

## *Chapter 73*

### **From the Palace to the Slave-market**

(Romans 16:1–16)

We are noticing in these verses (i) the kinds of ministry people are involved in: serving the church (16:1), helping individuals and churches (16:2), combining business and ministry, teaching, counselling (16:3, 4), the ‘ministry of couples’ (Prisca and Aquila, 16:3; Andronicus and Junias, 16:7; Tryphaena and Tryphosa, 16:12a; Philologos and Julia, 16:15), using one’s home (16:5a), working for the church (16:6), being a personal friend to Paul (16:5b), being apostles (16:7), being a mother to Paul (16:13). The church has a great variety of ministries besides preaching! Preachers need to know it (or they keep people in bondage as nothing but a passive audience). Non-preachers need to know it (or their only ambition is to preach!). The church has a vast range of ministries for every type of person. No one is dispensable. All have gifts, and the church is lacking something if all do not play their part.

We see also (ii) the willingness of Paul’s friends to work hard. Several of them are known for being ‘workers’ (Prisca and Aquila, 16:3; Mary, 16:6; Urbanus, 16:9; Persis, 16:12b).

(iii) The contribution made by women to Christian work is also visible. Nine women are mentioned (Phoebe, 16:1–2; Prisca, 16:3; Mary, 6:6; Junia, 16:7; Tryphaena and Tryphosa, 16:12a; Rufus’s mother, 16:13; Julia and Nereus’ sister, 16:15). Two of them have been commended for their hard work (16:3, 6).

Although I do not think the ‘ministry of women’ should be exaggerated as we read this chapter, yet there is plenty of evidence here, without having to exaggerate, that women had a significant part to play in Christian ministry under Paul’s leadership. Although Paul did not allow a woman to be a dominant authority in his churches, they could nevertheless make a powerful contribution. There was not actually very much from which they were excluded. The idea that Paul was some kind of anti-feminist is outrageous nonsense. Was there anyone else in the world in the first century who would so warmly commend these women among his workers? Paul was far ahead of his time in his bold freedom from discrimination.

(iv) Some of these Christians are commended for their willingness to suffer. Prisca and Aquila ‘risked their own necks’. Andronicus and Junias had been fellow prisoners with Paul (16:7) – the only reference we have in the New Testament to a woman being in prison for Christ. Apelles (16:10a) had been through some difficult situation.

(v) We notice the great variety of the people in these greetings and commendations. Paul has mentioned eighteen men (Aquila, Epaenetus, Andronicus, Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles, Herodian, Persis, Rufus, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, Philologos, Nereus, Olympas) and nine women (listed a few lines above), several households (16:5a, 10b, 11, 15), ‘the brothers’ of 16:14 and the ‘saints’ of 16:15. He has referred to Jews (Andronicus and Junias, ‘my kinsmen’, 16:7; Herodian, ‘my kinsman’; Rufus, son of a Jew from north Africa) and gentiles (most or all of the others). He mentions slaves or released slaves (Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles, Herodian, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Persis, Philologos and Julia) and business people. He mentions specially loved friends (Epaenetus, Ampliatus, Stachys, Persis) and others he perhaps does not know so well.

Paul was a man who promoted a network of team ministry.

He thoroughly approved of having women among his workers. We have seen the ministry of couples, and perhaps there is an example of a parents-and-children team. We have seen a considerable variety of ministries, including helpers, hospitable people, women who are mothers to God's people. We have seen the value of itinerating, self-supporting ministry. We have seen the great variety of the Christian church. There are people from the palace, people from the slave-market; there are the wealthy and the destitute; there are Jews and gentiles.

What is amazing is that all these people are able to be together in one body, in the Lord Jesus Christ. Is there anything like it in the world? Every club and institution and ideology and political party has its own caste system. The world promotes the rich and despises the poor. In some religions your caste stays the same when you join the faith. Yet Paul pleads that these people should stay together as one body in the Lord Jesus Christ, spanning the Roman empire from Jerusalem to Rome, and soon (he hopes) on to Spain. Even in the first century, he has a global vision. He can see the church of Jesus Christ as an interlacing people of God, and he uses these greetings to assist them to be a united, friendly people. He wants the church of Jesus Christ to be a place where there is opportunity for slaves, for women, for traveling business people. He does not want everyone to be the same, like a row of postage stamps. He wants God-given variety within God-given unity. These are to be the marks of the Christian church and its leaders.

Most of these people were not rich people or of noble birth. Far from it. Even their being given noble names is generally a sign of their release from slavery, because released slaves often took the name of benefactors in the imperial family. And yet, although few of these were in any way famous in the eyes of the world, yet they reached notable people eventually. Later on in the history of Rome we do find Christians in some very high positions. People like Flavius Clemens, once consul of Rome,

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and his wife Donatilla, granddaughter of Emperor Vespasian, were famous among those who suffered for their faith in later years. It was surely their slaves who helped them come to faith. Eventually people from the prisons and the slave-market reached the people in the palace.