

EVIDENCE FOR A FIRST CENTURY “TENEMENT CHURCH”

JOHN NIEMELÄ

Professor
Rocky Mountain Bible College & Seminary
Denver, CO

ESTIMATING THE SIZE OF PAUL’S ROMAN AUDIENCE

Scholars have sought to calculate the number of Christians in Rome when Paul wrote.¹ The greetings section of Romans 16 is the basis for such estimates. Paul greets more people by name here than in any other epistle. However, the mention of twenty-six congregants does not immediately suggest a large Christian community. Thus, scholarly estimates of the original audience of the epistle tend to be low—probably too low.

In AD 64, Nero charged Christians with the burning of Rome. In the aftermath, Tacitus reports the condemnation of “a huge crowd” (*multitudo ingens*) of Christians.² If he is right, the church at Rome was no small entity only seven years after Paul’s epistle. This leaves three options:

1. Tacitus may have overstated the numbers.
2. Christianity grew from a small sect in Rome to a large one in less than a decade.
3. Christianity was already sizeable in the capital before Paul’s epistle.

Looking at this another way, the first question is: How large was the church in AD 64? The second is: How large was it in AD 57?

¹ See studies referred to in Robert Jewett, assisted by Roy D. Kotansky, *Romans: A Commentary*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp, Hermeneia Series (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 61.

² Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44.

There is every reason to accept Tacitus' report that the church community in Rome was large by AD 64. Politicians needing a scapegoat do not persecute friends or small, innocuous groups, but attack perceived enemies. Although believers were not revolutionaries (cf. Rom 13:1-7), something must account for Nero blaming them, not others. Two issues may have caught his eye:

1. Christians showed strong convictions in clashes with religious Jews.
2. Christianity was a large sect in Rome and it was also growing rapidly.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ROMAN CHURCH WHEN PAUL WROTE

It would be tempting to estimate the size of the Christian community in Rome at the outset of this discussion. However, an accurate description of the Roman Church is requisite to estimating numbers. For example, if Rom 16:3-15 greets twenty-six rank-and-file members, the minimum number (assuming that those with no named spouse were married) could be as small as seventy-five adults.

Three factors could immediately expand this to a much larger community:

1. Paul may only greet leaders and sponsors of 15 congregations known to him.
2. Each leader (and sponsors) would meet with small congregations weekly.
3. Leaders may meet at different times and places with multiple groups a week.

The number of believers in all the congregations of the churches in Rome could easily have been over 1,000 in AD 57 when Paul wrote. Thus while traditional thinking has yielded a small original audience for Paul's letter (i.e., under 100), the presence of large numbers of Christians in AD 64 suggests the need to be open to

a substantial beachhead existing prior to Paul’s AD 57 letter as well. A closer examination of the church in Rome may clarify. Certainly, the number of Christians expanded after Paul’s letter, and possibly dramatically, but his epistle was not designed as an evangelistic tool, contrary to what advocates of the so-called Romans Road would say.

Careful analysis of Rom 16:3-15 will offer a glimpse into the Roman church when Paul wrote. The resultant picture of the audience of Romans has several aspects.

Romans 16:3-15 shows that Paul was writing multi-ethnic readers within fifteen distinct congregations. They belonged to various socio-economic groups, including slaves and freedmen who dwelt in tenements. Leaders of several assemblies had associated with Paul during exile from Rome under Claudius. When the Claudian persecution ended, these people (familiar with Paul’s teaching) returned to Rome, planting churches friendly to Paul and his teaching. Paul evidences varying degrees of familiarity with these congregations, so other churches (beyond the fifteen) may have already existed. Priscilla³ and Aquila, the first people greeted (Rom 16:3), evidently had an elevated economic and social position which made them ideal candidates to distribute the epistle to the other fourteen named congregations and to others not named as well.

³ Both the MT and CT read *Priska* (or Prisca), not Priscilla, in Rom 16:3, but elsewhere the NT calls her *Priskilla* (or Priscilla; see Acts 18:2, 18, 26; 1 Cor 16:19 [*Priska* in the CT]). Rather than calling her Prisca or Prisc[ill]a in Rom 16:3, the article retains her more familiar name, Priscilla.

ROMANS ADDRESSES FIFTEEN NAMED CONGREGATIONS

Paul greets fifteen autonomous groups of believers in Rom 16:3-15. Each use of *aspazomai*⁴ (“greet”) distinguishes an autonomous assembly.⁵ The easiest way to see the groups is by offering a skeletal view of the verses in question, arranged on a congregation-by-congregation basis. Following the list will be a set of arguments favoring this approach.

1. Greet Priscilla and Aquila...and the church that is in their house (*vv* 3–5a).
2. Greet my beloved Epaenetus...(*v* 5b).
3. Greet Mary...(*v* 6).
4. Greet Andronicus and Junia...(*v* 7).
5. Greet Amplias...(*v* 8).
6. Greet Urbanus...and Stachys...(*v* 9).
7. Greet Apelles...(*v* 10a).
8. Greet those who are of the *household* of Aristobulus (*v* 10b).
9. Greet Herodion...(*v* 11a).
10. Greet those being in the Lord of the *household* of Narcissus (*v* 11b).
11. Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa...(*v* 12a).
12. Greet the beloved Persis...(*v* 12b).
13. Greet Rufus...and his mother and mine (*v* 13).
14. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren with them (*v* 14).
15. Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them (*v* 15).

⁴ Editor's note: There are actually four additional uses of *aspazomai* in Romans 16, for a total of nineteen. However the last four in Rom 16:21, 22, 23 (2x) are not specific greetings from Paul, but general greetings from his co-workers—Tertius, the scribe who wrote the letter, Timothy, Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater. Three other believers with Paul also sent greetings—Gaius, Erastus, and Quartus.

⁵ The fifteen uses are Rom 16:3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 (2x), 11 (2x), 12 (2x), 13, 14, 15.

THE FIFTEEN USES OF *GREET*

The greetings section of Romans served as a new literary departure. That is, no prior precedent exists, although subsequent Christian writing often emulated this epistle’s greetings. Jewett writes:

Most frequently, the greeting is a brief and formulaic *errōsthe* (“be well”). The combination of greetings to so large a number of persons and the use of the second person plural form in Romans is unparalleled, contributing to the establishment of a precedent that popularizes greetings in subsequent Christian letters. Since no other Pauline letter carries so many greetings, “this indicates that the situation under which Romans was written differed in some significant way,”⁶ which my hypothesis concerning the purpose attempts to clarify and which the exegesis below will elaborate.⁷

Paul had not been to Rome, but was personally acquainted with a host of people there. In one sense, the many repetitions of the verb *greet* seem redundant. The repetition suggests a stylistic feature signaling the existence of various congregations.

USE OF TERMS COMPATIBLE WITH CORPORATE ASSEMBLY

A couple of features within this section show that Paul strategically placed each imperative *Greet* to distinguish individual congregations. Paul specifically refers to the meetings of three of these groups (indicated by italicized words):

Greet Priscilla and Aquila...and the *church* that is in their house (*vv* 3–5a).

⁶ Jewett, *Romans*, 951. Jewett has a footnote here which indicates the quote is from “Mullins, ‘Greeting,’ 425.”

⁷ *Ibid.*

Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren *with* them (v 14).

Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are *with* them (v 15).

Attention to the names mentioned in the three groups is important. Priscilla and Aquila were a married couple. Verse 15 initially names a man (Philologus) and a woman (Julia), perhaps as a married couple. Then it mentions a brother (Nereus) and his unnamed sister. Though the first four names may be associated because of familial ties, Olympas and all the saints who are with them look less like family and more like church. The same is true for the five named men in v 14 and the unnamed brethren with them. Furthermore, the greeting to Priscilla, Aquila, “and the church that is in their house” (vv 3-5a) weighs against the idea that the people in vv 5b-15 were part of Priscilla and Aquila’s house church. The wording of v 5a distinguishes one congregation from succeeding ones.⁸ Likewise, vv 14-15 point to two separate assemblies. The word *greet* demarks each of those congregations. By extension, Paul signals the existence of fifteen congregations, each with its own greeting.

POORER ETHNICITIES WERE REPRESENTED

Romans 16:3-15 gives the names of twenty-six people. The names of eighteen were Greek (Andronicus, Apelles, Aristobulus, Asyncritus, Epaenetus, Hermas, Hermes, Herodion, Narcissus, Nereus, Olympas, Patrobas, Persis, Philologus, Phlegon, Stachys, Tryphena, Tryphosa), seven were Latin (Amplias, Aquila,⁹ Julia, Junia, Priscilla,

⁸ Cf. Galatians, which explicitly addresses more than one congregation, “the churches of Galatia” (1:2). Of course, Galatia (a province) covered a larger geographic region than a city. Nevertheless a crowded city the size of Rome could give rise to a number of pockets of believers.

⁹ Luke identifies Aquila as Jewish in Acts 18:2.

Rufus, and Urbanus), while one was Hebrew (Mary). Six of those with Greek or Latin names were ethnically Jewish (Andronicus, Herodion, Aquila, Priscilla, Junia, and Rufus).

It is widely acknowledged that relations between Jewish and Gentile Christians were not always smooth. Paul greets Jews in some of the congregations; Gentiles in others. None of the congregations explicitly have both Jews and Gentiles in them.¹⁰

Jewett shows why the language of origin for the names is important:

...Paul is struggling against cultural chauvinism in all its forms. Particularly in the imperial context of Rome, where the majority of Greek-speaking persons, including most of those with Jewish background, were slaves or former slaves, respect for original cultural origins and identity was a matter of importance.¹¹

SOME OF THE LEADERS WERE ASSOCIATED WITH PAUL DURING EXILE FROM ROME

Acts 18:2, 18, and 26 document Priscilla and Aquila’s prior association with Paul in Corinth and Ephesus (March to September AD 52). They traveled extensively¹² and remained associated with him whether accompanying Paul or separated from him.

¹⁰This does not mean that all congregations were purely Gentile or purely Jewish. For example, Priscilla may or may not have shared her husband’s Jewishness. Acts 18:2 does not say whether she was a Jewess or not. The point remains that Paul does not explicitly mention any congregation as including both Jews and Gentiles.

¹¹Jewett, *Romans*, 953.

¹²Aquila was born in Pontus (Acts 18:2); he and his wife Priscilla lived in Rome until the Claudian edict of AD 49 (Acts 18:2), was at Corinth (Acts 18:2 and 18) and Ephesus in AD 51 (Acts 18:24-26), was at Corinth in AD 56 (2 Cor 16:19), at Rome in AD 56-57 (Rom 16:3-4), and at Rome with Paul in AD 67 when 2 Timothy was written (2 Tim 4:19).

Paul maintained contact with them, greeting them in Romans and 1 Corinthians. Their frequent travels and close connection with Paul suggest that they served as the Apostle's emissaries. Furthermore, Paul greets them first in Romans 16 and gives them a longer greeting than anyone else in the chapter. They do not evidence long-term or permanent ties to Rome. For these reasons, they seem to be Paul's emissaries, temporarily assigned to Rome, ensuring that the Roman epistle reached all of the churches in the city. This aspect will receive further development later.

Epaenetus was the firstfruits of Achaia (Rom 16:5b). On his second journey, Paul took Epaenetus to Achaia from February 51–September 52 (Acts 17:15–18:18). On the third journey Epaenetus was also there for three months in the winter of 56–57 (Acts 20:2-3). The reference to Epaenetus as the firstfruits of Achaia suggests that he was among the first believers there, meaning that Paul met him around February 51. It also implies that Epaenetus did not believe prior to meeting Paul, so the safer assumption is that Achaia was the birthplace of this man with a Greek name, but he moved to Rome.

Mary (Gk. *Mariam*) “labored much for us” (Rom 16:6); Tryphena, Tryphosa, and the beloved Persis “labored [much] in the Lord” (Rom 16:12). Paul knew them, so it is clear that they traveled. As with Epaenetus, there is no indication as to whether they were natives of Rome.

Andronicus and Junia were Paul's “fellow prisoners,” which may mean that they and he were imprisoned together. The apostles regarded these (who believed before Paul did) as noteworthy (Rom 16:7). For them to be held in high regard by the apostles would seem to require that they also had travelled.

Paul calls Amplias “my beloved in the Lord” (Rom 16:8) and Stachys “my beloved” (Rom 16:9). These appellations suggest that they traveled outside of Rome and spent time with Paul.

Paul refers to Urbanus as his “fellow worker in Christ” (Rom 16:9), a term reserved for outstanding partnership with Paul in ministry. Such a commendation would require close association with Paul.

For Paul to speak of Apelles as “approved [Gk. *dokimos*] in Christ” (Rom 16:10) means that he was currently pleasing the Lord and should he persevere in that state, he would have the Lord’s approval at the *Bēma* (cf. 1 Cor 9:27; 2 Tim 2:15). Clearly, he and Paul had spent time together.

Paul speaks of Rufus as “chosen in the Lord” (Rom 16:13), which is special.¹³ Note how Paul speaks of the mother of Rufus as his own mother also. Such a comment suggests that Paul and he were close.

These people that have been associated with Paul in times past constitute about two-thirds of the names listed in Rom 16:3-15. He does name a few women. The men listed are qualified for prominent leadership and ministry roles. Paul is not cataloguing a list of church attendees. These are tested ministers, which accords with the idea that the epistle addresses fifteen congregations.

AN OCCASION FOR PAUL TO HAVE MET THESE PEOPLE

Acts 18:1–2 (AD 51) is when Paul first met Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth:

After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because

¹³The phrase *chosen* [or elect (*eklektos* is used here)] *in the Lord*, likely refers here not to election to everlasting life, but to election for ministry, including formerly ministry with the Apostle Paul. Indeed, there is no clear evidence anywhere in the Bible that there is such a thing as election to everlasting life. Compare Acts 13:46. However, some NT scholars suggest that Paul means that Rufus was “a choice or precious Christian” (e.g., Brenda B. Colijn, *Images of Salvation in the New Testament* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010], 221).

Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them.

Luke's statement sounds like every Jew was commanded to leave. The statement of Suetonius allows two different meanings, "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (or Christus)¹⁴ he expelled them [meaning either all Jews or all contentious Jews] from Rome."¹⁵

Rome's Jewish community was substantial (between 15,000 and 60,000)¹⁶ and did not vanish during the reign of Claudius. The reconciliation between Luke and Suetonius may be as simple as Claudius issued a universal command (per Luke), but enforced it only upon those contending over Chrestus (per Suetonius).¹⁷

Jewett reaches similar conclusions about the Claudian edict.¹⁸ He then contends that Paul did not merely meet Priscilla and Aquila on the mission field, but others in Romans 16 also.

...Prisca [i.e., Priscilla] and Aquila, whom Paul greets in Rom 16:3–5, were refugees forced out of Rome whom Paul met in Corinth when he

¹⁴ That this was a substitution of *e* for *i* is widely (but not universally) accepted. The disturbances among the Jews were widespread enough to result in official persecution. Who else, besides Christ Himself would serve as such a lightning rod? The most plausible interpretation is that Suetonius (a Latin speaker) misspelled a Greek name.

¹⁵ Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4, translated by J. C. Rolfe, *LCL*. The Latin reads, *Iudaios impulsore Chresto adsidue tumultiantes Roma expulit*.

¹⁶ Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser, ed. Marshall D. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 84, gives estimates of between 15,000 and 60,000 from Pss. Solomon 2.6, *Josephus Ant.* 17.13-14, *Philo Legat Ant.* 23, and *Josephus Ant.* 14.77-79.

¹⁷ Orosius, *History* 7:15-16, says, "It cannot be determined whether he [Claudius] ordered only the Jews agitating against Christ to be restrained and suppressed, or whether he also wanted to expel Christians as being men of a related faith." Orosius seems unaware that (in the year AD 49) most Roman Christians were Jewish. This is only five years after Acts 10, where Cornelius was the first non-proselyte Gentile in the Church. Positively, though, Orosius understood that Roman Christianity came under the Claudian edict.

¹⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 60.

arrived there in the winter of C.E. 50.¹⁹ Other likely refugees mentioned in chap. 16 are [1] Epainetos, [2] Miriam, [3] Andronikos and [4] Junia, [5] Ampliatus, [6] Urbanus, [7] Stachys, [8] Apelles, [9] Herodion, [10] Tryphaina, [11] Tryphosa, [12] Persis, and [13] Rufus and his [14] mother. The most probable explanation for Paul’s acquaintance with these early Christian leaders is that they met while in exile. Paul knows that they have returned to the capital of the empire during the peaceful, early years of the Nero administration...

Paul’s personal remarks towards these people shows that he met them before they returned to Rome. He speaks of one as the firstfruits of Achaia, others are his fellow workers, fellow prisoners, and so forth. A short-lived edict of Claudius put them in contact with Paul, but allowed them eventually to return to Rome.

Paul had opportunity to evaluate them in ministry. They were commendable. It is quite natural that they would have responsibilities in the various local churches of Rome.

VARIOUS CLASSES WERE REPRESENTED

It has been common in recent years to speak in terms of the churches in Rome (and elsewhere in the first three centuries) as being house churches. However, it is important to recognize the economic demographics of Rome. One estimate is that one-third of Rome’s residents were slaves, while one-third were freed slaves,²⁰ and one-third were not slaves. More than 90% of free men lived in upper-story tenement dwellings.²¹ Estimated population density for ancient Rome was, “...300 people per acre, almost two-

¹⁹My date for this is in AD 51.

²⁰Zvi Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1988), 117.

²¹Bruce W. Frier, *Landlords and Tenants in Imperial Rome* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), xx.

and-a-half times higher than modern Calcutta and three times higher than Manhattan Island.”²²

In other words, most people in Rome lived in abject poverty. In general, those with Latin-based names were likely to be higher on the social scale than those with foreign names. Earlier, I noted that seven out of the twenty-six names in the greetings section were Latin.²³

Furthermore, two of the congregations addressed by Paul do not name any attendees.

Greet those who are of the *household* of
Aristobulus (v 10b).

Greet those being in the Lord of the *household*
of Narcissus (v 11b).

A question arises as to whether Aristobulus and Narcissus were patriarchs of their families, who worshipped together or whether the worshippers were slaves belonging to these men. Either way, it appears that neither Aristobulus nor Narcissus attended church. If they did, Paul could have said, “Greet Aristobulus and his house.” Paul does not name anyone at all that belongs to either of these congregations.

Only one of Paul’s fifteen greetings to congregations mentions a church meeting in a home. “Greet Priscilla and Aquila...and the church that is in their house” (16:3–5a).

Realistically, the majority of the congregations probably consisted of poorer people—groups where early Christianity tended to make its best penetration (cf. 1 Cor 1:26). The history of the Church bears this out. In view of the likelihood that most of Paul’s audience was impoverished, it seems wise to contrast salient features of house churches and tenement churches.

²² Jewett, *Romans*, 54. Cf. John E. Stambaugh, *The Ancient Roman City: Ancient Society and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 337.

²³ See p. 104 above.

HOUSE CHURCHES

Jewett is comfortable with traditional definitions of house churches, but argues that the greetings of Rom 16:3-15 appear to limit house churches to one congregation, that of Priscilla and Aquila.²⁴ Other churches would be of the tenement church model. With that proviso, he approvingly cites both Klauck and Schürmann:

In contrast to modern usage, the word “church” did not refer to a distinctive building until centuries after the writing of Romans. The definitive study of house congregations and house churches by Hans-Joseph Klauck opens with a citation from Heinz Schürmann, “The living space of the congregation is the house.” These and other widely accepted studies investigate the references to houses as the meeting places of early Christian congregations and usually assume a freestanding building owned or rented by the patron or patroness of a house church.²⁵

In other words, Jewett would acknowledge that Klauck and Schürmann have well-described the situation of the house church of Priscilla and Aquila.

IMPOVERISHED TENEMENT CHURCHES

A brief description of the housing situation of the poor in Rome will give context for considering where those congregations met. Jewett says,

A crucial element in understanding the situation of Christian congregations in Rome is the crowded urban environment. At the time of Paul’s letter, most of the population in Rome lived in

²⁴ Jewett, *Romans*, 959.

²⁵ Hans-Joseph Klauck, *Hausgemeinde und Hauskirche im frühen Christentum*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 103 (Stuttgart, GER: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981), 11. Klauck cites Heinz Schürmann, “Gemeinde als Bruderschaft,” in Heinz Schürmann, *Ursprung und Gestalt: Erörterungen und Besinnungen zum Neuen Testament* (Düsseldorf, GER: Patmos, 1970), 68–69. The Schürmann citation is translated by Jewett, *Romans*, 959.

the upper floors of “multistory tenement houses” or in the rears of shops,²⁶ while the nobility and the wealthy citizens of Rome occupied the lower floors of these buildings or in mansions in the better parts of the city.²⁷

Frier contends that such housing “probably accommodated upwards of 90 percent of Rome’s free population.”²⁸ Jewett summarizes a section of Frier as follows:

He describes the most completely surviving *insula* [a multi-story apartment building], which has shops on the ground floor, with several large *cenacula* [upstairs] apartments above it. The upper floors, however, contain “a warren of tiny, squalid rooms, most of them not directly lighted and served by long interior corridors. Most rooms are very small (about 10 sq. m. [108 sq. ft.]), but it is still entirely probable that a small family could have occupied such quarters.”²⁹

As Jewett concludes, “It seems likely that house churches as normally conceived could not find space in the upper floors of such tenements when the rooms were that small.”³⁰ It is for this reason that Jewett differentiates house churches from tenement churches. Tenement churches lacked sponsors and were forced to use tiny spaces, normally occupied by a family. For example, one neighbor might accommodate men and older children, while women and younger children might meet in another believing neighbor’s quarters. The point is that believers who are motivated to assemble together can find ways to do so, even if they were impoverished tenement dwellers.

²⁶ Jewett, *Romans*, 53, draws upon James S. Jeffers, “Jewish and Christian Families in First Century Rome,” in K. P. Donfried and P. Richardson, eds., *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 131-33.

²⁷ Jewett, *Romans*, 53.

²⁸ Frier, *Landlords*, xx.

²⁹ Jewett, *Romans*, 54. See also Frier, *Landlords*, xx.

³⁰ Jewett, *Romans*, 54.

It is widely acknowledged that Christianity made great inroads into the poorer segments of ancient society. Jewett’s consideration of the circumstances of tenement dwellers assists in thinking through differences between tenement churches and traditional house churches.

PAUL EVIDENCES VARYING LEVELS OF FAMILIARITY WITH THE CONGREGATIONS

Paul greets Priscilla, Aquila, and many of the others with a personal touch, indicating that they had met. On the other hand, several greetings only mention names of people. As mentioned previously, two greetings do not even name actual participants in the groups (vv 10b and 11b).

This would seem to be a tacit acknowledgment by Paul that his information concerning these groups is sketchy. In light of this, it would be hard to argue that Paul’s knowledge about all of the congregations is exhaustive or that he necessarily knows every congregation that existed in Rome. In other words, Paul addressed congregations that he knew were in existence. Some of them were led by people he knew well, others had leaders about whom he had some information, while others he knew very little. It is difficult to dogmatize that there were no other congregations in Rome at the time of writing.

A MEANS FOR DISTRIBUTING THE LETTER TO OTHER CONGREGATIONS EXISTED

Of the fifteen addressed congregations, Priscilla and Aquila (and their house church) would serve as an obvious liaison to the other assemblies. Paul greeted them

first. They seem to be more comfortable financially than the other congregations. One other consideration is that the courier was Phoebe, a woman who hosted her own house church in Cenchrea, near Corinth. It is not at all unlikely that she knew Priscilla and Aquila, who were in Corinth in Acts 18:2. There were certainly dangers for a woman travelling alone, but Paul could take steps with regard to providing a safe and comfortable abode when she arrived in Rome. Priscilla and Aquila would be a most logical choice for Phoebe's point of contact in Rome.

Furthermore, Priscilla and Aquila would be the logical people to extend greetings to the various congregations as they delivered copies of Romans to the fifteen groups and to others in Rome.

CONCLUSION

Romans addresses multi-ethnic readers within fifteen distinct congregations, which belonged to various socio-economic groups (including slaves and freedmen who dwelt in tenements). Leaders of several assemblies had associated with Paul during exile from Rome under Claudius. When the Claudian persecution ended, these people (familiar with Paul's teaching) returned to Rome, planting churches friendly to Paul and his teaching. Paul evidences varying degrees of familiarity with these congregations, so other churches (beyond the fifteen) may have already existed. Priscilla and Aquila's economic and social position may have poised them to distribute the epistle to the fifteen congregations and to others as well.

Under such a model, a substantial Christian community already friendly to Paul existed at the time that he wrote Romans. Furthermore, it is easy to see how Christianity

in Rome could be so sizeable by AD 64 that Nero would launch persecution against them.

It is also easy to see how some of the tensions mentioned by the epistle could exist in a climate of numerous congregations of varying ethnicity (Jews, Greeks, and Romans). For example, Romans 1 brings up Gentile licentiousness, part of chap. 2 discusses legalism, while another part of Romans 2 discusses Jews in particular. Romans 9-11 discusses Israel. Chapter 14 considers liberty and doubtful things. It is not hard to imagine contentions arising between the various congregations, as well as within individual groups.

APPLICATION

In the modern industrialized world, much of Christendom places little emphasis upon assembling to learn God’s Word and to worship. Attendance is hit or miss. Inconsequentialities such as the impressiveness of the building or the presence of well-heeled congregants often are the basis for selecting a church.

By contrast, Christianity in Rome spread rapidly through the city, especially in poorer quarters, for reasons totally unrelated to, indeed, in spite of, the meeting space or the social standing of the congregants. Multiple groups of believers assembled together in uncomfortable and crowded locations. They told others about Jesus Christ. As a result, even more believers assembled. Christianity in Rome was already sizeable when Paul wrote, but further multiplication over the next seven years brought persecution under Nero. Then Christianity really began to flourish in Rome. May our commitment to assembly and proclamation of the message of life match that of the

early Roman Christians.³¹ May God bless His word today so believers would assemble to hear truth and disperse to proclaim God's message of grace.

³¹ Editor's note: The Free Grace movement would expand exponentially if one or two families would join together and begin to form house churches all over the U.S., Canada, and around the world. If instead of thinking in terms of groups of 50 or more which meet in special church buildings with professionally trained and full-time pastors, we started thinking in terms of groups of 5 to 10 people who met in homes and who are led by godly men who may have no formal Bible college or seminary training, we would see an explosion in the number of Free Grace churches.

There were no church buildings for the first three centuries. The NT model for church does not expect or require professional staff, special buildings, or special training.