

## **“I Call it Church” Romans 15**

He never made it. At least that’s what tradition tells us. Paul never actually made it to Rome to see his friends like he had mentioned so many times before. He planned on going – maybe even deliver the letter personally but he never made it. In fact even after the letter had been hand delivered (by someone else of course) and those in the church patiently awaited Paul’s arrival he still never showed. It’s not a great ending really. If it were a Hollywood Blockbuster most people would walk out rather disappointed during the credits. This is not the way stories are supposed to end. But then again Biblical stories are by no means “typical”.

Here was Paul at the end of the Roman Road, at the gates leading into Rome, as it were, and he turns back. Not exactly but we are made to feel this is what happens. It’s like Paul has been speaking to a bunch of strangers, a group of unknowns – which may make us feel like the lessons are as much for us today as they were for the original audience, especially if everyone is anonymous. But by the time we get to chapter 15 things become a little more familiar, we could say. It’s as if Paul, while writing about general “Christian” characteristics he begins to think of the people who were in the church of Rome. We can expect Paul did not know everyone personally in the little church in Rome for remember Paul did not plant the Roman Church (as we have mentioned before) like he did in Ephesus (The Book of Ephesians), Philippi (The Book of Philippians) or Galatia (The Book of Galatians) just to name a few. We can therefore assume that some attendees were born, bred and raised in the Roman Church and like my maternal grandfather, only ventured off Prince Edward Island in later years. And then there would have been “new converts” whose names were not known to many in the church or even Paul and finally those who may have been members in one of Paul’s churches before settling in Rome. Either way Paul must have thought of these people as he begins the last page of this long and hearty letter. He had maybe heard about, for example, “the insults” (15:3) some of the newbies to the Roman Church had received. And the “not so welcoming” (15:7) attitude by others that Paul was addressing and thus reminding them of the “welcoming Christ” all of them had come to know. And finally the blessing that Paul delivers halfway through the chapter (15:13) was said to the entire community and not just a few.

And by this time in the letter old, fatherly Paul appears to soften before our very eyes. This theological laced saint becomes a sentimental brother in Christ in only a matter of a few chapters. He doesn’t deny that he may have sounded hard on the church at times but he needed to be. What parent could be considered “responsible” if they are not firm at times with their own children? Every good parent has to say, “No” every now and then, and be honest and truthful even when the truth hurts. But these were not Paul’s words alone. By no means was Paul writing new words but words

that God had been speaking from the very beginning. Paul was simply a “gospel” bearer or a carrier of “good news” which is the literal definition of gospel. Paul’s sole desire was not to write a theological textbook for use in Bible Colleges and Seminaries but for people to encounter the same Christ he himself had met so many years ago on another Road, the Road to Damascus. Paul was simply building a “foundation” so that others could “see” and “hear” and “understand” God at work in other’s lives. This is why in some ways Paul was so heartbroken that he never made it to see the Roman Church in person and tell them in person. And I think he knew deep down he would never make it and maybe never make it to all the destinations he was planning to visit before Rome. Why else would Paul write to ask the Romans believer to “pray for his rescue” (15:30) from those who were not out for Paul’s best interest. And then one more blessing (15:32) just in case the first didn’t stick, and then that word that seems to signify the end. “In Jesus’ name...” “Can I get a positive response from the congregation....” “And we want to tell you that the result came back negative....” And all the people say... “Amen.”

It’s a good place to end our journey on the Roman Road and even a better place for Paul to put down his quill and begin rolling the scroll up. And even a better spot for us to go our own way from here. We’ve looked at a few verses in one sitting and in other places, an entire chapter. But never have we ventured as far in one week before. Never before have we looked at two chapters and we aren’t going to start now, or are we? Although I only read on chapter prior to my sermon I am not planning on reading another now. For one thing it is a full of names and we ministers like ordinary people, like you, from the congregation to stumble your way through those passages rather than we, the paid staff. And anyways what good are such passages? No ministers I know, when doing a Book Series like we have been doing, reads every single verse and looks at every passage inclusively. At a glance passages or chapters like Romans 16 appear more like a family tree than an important life lesson. And to be honest I always skim over such passages in my own research or devotional reading. That is, until I listened to maybe the one and only sermon I ever heard preached on such a passage. And if you have the chance I would try to find the audio for Fred Craddock’s sermon, “When the Roll is Called Down Here.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X20Sd8NKLsk> It’s worth the read or listen. Craddock begins his sermon by saying, “I don’t expect your heart is all a flutter after the reading of (Romans 16).” He then goes onto to say, as a theological professor teaching homiletics (or preaching) that he always told his students to never preach from any lists.” And I can see why. That is until you attend your child’s graduation and recall all those late night and re-reads of paper or science projects and feel like your name should also be mentioned at graduation but even if its not you are overjoyed and celebrate when your child’s name is announced. Or what about the names of those who lived in Grenfell Tower in London? I believe there are still only 58 confirmed dead. But there are

still many more names to be mentioned. If you go to any military cemetery you will typically find granite walls with name after name after name. Maybe this is part of the reason I would love to travel to the highest point in Scotland - to Durness – to maybe see a name or two on the tombstone of relatives from long ago who waved goodbye to their children and grandchildren as they departed port to sail all the way to French River, Prince Edward Island for the hope of a better life or a new beginning.

In many ways the “list” (I’m sorry Mr. Craddock) seems like a list to me. But Craddock remarks, “I could get interested in the roll call (of Romans 16) because it gives a sociological profile of the membership of the church. I don’t expect you to remember this, but in the list there is a husband and wife, Aquila and Priscilla... There is a brother, Nereus, and sister. There are brothers, Andronicus and Junias. There are sisters, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. There is an old man, Epeanetus. Isn’t that an interesting profile of the church? There’s a single woman, Mary. There’s a single man, Herodion. Not a lot of nuclear family there at all except as Christ has called them together. It’s an interesting list— sort of. No, not very.” (Source: Fred Craddock, “When the Roll is Called Down Here.”) But to Paul all those names were important, vital even, in his life. Chances are they would not be remembered if not for Paul. Chances are their birthplace or death marker are not a part of any of the Biblical Tours of the Holy Land that you see on late night tv or in Christian magazines. To many they would seem insignificant but not to Paul. The one person I find most inspiring in Romans 16 was Rufus’ mother (16:13) who was “also a mother to me,” writes Paul. Here was someone in the church, who we can’t expect as a first century woman would have been well educated or even well respected but to Paul she was considered “mother-like.” Scripture never mentioned Paul’s family or if Paul’s own biological mother was even still alive. And if gone we can maybe understand the importance of Paul’s mention of Rufus’ mother. But it’s not just Rufus’ mother who is listed but a group of people, a group of people who committed their lives to one another, no matter what. So we can’t leave Romans unfinished and that’s why I have mentioned Romans 16, even though you didn’t hear it read to you. To be honest I knew some of you might not be able to sleep tonight if we didn’t read Romans 16 next week and simply ended our series with Romans 15. But there is an even more important reason I mentioned Romans 16 and it’s because I don’t want us to leave here forgetting how old this letter really is and one final context to Paul’s letter to the Romans. All those people mentioned in Romans 16, men and women, young and old, Jews and Gentiles, related and un-related **risked** being together. If not happening by Paul’s writing, it would soon occur that the roll of all those people Paul had mentioned would most likely be a list of names used by government officials and religious authorities in gathering together those who were loyal to someone other than Caesar. Maybe some would try to deny they

were ever associated with Paul and therefore avoid crucifixion or the amphitheatres but most we believe would not.

Today we call that **list** “church.” And I’m not simply referring to those on the official membership roll of Keswick Presbyterian Church or the address list on the desktop of the computer but the church that gathered so long ago and the church that gathers on days like today. Many of us are here and others of us are not, for one reason or another. To this some might say, “Don’t lump us all together” if you are about to give a challenging message about church attendance you are “preaching to the choir” this morning At least I am here. And I thank God for you who are here but I also thank God for those not here because together we are still the church. I know that Sunday worship does not make us Christians any more than being baptized makes us a Christian. But sometimes, we all need to be reminded that Paul concludes Romans not with a deep theological statement but a list of ordinary people like you and me who committed ourselves selves first to Christ and then the institution that God himself designed. I know what people say, “Church is humanity’s invention.” But do you know who says such things? - those who do not attend church for one reason or another. But for Prisca and Aquilla, for Mary, Adonicus, Urbana and even Rufus and his mother the church was vital to their lives. They did not see church as inconvenient, or something they went to when they felt like it, but a place where they encountered God like no other place and learned community like no other place. It’s known by many names but I call it church. You may not think you need it until you really do. And you may not realize how vital it is to maturing in your Christian life until you get away and then come back. It’s known by many names but I call it church.

Like me, you are probably happy to get off the Roman Road because we have finally reached the end – maybe the end of the book but not the end of the road or even the end of our journey. We may not speak of the Roman Road again for awhile but Rome was not our final destination anyway. The road itself was most important - to stay on the road and not veer off or turn back but even more - to not travel it alone. Now that’s what I call church.