

Romans 16:6-7,12

Doing our part. The role of Apostles.

Can you remember your school photos, with teacher and children all trying to keep their smile for the camera? It would be great to have a picture of the church at Rome, but the nearest thing we have is Paul's list of greetings. At the beginning of the epistle he addresses *all those in Rome* (Romans 1:7), and in the greetings he selects certain individuals. But how, we might wonder, did he know so many of the believers in Rome since he had never visited Rome? Rome was the metropolis of the known world. The excellent roads allowed a huge amount of travel. The Christians moved around as well. We know Phoebe travelled from Cenchreae to Rome; Priscilla and Aquila moved from Rome to Corinth to Ephesus to Rome and back to Ephesus; Epaenetus moved from Ephesus (Asia) to Rome; Andronicus and Junia served with Paul on his travels. This kind of movement sounds like our world today! It was key to the spread of the gospel. Paul would have met many of the individuals mentioned in Romans 16 on his travels, though he may also have known of them from Priscilla and Aquila.

Like our old school photograph the church in Rome was made up of a very mixed bunch of people: men and woman; the young and old; Jew and Gentile (majority Gentile); different nationalities (Jew, Greek, Roman, Persian); married couples; siblings; parents and children; slaves and those from the upper echelons of society. A more diverse group you could not imagine. What they had in common was they were *loved by God and called to be saints* (Romans 1:7). They were all *in Christ Jesus* (cf Galatians 3:28-29). Paul does not however focus on their distinctions but commends some for their work in the Lord, some who have suffered in some way, some for whom he has particular affection, and some who have shown hospitality, especially hosting churches.

In a sense Paul's list is better than a school photo, because Paul adds his own personal touch to his greetings which act as character sketches. Not only would they have been a great encouragement to those named, but also act as an incentive to others, including us.

The list begins with individuals and then mentions groupings of people. We will look now at Mary (Romans 16:6), Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis (Romans 16:16). These women are all mentioned for their work in the Lord. Mary is mentioned high in Paul's list perhaps because he knew her in a special way. Persis was probably Persian. Tryphaena and Tryphosa have similar names and are grouped together, which suggests they could be related, for example sisters, or even twins. We don't know if they were married, but they were part of "An army of ordinary people, a kingdom where love is the key!" They were mature women who laboured in the Lord (we're not sure in what way). To work (labour) means to toil, to be wearied, to feel tired. This reminds us that we are all called to be workers in the Lord to build up the church, *as each part does its work* (Ephesians 4:15-16). Tryphaena and Tryphosa did their part, but of Persis Paul said, she *worked hard*; and of Mary Paul said, she *worked very hard*. For various reasons such as gifting, age and circumstances, some can do a little and some can do much (1Corinthians 12:4-6). The important thing is that we do our part as the Lord directs us, as unto the Lord.

However in Romans 16:7 Paul greets a couple of outstanding individuals, Andronicus and Junia (or Junias). Junia could be either male or female, but the scholarship now suggests Junia was female. If so it seems obvious that like Priscilla and Aquila, Andronicus and Junia were a husband and wife team. They were Paul's kinsmen, fellow Jews, and it seems that at least some of the time they worked with Paul in preaching the gospel and establishing congregations because they also shared a prison cell with him. It is not totally clear what Paul meant when he says, *They are outstanding among the apostles*. He could mean that the Apostles considered this couple as outstanding in their work. Or it could mean that Andronicus and Junia, as apostles, were outstanding. This ambiguity gives opportunity to consider the role of apostles and who they were in the New Testament.

Apostle means “sent one”. About 90% of references to apostles in the New Testament refer to the 12 Apostles and Paul, all chosen by Jesus. The other references refer to apostles in a wider and general sense. Jesus gave unique authority to the Twelve and to Paul. Their ministry involved laying the foundations of the church through their teaching and writing Scripture. Books of the New Testament not written by an Apostle were written by a close associate of an Apostle, e.g. Mark was associated with Peter, Luke was associated with Paul, James was the Lord’s brother. Therefore the church is *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone* (Ephesians 2:20). The qualification of an Apostle was to have witnessed the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:21). 1Corinthians 15:1-11 mentions the resurrection appearances of Jesus to the apostles as well as others. In this passage Paul describes himself as the last of the apostles: *and last of all he appeared to me also* (1Corinthians 15:8). After the Apostolic Age early church leaders like Clement of Rome, who had known the Apostles, didn’t call themselves as apostles or appoint more apostles. Rather, as directed by the Apostles, they appointed elders/overseers/pastors and deacons for the churches. Wayne Grudem says, *It is noteworthy that no major leader in the history of the church – not Athanasius or Augustine, not Luther or Calvin, not Wesley or Whitefield – has taken to himself the title of "apostle" or let himself be called an apostle.* [Systematic theology, 911]

However Roman Catholicism teaches apostolic succession and understands the Pope to be invested with the apostolic authority of the lead Apostle Peter, as the first bishop of Rome. The Pope writes apostolic letters and preaches apostolic sermons. But if Paul was the last of the Apostles how can the Pope be an apostle? The one person notably missing from Paul’s list of greetings is Peter. Yet if Peter really was bishop of Rome he should certainly be in Rome at the time of Paul writing Romans, and have been included. One of the primary reasons for the 16th century Reformation was to come out from the false religious system of Roman Catholicism and return to the Apostolic teachings of the New Testament (Sola Scriptura). Luther said, *I feel much freer now that I am certain the pope is the Antichrist.* In saying this we do not demean individual catholic people but simply point out the error of Rome.

Yet it is not only the error of Rome. The idea of modern-day foundational apostles equal to or greater than the original Apostles has got into much of the charismatic church. This comes in the name of a fivefold ministry (Ephesians 4:11, although this list should be read in an *ad hoc* way,) and under the very general banner of the New Apostolic Reformation. This movement has spawned not just one false apostle like the Roman church but many thousands. The general idea of this complex theological movement is that after 2000 years of failed church history God is now restoring to the church apostles to bring about restoration before Jesus return.¹ Jesus didn’t say anything about a restoration of apostles, but he said there would be a great spiritual deception and falling away before His return (Matthew 24:4-11). We are living in days when we need to have our spiritual powers of discernment sharpened through continual feeding on and use of God’s word (Hebrews 5:14).

There are no longer foundational apostles today (Revelation 21:14). Having said this I believe the gift of apostleship does still exist in the general sense. There are some people called and gifted by God to take the gospel to new regions, and to gather converts into churches. It seems to me this was the calling of Andronicus and Junia, and *they were outstanding among the apostles.*² But to avoid confusion the church has called these people church planting missionaries. Most of us do not have this gift although this kind of pioneering is very much needed today. What we all need is to do our part. Especially it is very important we should be fearless in sharing our faith and the gospel as the Lord gives us opportunity.

¹ For more information on the NAR deception see, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVkBcP6T1Lg>

² Nevertheless, they were in Christ before Paul, and could have been present at Pentecost, and could have been among the 500 who witnessed Jesus’ resurrection (1Corinthians 15:6). Therefore perhaps for this reason Paul felt justified in calling them apostles. This would rule out any justification for using the title ‘apostle’ today.