

Chapter 70

A Variety of Ministries

(Romans 16:1–5a)

Romans 16:1–16 might seem to be less interesting than other parts of Paul’s letters, yet actually the names and greetings in these verses are full of interest.

First there is a word of commendation. ¹*And I commend to you Phoebe, our sister who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrae.* Phoebe was a lady travelling to Rome at the same time as Paul was sending his letter. Paul knew her well since she came from Cenchrae which was near to Corinth. She has to come to Rome and needs assistance because she does not have friends in Rome to help her when she arrives. It is likely that she is the one who carries this letter to the Christians at Rome. ‘Servant’ has the sense of ‘worker’; Phoebe was obviously a woman who played her part in the life of the congregation at Cenchrae. She is to be given a Christian welcome in Rome as a person who is worthy of any help the Christians can give her. If she needs help in her purpose in visiting Rome (which might have been a court case in the capital city), the Christians are to do what they can to give assistance and advice. New Testament Christians cared for each other warmly. ²*I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you will help her in whatever matter she may have need of you. For she has herself also been a helper to many people, including myself.*

³*Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,*

⁴*who for my sake risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the gentiles.* Prisca and Aquila were once forced to move from Rome to Corinth, as we learn from Acts 18:2. They were tent-makers and Paul lived in their home for a while (Acts 18:3). They were able to help Apollos who was a believer in the message of John the Baptist but knew little of the blessings of the new covenant (Acts 18:24–26). Obviously Prisca and Aquila have abilities in teaching and counselling. Later we find them in Ephesus because 1 Corinthians which was written in Ephesus includes greetings from Prisca and Aquila (1 Corinthians 16:19). Now they are in Rome and Paul greets them. Later still they will be in Ephesus when Paul sends a second letter to Timothy (see 2 Timothy 4:19). It seems that Prisca and Aquila combined business and ministry. They seem to have been skilful in Christian work and yet Aquila had a trade and his travels are likely to have been connected with business. They were known for their hard work, and for their willingness to face danger. From Paul's mention of the gratitude of all the churches they must have used their travels to exercise a wide ministry. Paul says, ⁵*Also greet the church that is in their house.* In more than one place Prisca and Aquila made their home available for meetings of the church. They must have been quite wealthy and probably had large homes that were useful for the churches in the different places where they lived. This might be one of the reasons why many churches were grateful to them.

Judging from Prisca and Aquila and some other names in Romans 16, it seems there was a 'ministry of couples' in the early church. Prisca and Aquila were a husband-and-wife team. The man was a tent-maker by profession and used his skill at raising finances in this way to support his ministry with his wife. Clearly Prisca was a significant lady. It is pleasant when a man in ministry has a highly gifted wife who genuinely is a team-member and not a rival in Christian work.

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There are at least three more couples that we shall meet in this chapter. Andronicus and Junias (16:7) seem again to be a husband-and-wife team. Tryphaena and Tryphosa (16:12) were sisters who apparently are working together. Philologos and Julia (16:15) seem to be a married couple. The smallest kind of team-ministry is a team of two!

It is interesting to note that a church met in the home of Aquila and Prisca. The word ‘church’ has a number of different usages. Romans 16:5a is an example where Paul refers to a ‘church’ meeting in a house. Probably this was a part of a larger city-wide church that could **sometimes** meet together. This is specially likely in the case of Rome. Justin Martyr who wrote in the middle of the second century AD said that ‘all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place’. He said, ‘we all hold this common gathering on Sunday’ (*Apologia Prima*, 67). It seems that Paul could not address his letter ‘to the church in Rome’ because they did not often **actually** meet together. The ‘church’ is an actual gathering of people, or people who do at one time or another actually gather together. When Pliny, a Roman governor of Bithynia, wrote to the emperor Trajan (Pliny’s *Epistles*, 10, paragraph 96) in about AD 112, he asked what to do about the Christians. He gives the impression of large numbers. It has penetrated, he says, ‘not the cities only, but the villages and country’. People ‘of all ages and every rank, and also of both sexes’ come together on a fixed day, he says. The pagan temples were becoming empty. Where did these Christian gatherings take place? Pliny does not give any hint of any kind of building. It surely must have been in the open air. It seems that Christians of an area around a city would from time to time come together. I doubt whether one home would be big enough. Nor is it likely that ‘the church in someone’s house’ ever referred to the whole congregation meeting in one home. The numbers – although not as big as some modern congregations – were after a couple of years in any one place too big to meet in a

single home. Even in Acts 20:9 the house was so crowded someone was sitting dangerously in a window-frame – and that was only the church of Troas. The churches of Rome and Ephesus and Corinth were surely even larger! The ‘church that is in their house’ must be a smaller part of a larger city-wide church that could **sometimes** meet together.

What then happened in these smaller groups? They were (one imagines) places for praying, sharing, caring. House churches are surely needed! If we are to have ‘every member ministry’ in the church there must be small meetings where every member can indeed minister to the others. Such smaller meetings will be training groups for wider ministry. Spiritual revival has nearly always produced small-group ministry. Modern churches often have small fellowship meetings in homes for worship and praise, Bible discussion, follow-up of the Sunday sermon, encouragement, the exercise of gifts (safer in smaller meetings than in bigger ones), encouragements, practical helpfulness. Spiritual vitality requires house churches.