

Romans 16:8-11,13-16

House churches and home groups

Paul greets various groups of people in a way which suggests some of these groups were congregations that met in households. The church at Rome wasn't just one church, but a number of congregations.

- Romans 16:5 mentions explicitly the church that met in the home of Pricilla and Aquila, implying there were others;
- Romans 16:10b-11 mentions two wealthy households which could have hosted meetings;
- Romans 16:14 lists men who, judging by their names were slaves or freedmen, *and all the brothers who are with them*. Could this represent a congregation?
- Romans 16:15 lists *Philologus, Julia* (husband and wife?), *Nereus and his sister* (son and daughter?) *and Olympas* (a lodger or uncle?), *and all the saints who are with them*. This looks very much like a congregation that met in the home of Philologus and Julia.

I think we have a minimum of 3 congregations (possibly 5) which met in homes in this list. These Christians weren't meeting in huge stone buildings with a spire, with a single person dressed in a frock conducting the service. It was a meeting of likeminded believers within the confines of a warm family home.

One of the developments in modern Christianity, beginning in the 1970's, has been the emergence of house churches, inspired by charismatic renewal. This came out of a desire to return to an authentic New Testament faith (see Acts 2:42). This emphasis also generated interest in home/small groups as part of existing mainline churches. When well led, such groups can provide excellent opportunity to develop personal discipleship (learning to pray, having space to ask questions, developing spiritual gifts) and lasting relationships.

House churches and home groups have been highly effective in countries like China, South America and Egypt where there has been rapid church growth. John Wesley's success in transforming England in the 18th century was in large part due to his method of discipleship in organising converts in to societies (like churches), classes (or 10-12 people), bands (or 4-6 members) as well as mentoring pairs. These people were called Methodists because of their methodical approach to discipleship. Wesley wasn't anti-tradition and never wanted to start a new denomination, but his success made this inevitable.

The question I want to ask is, "To what extent do the house-churches in Romans 16 in 58AD compare to modern-day groups that meet in homes?" At first sight the congregations in Romans 16 appear to be spontaneous and loose associations of converts who started meetings in homes around the city, with little or no formal structure. But I do not believe this was the case.

In his opening paragraph Paul describes the gospel as that which God *promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh* (Romans 1:2-3). Paul clearly expected his majority Gentile readers, who had been brought up on Greek and Roman stories, to have a reasonable grasp of the Jewish Scriptures (e.g. to know who David was and some of the promises God had given, e.g. 2Samuel 7:16). Even the average University student in the UK is likely to lack this knowledge, and to have little respect for Holy Scriptures as something authoritative. The same was true in 1st century Rome or even more so. Where did Paul's Gentile readers get this knowledge? (e.g. *Philologus* means 'lover of the word'). Scripture scrolls were very expensive and not widely available, and literacy rates were very low. The only place to learn the Scriptures was the synagogue. To get to the level of knowledge anticipated by Paul would have required years of synagogue attendance. These Gentiles were called God-fearers.¹ They had shunned the immorality of the heathen gods and turned to the God of Israel.

¹ The term 'Godfearer' is applied to diverse people in disparate localities: women of esteem in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:50), Greeks from Thessalonica (Acts 17:4), people found in synagogues in Athens (Acts 17:17), and a man from Corinth (Acts 18:7)

These people were also especially open to the gospel. At the time of Paul writing to Rome the 'Jesus movement' was still a sect within Judaism (Acts 24:5, 28:22). The Gentile God fearers would have heard the gospel from within the Jewish community, as the gospel was taken first to the Jews (Romans 1:16).

The Jewish community in Rome is estimated to have been 20-50,000 people. There were sub-groups within this community of different theological persuasions. Evidence from within Romans also strongly suggests that the Jesus movement (the sect of the Nazarenes) was one of these sub-groups, since Romans 9-14 is mainly about how the Gentile believers were to understand and relate to the wider Jewish community. The Gentile believers were not under the Torah in the same way the Jews were, but they were committed to standards of righteousness set out in the holy Scriptures. However, the believers in Jesus now understood that this righteousness could only be found through faith in Christ (Romans 3:21).

Romans 16 lists some households where meetings of believers took place. It is most likely that meeting in homes was normal practice for the Jewish community in Rome. There is no archaeological evidence of 1st century synagogue buildings in Rome, and even if there were some, there is every reason to believe that there were hundreds of small meetings in Jewish households, perhaps adapted, to act as synagogues. Far from the Messianic congregations being informal and 'fluid' associations, they were simply following the pattern that already existed. It is worth pointing out that *synagogue* and *church* both mean 'congregation of the Lord'. Although the use of these words is not straight-forward, they were used more or less as synonyms (e.g. James 2:2 assembly = synagogue,) even though Paul used *ecclesia* (church) to describe the Messianic congregations.

What happened in the meetings? There would have been readings from Scripture. Each household would have had Scripture scrolls. The reading would have followed a Bible reading cycle (lectionary) with specific reading for the Sabbaths and festivals² (Acts 15:21). There may well have been someone appointed to care for the scrolls, and a cabinet may have been built for keeping them safe. After the reading there would have been an exposition and then discussion. Prayers were probably liturgical as well as extemporaneous.³ They celebrated the Sabbath and other Biblical holidays. The believers in Jesus would have been aware of how these pointed to the reality of Christ (Colossians 2:16-17). They would have broken bread and had fellowship meals together. They would also have discussed social matters dealt with by the Jewish community at large, including education, births, marriages, deaths and taxes (Romans 13:7). Paul had reminded the Gentile believers, *do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you* (Romans 11:18). This makes even more sense when we understand the social context. We should remember that the Jewish community enjoyed considerable legal protection from the Roman authorities, and it would have been next to impossible (and illegal) for Christians to operate outside of it, even if it had been desirable. But as the 'sect of the Nazarenes' grew rapidly, and as the status of the Jewish community changed dramatically (after AD70 and the destruction of the Temple), the association we see in Romans became untenable, and Christianity began to develop separately from its Jewish roots.

In many ways the household meetings in Romans 16 were very different to our home groups, both practically and socially. They were actual house-synagogues or house-churches. But it was not a hierarchical structure, like the Episcopalian churches, and the congregations could be quite independent if they chose (more like the Baptists). They were however similar to our home groups in that they allowed for a deeper level of discussion, fellowship and interaction than is possible in larger church buildings. I think church buildings are a blessing, and there is much we can't do without them. However I also think there is much potential for real house-churches, such as in China, especially when the Lord is moving and the church is growing.

² It is impossible to say to what extent 1st century Bible reading cycles were similar or dissimilar to those developed later. Furthermore, different Jewish sects in the first century could well have used different cycles. But it is widely established that they existed (see Luke 4:17-20).

³ 'the prayers' in Acts 2:42 is a reference to the Temple and synagogue prayers which were liturgical.