

“The Disciples of Romans 16”

Romans 16:1–16

A picture of the early church at work.

It is so tempting to rush past the portions of Paul’s letters that are filled with names. We all do it. Where’s the good theology stuff, we ask? . . . What a shame. For in these name-filled passages, we get concrete glimpses of the early church at work. Women, men, young, old, Gentile, Jew all working alongside each other to further the Good News, to make disciples and be witnesses to Jesus.

So, this week, we are going to take a closer look at Romans 16, the longest and most diverse of these passages, narrowing in on one disciple, or better said—apostle, named Junia, prominent among all the apostles. Her story, as much as we know, should help us to grasp God’s wisdom in using all of us for his work, to the very best of our abilities and gifts.

Names

The list of names in Romans 16 is, by far, the longest list in any of Paul’s letters. An informed guess is that since Paul is seeking to unify the Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome, he is anxious and careful to touch all the bases, to be sure that all the house churches in Rome are noted. He refers to five of them, probably all. If the size ranged from 10-30, then there would be in 50-150 believers in Rome. Surely no more than that. Paul refers to twenty-four people by name, another two by relation, and an unspecified number of others generally. Paul refers to ten women, eight by name and two by relation. Nine of the twenty-four names were usually used by slaves.¹ Thus, Paul has called out a broad cross-section of the early church: male and female, rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile.

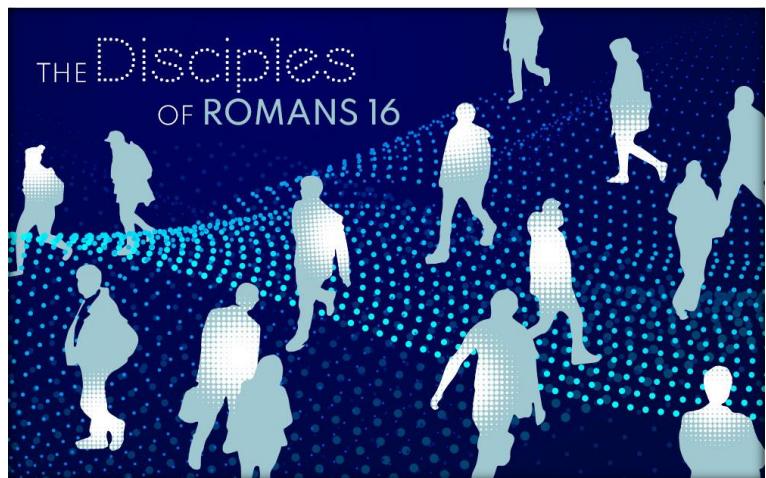
And now Paul has written a massive letter, the longest of all those we have in the New Testament. And it is not an “easy” letter, often dense and hard to follow. Try sitting down and reading through it...

So...imagine that someone has arrived from Paul with this letter in hand. First, the believers would gather, probably house church by house church, and the letter would be read to them, for most could not read such a letter for themselves. Then, once read, I picture the believers sitting there in the dim light, wondering about the meaning of what they had just heard . . . and after a few minutes, questions would start to pop up. “What did Paul mean when he talked about Abraham?” “Did he actually mean that some Gentiles keep the Law they’ve never even heard better than the Jews?”

Who do you think would be there to help the believers understand Paul’s meaning? To whom would Paul entrust such a challenging letter written to believers living under Caesar’s very nose? Obviously, it would be the person to whom Paul had entrusted the letter in the first place. . . . And who was that? . . . a woman . . . Phoebe.

Phoebe

All we know about Phoebe comes from the first two verses in Romans 16. Most important, she is a “*diakonos/deacon*” of the church in a place called Cenchreae, a port just a few miles northeast of Corinth. Given her means, Phoebe was probably involved in the business of the port.



¹ The name information is from N. T. Wright’s commentary on Romans in the *New Interpreters Bible*

A few weeks ago, we looked at the story of Stephen, a *diakonos*/deacon in the church in Jerusalem. Whether used for Phoebe or for Stephen, *diakonos* is a masculine noun. Phoebe is no more and no less a deacon/minister than Stephen or the other six deacons of Acts 6.

She is also a patron (*prostatis*) of Paul and others. In their culture, this is more than a mere helper. Patrons provided housing, money, and represented their clients before local authorities. By referring to her in this way, Paul is letting the believers in Rome know just how important Phoebe has been to Paul's work.

These two verses in Romans 16 are a letter of recommendation for Phoebe. Such letters were a vital part of society in the ancient world. The recommendations provided a stamp of approval on the letter carrier, in this case, Phoebe. The house churches in Rome can trust her, she carries Paul's instruction and teaching. She can speak for Paul.

So the next time someone tells you that women shouldn't preach or teach men because of what they mistakenly think Paul means in a few scattered sentences in his letters, refer them to Phoebe (or Priscilla or Junia) in Romans 16, so they can actually see for themselves that the apostle Paul and Phoebe worked side-by-side in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to all who would listen.

As stated, there are two other women of note in Romans 16: Priscilla and Junia. Both are more of Paul's supporting actors. We don't know much about Junia, but Luke tells us a lot about Priscilla (Prisca) in the book of Acts, which we looked at last week. Here's a brief refresher.

Priscilla's story When Emperor Claudius ordered all Jews (and by extension Christians) out of Rome, Priscilla and Aquila were better off than many. They had a portable business; they were tentmakers. They owned property. Priscilla probably even had some family money. So they headed toward the large, bustling Greek metropolis of Corinth, Greece. Corinth was a busy, commercial port on a narrow isthmus. There, Priscilla and her husband set up shop in a storefront and began to rebuild their lives.

Not long after their arrival in Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila met a fellow Jew who had come to Corinth to proclaim the gospel, the Good News, of Jesus Christ. His name was Paul. The three of them quickly formed a close bond, for Paul was a tentmaker too.

Priscilla and her husband invited Paul to join them in their storefront business and for the next eighteen months the three of them grew their business and grew the young Christian house churches in Corinth.

Priscilla and her husband committed themselves fully to Paul's work and the building of God's kingdom in Corinth. When Paul decided that it was time for him to leave Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila left with him. All three made their way to Ephesus, another very important city. Priscilla and Aquila stayed there while Paul went on to Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, they quickly became leaders in the Christian community in Ephesus.

Priscilla and Aquila stayed in Ephesus for several years. Paul would mention them when he wrote a letter back to Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 16:9). But they never lost their desire to return to Rome. After all, it was their home, where they had been raised, where they had met and married. In 54AD, Claudius died and his edict expelling the Jews from Rome died with him. So, Priscilla and her husband returned to Rome where they would carry on their kingdom building work. Later, when Paul was in Corinth a second time, he wrote a letter to the Christians in Rome urging them to find unity as the Jewish-Christians returned. In this letter, Paul sent a poignant hello to Priscilla and Aquila, noting that they had "risked their necks" for Paul and his work (Romans 16:34). But even though they were back in Rome, their work was not done. There were many house churches in Rome that needed help and encouragement. Later, it seems that they again headed for Asia Minor to work for the spread of the Good News of Jesus Christ (see 2 Timothy 4:19).

The Apostle Junia

In Romans 16:7 Paul drops a bombshell, at least you'd think so given how much effort has been spent trying to change what Paul wrote, especially in the last two hundred years. Paul commends Andronicus (male) and Junia (female), his relatives and fellow prisoners. Referring to them Paul says, "they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me" (Romans 16:7). Thus, it seems clear that Andronicus and Junia

have been Christians from the very first days, even before Paul, and that they were witnesses to the resurrection.

Despite the witness of the early church and the manuscript evidence, many attempts have been made to change Junia into a man by adding an “s” to her name. Indeed, some translators said Paul must have referred to a man because the person was an apostle. But, no, Junia was a woman, an apostle, and a prominent one. The early church fathers all referred to her as such. In his definitive treatment of the topic, Eldon Epps writes:

By far the most influential of these, and among the earliest, was Chrysostom,² whose statement is pointed and unambiguous:

"Greet Andronicus and Junia ... who are outstanding among the apostles": To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles—just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle." (*In ep. ad Romanos 31.2; PG 60.669-670*)³

In her foreword to Epps's book, the noted New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa summarizes things for us this way:

Paul also greets another woman, Junia, whose case Eldon Epp treats in this slender and important volume. Several studies have attended to Junia before, but no one has addressed as many facets of the problem as Epp does. There are several issues that run through Epp's account, but two dominate. The first and most important issue concerns the name Junia and its presence during the two millennia since Phoebe first delivered the letter to Rome. Stated much too simply, the problem is as follows: in Romans 16:7, Paul greets a pair of people he identifies as "prominent among the apostles." The first is named Andronicus, a male name. And the second is named either Junia (feminine) or Junias/Junianus (masculine). The difference in Greek is a matter solely of the accentuation: one form of accent would indicate a feminine name and the other a masculine name.

The points Epp brings forward and develops are quite clear: For the first seven centuries of the church's life Greek manuscripts scripts did not employ accents, but when accents did become common practice in the manuscript tradition, and insofar as those accents can be identified, they uniformly identify the name as feminine. To put the point sharply: there is no Greek manuscript script extant that unambiguously identifies Andronicus's partner as a male. That consistent pattern coheres with the evidence offered by early Christian writers for the first thousand years of the church's life and well into the second thousand years. Theologians as diverse as Origen, Ambrosiaster, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Theodoret, John Damascene, Peter Abelard, and Peter Lombard, assume that the partner of Andronicus is a woman by the name of Junia. Particularly impressive is Chrysostom's observation concerning Junia: "How great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle."³ Only with the thirteenth century Aegidius of Rome, and especially with Martin Luther's translation, did the view arise that Junia was in fact a male, Junias. Finally, and not of least importance, the female name Junia is a widely attested Roman name, but there exists no evidence for the use of the masculine forms Junias or Junianus.

The second issue arises directly from the first: Since the case for the name Junia is so strong, how did a male replacement slip into her spot in Romans 16? Something happened during the first quarter of the twentieth century. As Epp thoroughly documents, prior to that time, critical editions of the Greek New Testament as well as English translations, with rare exceptions, identify Andronicus's partner as Junia and offer no alternate reading that would suggest there is any problem or ambiguity. Beginning with

² John Chrysostom was the archbishop of Constantinople and was famous for his eloquent preaching and speaking. His name is from the Greek *chrysostomos* meaning “golden-mouthed.” His accumulated writings are vast.

³ Eldon Jay Epp. *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Kindle Locations 448-451). Kindle Edition.

the thirteenth edition of the Nestle text in 1927, and somewhat earlier with English translations, the female Junia becomes the male Junias. So things remain until the 1970s, when once again Junia enters the picture. Even now, however, the NRSV offers "Junias" in the footnotes, and the NIV presents "Junias" with no further comment, leaving Andronicus with a male partner for whom there is no ancient evidence whatsoever.⁴

There you have it. In an attempt to further a poor reading of Scripture, poor Junia was changed to a man. But Epp's work has put an end to that. Junia, it is, "prominent among the apostles," at least according to Paul.

⁴ Eldon Jay Epp. *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Kindle Locations 38-54). Kindle Edition.