us that our efforts are never wasted and not unimportant. Just as with the OT genealogies are filled with names of people who are lost to history, they are not lost to the memory of God. He knows them all and knows all of their story and will remember to bring them into the Kingdom (if they are believers).

- **Every member has a role in the body.** This ought to enhance our commitment to use and serve our gifts somewhere in the body. One of our core values is “every member ministry” — the church is only fully effective when every member is functioning; we get that from Rom. 12:3ff and from passages like this — every person has a place to function in the body and when they do the body works well.
- **Treat every member with the dignity and affection of Christ, to whom every member belongs.** I find this principle in three emphases in this passage:
 - ✓ Paul’s continued reminders to **greet** every member of the body he names (and even some unnamed). “Greeting” one another implies we are hospitable and embracing. And what is more affectionate than a **kiss** (v. 16)? Christ doesn’t bind us together to make us aloof from one another.
 - ✓ The reminder of their common relationships (“beloved,” “fellow workers”). There is brotherhood and connection and fellowship that is far greater than biological relationships we have that are not spiritual relationships.
 - ✓ The reminder of their common unity in Christ (“in the Lord,” “in Christ...”). Those emphases affirm what Paul later wrote from prison in Rome — “Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11).
 - ✓ You are loving and affectionate with each other; that’s biblical. Keep loving... (1 Thess. 4:9-10).
- **The work of ministry is reciprocal:** sometimes you minister to me, sometimes I minister to you, but we both always *need* each other (and neither is “more important” than the other). Whatever your role, you are needed and indispensable.
- **However diverse we are as individual people, our unity in Christ is greater.** We saw this in chapter 14. We *are* different. But we are not *defined* by those differences — those things are all temporal and only (at times) skin deep. We are defined by our common Savior, Jesus Christ. When we are connected by Him, we have far more in common than we have in difference. So we do well to preserve the unity we have by emphasizing our commonness and de-emphasizing our differences.

CONCLUSION: It’s fitting that we should talk about this passage on conference weekend. So many of you have given and sacrificed and served to enable us corporately to care for all the attendees. You’ve done menial tasks and you have given generously with time and resources. You have served and you have loved those you served and those with whom you serve. Will history remember everything all of us have done? No — no more than we know everyone who served in the Roman church.

But the Lord knows and remembers. And He has been honored as we have lived out our unity in Christ with loving service. May He give us grace to continue to love in such ways.

BENEDICTION: Romans 15:13