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Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. Paul's greetings to the Christians in Rome.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Proverbs 3. My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you. Bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart, so you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes.

Fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones. Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce.

Then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine. My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights. Blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver, and her profit better than gold.

She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand, in her left hand are riches and honor, her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her.

Those who hold her fast are called blessed. The Lord by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding he established the heavens, by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds dropped down the dew. My son, do not lose sight of these.

Keep sound wisdom and discretion, and they will be life for your soul, and adornment for your neck. Then you will walk on your way securely, and your foot will not stumble. If you lie down you will not be afraid, when you lie down your sleep will be sweet.

Do not be afraid of sudden terror, or of the ruin of the wicked when it comes, for the Lord will be your confidence, and will keep your foot from being caught. Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, go and come again, tomorrow I will give it, when you have it with you.

Do not plan evil against your neighbor, who dwells trustingly beside you. Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm. Do not envy a man of violence, and do not choose any of his ways, for the devious person is an abomination to the Lord.

But the upright are in his confidence. The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous. Toward the scornful he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor.

The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace. The third and fourth speeches of the Book of Proverbs are found in chapter three. The third is in verses 1-12 and the fourth in verses 13-35.

Once again this is an address of a father to his son. The third speech presents the son with a series of charges, attended with promises or blessings, keeping the father's commandments, not letting go of steadfast love and faithfulness, trusting the Lord, fearing the Lord, and honoring the Lord, concluding with the admonition not to despise the discipline of the Lord. The speech begins by enjoining the son to keep the commandments of his human father, but ends with comparing the Lord to a father who lovingly disciplines his son.

We might imagine Solomon training his own son here, with the hearer as an eavesdropper. However, the framing of the father teaching the son need not be focused so narrowly upon such a concrete referent, it may be more of a literary device designed to democratize the book, in terms of the father-son relationship more generally. The promise with which this speech begins recalls the promise of the fifth commandment in Exodus 20, verse 12, honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God has given you.

In the speech that follows, in verse 16 of this chapter, length of days is presented as the reward of wisdom. The blessing promised to the son who honors his father's instruction presumably comes because the wisdom of the father's instruction and counsel will guard the son's ways as he is beginning in his way, and has not yet internalized wisdom himself, and as he matures will also prove their wisdom to him in his own experience. Perhaps the greatest of the challenges with regard to wisdom is where to find it.

If you are not yet wise, how are you to know where to look for it? The instruction of parents is a very natural and in most situations the most promising place to begin. Wisdom first comes to us in the form of authoritative commandments that must be kept. Authority provides us with a reason for action before we have reasons of our own.

However, good authority seeks to inform obedience so that it is offered increasingly willingly, rather than by coercion or mere thoughtless compliance. Parental authority may begin with the command, but it seeks to acquaint the child with the goodness of what is commanded, so that the principle with which the child is first acquainted as an external constraint or demand becomes a willing and witting principle of behavior, which the child comes proactively to observe and understand. The statement of the father to the son here gestures towards just such a type of formation.

The son must treasure and hold on to steadfast love and faithfulness, virtues that seem to correspond with the fear of the Lord in chapter 16 verse 6. While superstitious persons might bind protective charms around their necks, the son here is told that he will discover his father's teaching in the fear of the Lord will readily answer to such an end. The father's teaching will also be like an adornment that a man might wear around his neck that would attract people's attention and praise. He must also write them upon the tablet of his heart.

Memorization of the instruction of the father is a critical step in the process of internalizing the wisdom of his lessons. The word hidden in the tablet of the heart should also recall for us the tablet of the law in the Ark of the Covenant in the tabernacle, which among other things symbolized the human heart. Proverbs chapter 6 verses 20 to 22 make a similar statement.

My son, keep your father's commandment and forsake not your mother's teaching. Bind them on your heart always. Tie them around your neck.

When you walk, they will lead you. When you lie down, they will watch over you. And when you awake, they will talk with you.

The hero should likely remember the words of Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4 to 9 here and recognize the implicit association between the teaching of the father and the teaching of the law and between the father's teaching of his son and the Lord's teaching of Israel as his firstborn son. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.

You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. In Deuteronomy chapter 6, the word of the law, the word of the Lord's teaching of his son Israel is communicated by fathers to their sons. Just as the Lord promises prosperity to Israel if they diligently keep his commandments, so the father here gives his son a similar assurance, a blessing, if he observes his instruction.

Children are initially cast upon their parents. They depend upon their parents and don't have much of a choice but to trust them. Wisdom requires this initial stage of trust.

We will never obtain wisdom without trusting others to direct us into it. The challenge is to trust the right people and to move to a point where we are increasingly exercising our trust responsibly, circumspectly and with discretion rather than merely trusting people because we cannot do otherwise. Over time, for instance, we will find our trust of wise people is rewarded with blessing which makes ongoing trust of them even more reasonable and understandable.

The good father recognizes his own limitations as a guide in the path of wisdom. While he wants to direct his son as far as he can, the primary form of direction that he can give is to wiser teachers than he. Above all else, his task is to direct his son towards the Lord.

In the rest of this third speech, the father teaches his son to relate to the Lord with trust, fear and honor and to submit to his discipline. This is the most important lesson that he can teach for the fear of the Lord. To trust in the Lord is the wellspring and the greatest substance of wisdom.

To trust in the Lord is, among other things, to observe his commandments in the confidence of his ordering of the world and in his providential rule over it. Those who depend on their own impressions will often be tempted to divert from the Lord's instructions as they believe that success and prosperity will come more readily by following their own counsels. They see the wicked prospering and believe that they

would be better off if they followed them in their ways rather than walking in the way of uprightness.

We see the psalmist struggling with this in places like Psalm 73 where Asaph describes his initial envy of the wicked as they apparently prospered, wondering whether his righteousness was all in vain. It was only through trust in the Lord and in turning to him that he was brought back from that brink. Psalm 37 describes something similar in verses 1 to 7. Threat not yourself because of evildoers.

Be not envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord and do good. Dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.

Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord. Trust in him and he will act.

He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your justice as the noonday. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him. Threat not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices.

Wisdom is about the long-term course of our lives, about what we sow and what we will reap. It is about the consistency to make good commitments and to follow through with them, doggedly persevering even when things look unpromising. Here we see that wisdom is a matter of living by faith, not by sight.

The time should come when that faith is confirmed by sight. But much of the time we simply have to act in a stubborn and daring confidence that the world is ruled by the Lord and that if we commit our ways to him and act in dependence upon him, we will be blessed by him. Even when there may be many contrary and disheartening appearances along the way, the Lord will guard us from a myriad unseen dangers, protecting our paths, not allowing us to be tempted beyond what we are able and leading us in a path whose destination is blessedness.

Fear of the Lord here involves turning away from evil. It is also the alternative to being wise in one's own eyes. It involves a posture of humility, a recognition that we have not attained to wisdom and that we need to trust the Lord who is its true source.

Wisdom can be pursued but we will never fully possess it. Trust in and fear of the Lord should be accompanied by an honouring of the Lord. Here the Father gives the specific case of the presentation of the first fruits to the Lord.

The first fruits are the beginning of the produce, of the harvest, the things one might be most tempted to keep back, leaving the Lord with whatever is left over at the end instead. While this relates to agricultural produce, we should probably discern a metaphor for our lives here. The son might think that he wants to keep the first fruits of the harvest of his life to himself.

One could imagine him thinking, these are the best years of my life, my late teens and early twenties. Surely I should be allowed to enjoy them on my own terms, to have a good time, to sow my wild oats and then I will serve the Lord in my thirties. However when the thirties come, the path of folly will be well set and its bitter harvest already starting to appear.

Had he honoured the Lord by presenting him with the first fruits of his years, he would be prospering and experiencing rich blessing in many areas of his life. We should not delay our service of the Lord. We should give him the first fruits of our life, our week, our day, our wealth and we will be richer in the rest of it on that account.

The Lord as a loving father disciplines his sons. Those who trust in, fear and honour the Lord will also find that they are disciplined by him, which as the author of Hebrews argues, quoting verses 11 to 12 of this chapter, while never pleasant at the time, later yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. The father wants to bring out virtue in his son, to form his son into his good character.

The Lord wants us to grow as those created in his image, which relates to the theme of sonship in scripture. This however requires painful correction as the Lord deals with our folly, often through bringing us into suffering on its account. If we want to be treated as sons and to grow into a closer relationship with our heavenly father, we are asking for the Lord to take our sin and our folly seriously and to deal with us in ways sufficient to correct them.

If there is one thing that the proud fool dislikes, it is correction and rebuke. However the wise and good son desires such correction, he wishes to grow by it. The wise cultivate great sensitivity to correction, while fools harden themselves against it.

As Proverbs chapter 17 verse 10 puts it, a rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool. The fourth speech of the father takes us from verses 13 to 35, stringing together four distinct sections, verses 13 to 18, 19 to 20, 21 to 26 and 27 to 35. As Bruce Waltke notes, it begins with an encomium to wisdom, extolling its surpassing value.

Verses 13 to 18 concern the blessedness of the man who finds wisdom, beginning with the beatitude, blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding. Wealth offers many advantages and benefits, but wisdom, the father assures his son, greatly exceeds wealth in its value and should be valued and pursued over everything else. If the son obtains wisdom, many of the blessings that the fools pursue without it will be granted to him by her.

Long life, riches and honour. The long life being in wisdom's right hand suggests its greater value than riches and honour, which are in her left. The hearer of this passage may recall Solomon's own valuation of wisdom over everything else, when the Lord

appeared to him in his dream at Gibeon in 1 Kings chapter 3 verses 6 to 13 and offered him what he wanted.

Solomon said, You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness and in uprightness of heart toward you. And you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father.

Although I am but a little child, I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil.

For who is able to govern this your great people? It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And God said to him, Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you, and none like you shall arise after you.

I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honour, so that no other king shall compare with you all your days. Besides the gifts that she offers to those who seek her, wisdom's ways are pleasant and peaceful. Solomon's wisdom was associated with the peace and flourishing of Israel as a nation.

The Tree of Life brings us back to the Garden of Eden. The Tree of Life was in the centre of the Garden and offered eternal life and healing to those who ate of it. The hearer should think back to the story of Genesis and to mankind's attempt to grasp at the treasures of autonomous wisdom from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil before they were ready to receive it.

As a result, they were expelled from the Garden, particularly in order that they might not have access to that tree. They were also frustrated in their labours from that point onwards. Wisdom, however, offers something of a path back into the Garden.

In submitting to the Lord and seeking wisdom, rather than seeking to steal her fruit, one will get to enjoy her fruit and enjoy the blessings of life that come from it. Adam and Eve sought the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in order to grasp at a divine-like status and power which God had manifested in his act of creation. In verses 19-20, after the promise of wisdom serving as a tree of life to those who seek her, the father tells his son that the Lord himself acted by wisdom in his creation and his founding of the earth and the heavens.

The world order is the product of the Lord's wisdom. That wisdom pervades it as the imminent principle of its operations. The Lord doesn't merely create as an act of power, but also as an expression of his immeasurable wisdom.

Verse 20 shows that the Lord also sustains the world by his wise providence. We are already here venturing in the direction of the personification of wisdom as a quasi-divine principle, something that will be developed in much more detail in chapter 8. From extolling wisdom, the father moves to exhorting his son relative to it. He must make sure to obtain it and to keep hold of it at all costs.

If he does so, he will experience immense benefits on its account – life, adornment, security, and deliverance from fear and danger. The foolish walk on dark and dangerous paths, but the wise son walks in secure, straight, and well-lit ways. He won't need to fear the pits, traps, and snares that afflict the fools.

The security of the path comes both from the path's inherently safer character and from the fact that the Lord watches over, protects, and guards those who walk upon it. The chapter concludes with a series of instructions concerning a proper relationship to neighbours. Verses 27-30 encourage the son readily to show good to all to whom he has any obligation, to the extent of his power to do so.

He must not be grudging or reluctant in his generosity. We might here recall passages such as Deuteronomy 15, verses 7-10. If among you one of your brothers should become poor in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God has given you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.

Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, The seventh year, the year of release, is near, and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin. You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Likewise the son must be wary of delaying or deferring his obligations of generosity to his neighbour.

He must be speedy, and never withholding in his assistance. From reluctance in generosity, verses 29-30, warn the son against malicious and violent actions against his neighbour. He must not conspire against his neighbour, nor should he be litigious and a starter of quarrels, bringing accusations against the innocent, presumably intending to advantage himself in such a manner.

The tenth commandment condemns the sin of covetousness, a sin that lies at the root of so many others. In the wisdom literature envy and desire are given much closer attention. While the law focuses upon more external actions, the wisdom literature is

concerned to describe the growth of sin from its first incipients to its final bitter harvest.

Here the son might be envied of the wicked men of violence and their seeming ease. The psalmist expresses such envy in Psalm 73, verses 3-13. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For they have no pangs until death. Their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are.

They are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace. Violence covers them as a garment.

Their eyes swell out through fatness. Their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice.

Loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongues strut through the earth. Therefore his people turn back to them and find no fault in them.

And they say, How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High? Behold, these are the wicked, always at ease. They increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.

The father here is very concerned that his son not fall into this trap. In verses 32-35, the father supports his warning against envy of the wicked. The final end of fools and the wicked is disgrace, as the Lord is opposed to all of their ways, and his curse rests upon them.

Their downfall is sure to come. But those who trust in and fear and honour the Lord will themselves inherit honour. A question to consider, what are some ways in which we can make ourselves more receptive to the correction and discipline of the Lord? Romans chapter 16 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Sanctria, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many, and of myself as well.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risk their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. Greet also the church and their house. Greet my beloved Epinetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.

Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.

Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and

my beloved Stachys. Greet Epeles, who is approved in Christ.

Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my kinsmen Herodium. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus.

Greet those workers in the Lord, Triphina and Triphosa. Greet the beloved Persus, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well.

Greet Asencritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobus, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nerus and his sister, and Olympus and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All the churches of Christ greet you. I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught. Avoid them.

For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you. But I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you, as do Lucius and Jason and Socipiter, my kinsman.

Aetertius, who wrote this letter, greets you in the Lord. Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Cortus greet you.

Now to him, who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages, but has now been disclosed, and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the Eternal God to bring about the obedience of faith, to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ. Amen. Romans chapter 16, after the immensely rich theology of the letter, might seem a little anticlimactic.

However, examined more closely, we may find several aspects of it that will reward our attention. The most immediate thing that might jump out at the reader of the chapter is the sheer number of the names that are mentioned. By my count, 26 people in Rome are mentioned by name.

A few others are mentioned without being mentioned by name, such as the members of various households, or the mother of Rufus. It seems astonishing that Paul would know

so many Christians in a church that he had yet to visit. T.W. Manson suggested that Romans 16 was a letter to Ephesus, attached to the epistle to the Romans, so that the letter could be sent on to them.

However, there are a number of problems or weaknesses with that position, several of which are identified by Peter Lamp in an article, *The Roman Christians of Romans chapter 16*. He notes that it would have been likely that Paul would have had many more co-workers to address in Ephesus. Having such an attached letter would also be without precedent in Paul's writing.

A letter composed entirely of greetings would be remarkable for Paul, who couldn't resist getting into theology. A number of the names in this chapter also aren't found in many of the thousands of inscriptions that we have from Ephesus, although they are found in Rome. And then besides the fact that the manuscripts of Romans that we have don't end with Romans chapter 15, there is also the fact that Romans 15 would be a very unnatural ending to the book.

Nowhere else in Paul's letters does Paul address quite so many people. Yet Rome was different. Rome was a church that Paul had not yet visited.

Perhaps this is precisely why Paul can greet such a long list of people personally. Greeting so many people in other churches would seem to single out people in a way that might fuel rivalries and status conflicts. However, when Paul has yet to visit, he is freer to single out people that he already knows.

These people that Paul already knew in Rome were an important initial connection that he had with the congregation, which he would be able to build upon over time. Along with the names in this list of greetings, Paul often adds a brief statement describing his relationship to them or saying something about their character or their service. Especially in the case of the people mentioned who have worked alongside Paul in the past, such as Prisca and Aquila, Epinatus or Andronicus and Junia, these were obvious character references for Paul.

These people could commend him to the Roman church. This is another reason why the chapter makes most sense as one addressed to Rome, along with the rest of the letter. Paul would not require such references for almost every other church to which he wrote.

Interestingly, Paul does not greet these people directly, but instructs the recipients of the letter to convey his greetings to the people in question. Perhaps this suggests that, in the first instance, this would not have been read to an entire gathered congregation of Roman Christians. Before moving to consider any of the names in particular, we should consider the fact that there are so many of them, and what this might suggest about the character of the early church, and of the church in Rome more particularly.

It seems as though many of the Christians in the church in Rome were migrants from the East. Then there is the fact that some Romans would have spent some time living away from the capital. In Acts 18, we discover another reason why Paul might have encountered so many Roman Christians.

In verses 2-3, we learn of Paul's first acquaintance with Priscilla, or Prisca as she is here called, and Aquila. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade.

A number of Roman Jews had been expelled from the city by Claudius, before returning later. As Paul had been teaching in synagogues all around the East during this period, he doubtless would have met many of them, including many who would have returned at a later point, perhaps after being converted through his ministry. There is also the possibility that some of the names on the list Paul knew, not by personal acquaintance, but by reputation.

Besides this, there is the amount of travel that people could undertake in the first century Roman world. As Lamp observes, from the biblical details given concerning him alone, we know that Aquila had moved from Pontus to Rome, to Corinth, and to Ephesus, and then probably back to Rome again. It would not be at all surprising if he had moved back to Rome by the time that Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans.

There is also the possibility that some of the persons mentioned might have been associated with each other. Epinatus, for instance, mentioned immediately after Prisca and Aquila, may have travelled back to Rome with them. Especially if, like Paul, several of the people mentioned had done missionary work as well, we should not be surprised if their paths would have crossed with Paul's elsewhere.

This does give us a sense of how cosmopolitan the early church could be, and how extensively networked. This should be a source of confidence for us as Christians when we consider the greater strength, spread and possibility of confirming eyewitness testimony in such an environment, along with the greater coordination of the message of the churches across vast regions. The chapter begins by commending Phoebe to the Romans.

Phoebe is presumably the one who bears the letter to Rome. She is a servant of the church at Sancrea, someone noted for her ministry. Sancrea was in the region of Corinth, the eastern port of the Corinthian Isthmus.

She was most likely a businesswoman whose own affairs gave her reason to travel to Rome, and who was sufficiently known to and trusted by Paul that he could send an epistle of such great importance with her. She is described as a servant of the church in

Sancrea. She is an emissary of, or a respected envoy for, her church in this instance, and the Romans should receive her with honour as one who acts on behalf of her congregation in various ways.

More particularly, Phoebe is described as a patroness of many, including Paul himself in the verse that follows. The role of patrons was very important in the early church, and it seems that a culturally disproportionate number of these patrons of the church were women. They presumably funded the ministries and the ministers of the church and hosted their assemblies.

A wealthy businesswoman like Phoebe likely hosted the Sancrean church in her house and showed hospitality to missionaries like Paul who passed through the city. This is also something that was true of Jesus' ministry, as witnessed in Luke chapter 8 verses 1-3. Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God, and the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Cusa, Herod's household manager, and Susanna and many others who provided for them out of their means.

Such persons would have been of considerable importance to the early church, and likely enjoyed considerable honour in their congregations. Phoebe is the first of a number of women mentioned in this chapter. There are 26 names mentioned in verses 3-16, 9 women and 17 men.

However, as Lamp remarks, of those especially praised for their service, six or seven are women, Prisca, Mary, Junia, Trifina, Trifosa, Persis, and perhaps also Rufus' mother, while only five or three are men. Such a list implies that women were active, prominent, and honoured in many quarters of the life of the early church. Prisca and Aquila, a couple we first met in Corinth in Acts chapter 18, come first in the list of the Christians in Rome.

They were some of Paul's dearest friends who had risked much for him, and to whom the wider church owed a considerable debt. They host a congregation in their house, probably one of several such congregations in the city. Perhaps the most controversial name on the list is that of Junia, whose name has often been translated as Junias, a male name.

While technically possible, this is almost certainly a mistranslation. In the early church, Junia was identified rightly, I believe, as a woman, by people who clearly opposed women in pastoral ministry, something which many modern readers of Romans have used her name to support. Andronicus and Junia were most likely a married couple, or perhaps a brother and sister who travelled together.

We have description of such situations in 1 Corinthians 9.5. Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord in

Cephas? They are described as Paul's kinsmen. This may mean that they were relatives of Paul, or simply, perhaps more likely, that they were Jews. They also seem to have been in prison alongside Paul at some point, maybe in Ephesus.

The detail that has particularly made Junia a figure of much prominence in debate is the description of the couple as outstanding or well-known among the apostles. While the ESV's translation, well-known to the apostles, is possible, it is much more likely that Andronicus and Junia are included among the apostles in some sense. They clearly aren't members of the Twelve, but they are possibly apostles in the sense suggested in 1 Corinthians 9.1, as witnesses of the resurrected Christ, maybe among the 500 persons who saw the risen Christ at one time.

Going further than this becomes speculative very quickly, but considering how prominent and widespread debates concerning them are, there are some points that we should make concerning Junia, and the ways that other women in this list are used in contemporary debates about women in pastoral ministry. We should, at the very outset, notice the presence of a number of prominent women in the list. Whatever positions we hold concerning pastoral ministry, we should note the prominence of the various ministries of women more generally, and the honour that Paul held such women in.

We have much clearer teaching on these matters elsewhere in the New Testament, and we shouldn't need to rely on speculation about such passages. Making questions of women in pastoral ministry hang upon the uses of particular words and phraseology in such passages is stretching the evidence far further than it can actually support. In debates on such matters, it is telling how often the word leadership is focused upon.

Romans 16 clearly shows women being prominent figures in their churches, being key workers, and being honoured for their faithful service. However, the need to make a case for women in pastoral ministry leads to a focus upon these women as so-called leaders, which is a category that seems to be a rather clumsily fitted one, unsuited to the service that the women here are performing. Perhaps one of the lessons we should learn from this passage is that leadership should not have such a monopoly on honour, and that other forms of service in the life of the church should receive much more recognition.

We should beware of importing our modern assumptions about individuals filling essentially gender-neutral roles for which their sex is a matter of indifference, assumptions that arise in no small part from our modern economic order. In most societies across history and cultures, a person's sex colours the way that the roles they perform are perceived, and how those roles function, even when the roles they perform are nominally the same as roles the other sex can perform. A number of the women mentioned here are also mentioned alongside their husbands, their children, or their siblings.

Rather than individuals performing gender-neutral roles, in many of these situations we

seem to have husband-wife teams, or families who were known for their service. Clement of Alexandria, writing around the year 200 AD, speaks of the apostles making their wives fellow-workers alongside them, with the wives focusing on ministering to women, to which the apostles themselves would not have had such ready access. In the case of Rufus's mother, Paul describes a woman performing an explicitly gendered role of service, acting as a mother to him.

The domestic setting for many of the ministries that Paul addresses here, in house churches, as married missionary couples, as families, etc., naturally allowed for women to enjoy much more prominence as the face of their communities, sometimes because there were relatively few male converts around. As the church assumed a growing public profile, and the informality of house churches was replaced with more formal offices and ordered communities, the ministry of male leaders naturally assumed much greater prominence on the broader stages that the church was moving into, a development that could strengthen the entire church in certain ways. Nevertheless, in local communities, the more domestic and communally grounded ministries of women would still have enjoyed considerable honour and prominence, even though their ministries would not have been as prominent on the broader stages.

Looking through the names, there are some scattered clues to social status, to the regions of origin that people come from. Most of them were probably born outside Rome. Slave-born and free-born identities are sometimes hinted at, and in the case of Andronicus and Junia, their Jewish origin.

It seems likely that the majority of the Roman church were slaves or freedmen, or women. Throughout this list, Paul often uses the words In the Lord, or In Christ, speaking for instance of Andronicus and Junia as being in Christ before him. Christ is the new realm of his people's existence, and the source of their identity.

Before sending his companions greetings and signing off the letter, Paul gives an exhortation. He is concerned that the Romans watch out for the type of people who cause divisions and set up obstacles. Such people are not motivated by the truth and the love and service of Christ, but are just in it for their own appetites.

However, they can lead many naïve people astray. Paul writes very positively about the Romans themselves, but he wants them to be wise in discerning what is good, and completely averse to that which is evil. Alluding to the promise of Genesis 3, verse 15, he promises that God will crush Satan under their feet shortly.

The serpent will be attacking them in various ways, but Paul is assured that they will prove victorious. In verses 21-24, Paul conveys greetings from his fellow workers, and his amanuensis, Tertius, conveys his. Timothy is described as Paul's fellow worker, presumably something already well known by Christians in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

The references to Gaius and Erastus suggest the possibility that Paul was writing from Corinth. Also, Erastus' public office is evidence of individuals with higher social status among the early Christians. The book ends with a grand doxology, summing up the meaning of the Gospel.

In the fullness of time, according to his eternal purpose, and in fulfillment of prophetic promise, Jesus the Messiah is being proclaimed as the world's true Lord, and the one in whom the reign of God is established. This message is being proclaimed throughout the nations, so that all nations might submit to him with the obedience of faith. This is the Gospel.

This God, who has established his glorious kingdom in his son Jesus Christ, is also able to establish his people, secure in the strength of the kingdom that he is making known at this present time. A question to consider. Putting together various clues that we get in this chapter and elsewhere, what might we imagine the Roman church in the late 50s AD was like?