

Sermons through

Romans

My Fellow Workers

Romans 16:3-5

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
10/29/2017*

My Fellow Workers

Romans 16:3-5

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 4 who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. 5 Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ (Romans 16:3-5).

Introduction

I don't think it was a particularly good movie because I don't remember anything about it other than this one scene: An army of highly trained, top-notch, invincible soldiers were being transported to the field of battle—a battle they would inevitably win. They were in the back of what appeared to be silver oil trucks, perhaps to avoid detection. It was cold and snowing and the drivers failed to notice they were driving over ice; actually a frozen lake. The trucks proved too heavy for the ice and every highly-trained, well-armed soldier found himself on the bottom of the frozen lake.

We are coming to the conclusion of what many, if not most, theologians consider the Apostle Paul's *magnum opus*—his greatest work. Romans is perhaps the Scriptures most thorough treatment of the totality of the Christian faith. It deals with sin, apologetics, faith, works, justification, end-times, sanctification, ecclesiology and more. But other than a few verses (17-20, which will address divisive people) the entire sixteenth chapter is replete with greetings.

These little social pleasantries can be the thin ice through which our heavy theological trucks crumble. Thank you notes, birthday greetings, a caring word, a warm smile, a tap on the shoulder, remembering and bringing up a trial or concern that you were made aware of, a simple head-nod may make a massive difference in someone's day, week, month, life. Almost the entire chapter is dedicated to *greeting*.

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus (Romans 16:3).

Greet

It would do us well to recognize that the greeting *aspasathe* here is dissimilar to the standard greeting in which most of us engage. We may say “how are you?” when it is not really our intention to get an answer. Or we say “hello” as a courtesy with no thought of further conversation. And there is a certain context where this makes sense. If you run into ten people between your parking spot and your office at work, it is hardly reasonable to expect to engage in ten in-depth conversations. But what the Apostle is calling us to here is different.

The greeting here expresses a solidarity—a unity based upon something deep and profound. We are talking about eternal brothers and sisters in Christ, co-laborers *synergous* in Christ as Paul indicates. Last week we had co-laborer, Pastor Pan speak at our church. We met earlier this year at a Chinese seminary.

Perhaps it wasn't made clear but Pastor Pan has a massive influence in China. His influence, though vast, is at the same time a bit of a public secret and illegal. He is constantly bucking against poverty, law enforcement, cults, false churches and atheistic Marxism. Those conversant with him and his ministry have told me that they will write about him in the history books one day. I mention all of this to give a flavor to how odd it would be for us to merely share a shallow 'hello'.

Priscilla and Aquila

The Apostle specifically names here Priscilla and Aquila. Priscilla and Aquila were a married couple who were Jewish converts. They, like Paul, were tent-makers who had been commanded, with other Jews (by Claudius), to leave Rome and now had returned. They spent a great deal of time with the Apostle and had distinguished themselves as knowledgeable in the faith; knowledgeable enough to correct the

“eloquent” and **“competent”** Apollos in his Christian teaching (Acts 18:24-26).

In four of the six times Priscilla (sometimes in the diminutive “Prisca”) and Aquila are mentioned in Scripture, Priscilla is mentioned first. Many think this is because she may have been the more theologically skillful of the two. This has also opened the door for those who advocate women elders and pastors. And because of this common notion something must be said.

First, teachers of the word must be open to the correction of their theology by women. As good of a teacher as Apollos must have been, we read:

So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately (Acts 18:26).

Priscilla is included as one who took Apollos aside for instruction. As already mentioned, it is appropriate for a woman to address theological error. If a woman approaches me with a Bible in her hand, there should be no part of me who is not willing to hear. albeit in this case, something done privately and not publicly.

What is not said here is that Priscilla had the office of pastor or elder. Even in the account of her correcting Apollos, we see it done privately. They “took him aside”. The roles pastors, elders and deacons are gender specific to men. Time restricts a full treatment of the subject. Suffice it to say for now that both implicitly and explicitly this is what is found in Scripture. Implicitly we see in the Old Testament the twelve tribes were after the twelve sons (even though Jacob had daughters). In the New Testament the Apostles, elders and pastors were all men. Explicitly the Apostle teaches that an elder is to be the **“husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2)**. In this instruction, Paul does not use gender neutral terms. The elder is to be a *“mias gynaikos andra”* or literally a **“one woman man”**.

You will hear the argument against this teaching along the lines of a woman’s role in first century Roman Empire, that they were uneducated and considered inferior and owned by the man. But here is the problem with that argument. The Apostles were all **“uneducated and untrained”**

(Acts 4:13) in the technical, cultural sense. Secondly, one has to argue that both Paul and Jesus were kowtowing to cultural error.

Yet Jesus had clearly bucked cultural error (in almost every way imaginable) when He spoke with the woman at Jacob's well (John 4), as well as His other interactions with women. Finally, the fact that Paul was not subjecting himself to cultural error is brought forth in this very chapter where he extols the ministerial value of so many women. Suffice it to say, to have women elders and pastors is the product of cultural persuasion taking precedent over exegesis or Bible study.

...who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles (Romans 16:4).

Risked Their Necks

Priscilla and Aquila put their necks on the line on behalf of the Apostle Paul and his ministry. We don't know for certain what particular event Paul is referring to in this (but it was significant enough to warrant the gratitude of all the Gentile churches). But we can be certain this wasn't a mere figure of speech. The Christian faith was, and is, a dangerous affair in certain cultural contexts-almost any cultural context rule by men with power and godlessness. The willingness to die was an attribute we would see among the faithful both then and now. The Apostle John challenges us with the thought:

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. 17 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth (1 John 3:16-18).

What's interesting about this passage is that it speaks of laying down our lives (following the example of Christ), but the application isn't dying (at least not here). The application is helping others.

When we think of following the example of Christ, we recognize that the supreme apex of His ministry was to actually die and rise again. We

might ask ourselves if we would have the courage, the faith to follow that example. What we might fail to recognize is that Jesus didn't merely die for His bride. He lived for His bride. If I'm not willing to live for Christ, it is a bit of a self-deception to think that I'd be willing to die for Christ.

This may all sound a bit dramatic in a culture that views the faith as a fashion accessory and church is a self-help infomercial designed to empower and prosper. But the baby steps toward risking one's neck for Christ are found in what you might be doing or not doing for the remainder of the day in your love, care, concern, patience and selflessness toward those who God places in your path. Let us be reminded of Paul's earlier words:

For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:7, 8).

Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ (Romans 16:5).

The Church in Their House

Homeschooling has become large enough in the west to be deemed a movement. I think, for the most part, it has been a good movement. But with the homeschooling movement we have begun to see the home-church movement. I've been asked on several occasions what I think of this movement-or the idea of churches in homes. Clearly, we see many examples of churches meeting in houses in the New Testament.

The answer to this question is, 'It doesn't matter where the church meets'. Early churches met in homes because that was safe and available. As the church grew they met in bigger locations. But what we must realize is that the New Testament does have instructions on what makes a church a church and how it is to function.

The Gold Standard definition of the church is found in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession. Written in the mid 1500s, shortly after the Reformation when churches were unstable and in disarray. Having been released from the bondage of Rome, they were like teens on Spring Break.

Something Luther greatly feared would happen. A biblical definition became necessary. It reads:

The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church-- and no one ought to be separated from it.

And the New Testament is not unclear that the church is to be ruled by elders and served by deacons. It does not matter if it meets in a house or a tower. But there are things that make a church a church. And it can easily be argued that many of those things are not taking place in the western church today.

The Firstfruits

Finally Paul mentions “**Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ.**” All we know of Epaenetus is found in this verse. Why is it worthy to mention the first convert? There is a principle we should take to heart found in Scripture that relates to the firstfruits.

If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches (Romans 11:16).

If the rifle is off 1/16 of an inch at the barrel, it will miss the target by many feet. This again makes us consider the ministry in China that, in many ways, is just getting started. How critical for that church to be holy as it will produce after itself.

But this also applies to pastors, teachers and any who take the responsibility of presenting the truth of the Gospel to others. We may not know everything. Who does? But we should make every effort to ensure

that we stay within the boundaries of what we actually do know. There are few things more offensive to God than to be misrepresented. Let us ever pray that this powerful message goes forth in an unadulterated fashion.

Questions for Study

1. Are little pleasantries important or unnecessary? Explain (page 2)?
2. What is the Christian greeting based upon (page 3)?
3. Who were Priscilla and Aquila and what are some things we learn from their ministry (pages 3, 4)?
4. When we talk about dying for our faith, what is included in that? How can you demonstrate this (pages 5, 6)?
5. Is it okay for a church to meet in a house? What makes a church a church (pages 6, 7)?
6. Why are the firstfruits important (page 7)?