

"PAUL'S CO-WORKERS"

(Acts 20:1-6)

(F.F. Bruce)

There is a frequently quoted passage in one of T.R. Glover's books where he speaks of the apostle's fondness for words compounded with the prefix *syn* (meaning 'with'). These compounds, according to Glover, have two main functions: one, to emphasize Paul's union with the crucified and risen Christ, and the other, to emphasize his fellowship with other Christians, especially those actively engaged in propagating the gospel.

One of the most frequent of those compounds in Paul's vocabulary is the noun *synergos*, 'co-worker' or 'fellow-worker'. 'To a man or woman of any spirit or character', say Glover, 'to be so described by one of Paul's build and nature must have been in itself inspiration.'

Some of the people whom Paul describes as his 'co-workers' have been treated in previous chapters in this book - Prisca and Aquila, for example (Rom. 16:3), Timothy (Rom. 16:21), Titus (2 Cor. 8:23), Mark (Col. 4:10; Philem. 24) and Luke (Philem. 24). But there are other 'co-workers' of whom we know less.

There is Aristarchus, for example, called a co-worker in Col. 4:10 and Philem. 24. In Col. 4:10 he is also called Paul's *synaichmalotos*, his 'fellow-prisoner' (literally, 'fellow-prisoner-of-war'). According to Luke, he was a Macedonian Christian, from Thessalonica; he was with Paul in Ephesus, joined him later on his last journey to Jerusalem, and joined him yet again when he set out on his voyage from Judaea to Italy (Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2). Sir William Ramsay suggested that on his voyage Luke and Aristarchus 'must have gone as Paul's slaves, being actually registered as such on the passenger list.' It seems much more likely to me that Luke signed on as ship's doctor, but Ramsay could be right about Aristarchus: we just don't know. Luke, at an earlier stage, calls Aristarchus one of Paul's 'fellow-travellers' (Acts 19:29); if Paul himself calls him a fellow-prisoner, that may mean that he was currently sharing his confinement in Rome, or that he had done so in Ephesus or Caesarea.

But there are others to whom Paul refers as his 'fellow-prisoners'. One of these is Epaphras (Philem. 23). Epaphras, whom he calls his 'fellow-slave' (*syndoulos*) in Col. 1:7, was evidently the evangelist of the Lycus valley and had a pastoral concern for the churches planted there - Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea (Col. 4:13). Even when he was with Paul as his fellow-prisoner, and unable to visit those churches, he prayed hard for them all the time - obviously another man after Paul's own heart.

At an earlier date two other 'fellow-prisoners' are mentioned - Andronicus and Junia, Jewish believers whose faith in Christ antedated Paul's. They are of note among the apostles', Paul adds (Rom. 16:7), meaning that they were not only known to the apostles but eminent apostles themselves, possibly because they were witnesses of Christ in resurrection. They were resident in Rome when Paul sent his letter to the Christians there; we can only guess at the circumstances in which they had been Paul's fellow-prisoners (perhaps in Ephesus).

To return to others whom Paul calls his 'co-workers', there is Philemon of Colossae, mentioned already in our chapter on Onesimus. A curious thing—is it not?—that nearly two thousand years later the slave rather than the master should receive a study to himself in a series like this! Paul addresses



Philemon as 'our beloved fellow-worker' (Philem. 1) and expresses appreciation of all Philemon's activities, not least in the provision of hospitality to fellow-Christians. To see such evident signs of grace in one of his converts was meat and drink to Paul. With Philemon he couples Apphia, presumably his wife, and he salutes another member of the household, Archippus, their son. Archippus was also a co-worker, although Paul calls him rather 'co-fighter' (*synstratiōtēs*) - 'our fellow-soldier' (Philem 2). In Col 4:17 the Christians of Colossae are directed to convey a message to Archippus 'See that you fulfill the ministry which you have received in the Lord.' Had Archippus been present when the letter was delivered and read in the church, it would not have been necessary to convey the message to him indirectly; possibly he had been seconded for service in another church (Laodicea has been surmised). But the Colossians knew, and Archippus knew, what the ministry was; they were not left to guess, as we are.

There is another man whom Paul calls his soldier': he is Epaphroditus of Philippi - 'my brother and fellow-worker and fellow-soldier' (Phil. 2:25). Epaphroditus was entrusted by the members of the Philippian church with a gift of money for Paul, who was under house-arrest in Rome (Phil. 4:18). They asked him further, when he came to Paul, to give him what help he could as their representative. But at some point in the discharge of his commission, Epaphroditus fell ill and nearly died. News of his illness got back to Philippi and filled his friends there with anxiety; he knew that they had heard of it and was himself anxious to relieve their fears, but at the same time he was anxious to stay on in Rome and make himself useful to Paul. But Paul sent him back with a letter in which he not only thanks the Philippian Christians for their gift but explains that he takes sole responsibility for Epaphroditus's return to them. If they asked Epaphroditus why he did not stay with Paul and serve him as he had been instructed to do, here was their answer. At the same time Paul expresses deep appreciation of what Epaphroditus has done for him already, and tells the Philippians that this is the kind of man they should honour. The church of Philippi was well supplied with administrators - 'bishops and deacons' (Phil. 1:1) - but if the occasion arose to add to their number, Epaphroditus should not be overlooked. The mind of Christ, which has been eloquently celebrated earlier (in Phil. 2:5-11), was worthily reproduced in Epaphroditus.

Paul had other co-workers in the Philippian church. One of them, Clement, is named in Phil. 4:3, but others - 'the rest of my fellow-workers' - are unnamed. However, their names, says Paul, 'are in the book of life', although they are not in the letter to the Philippians. But the reference to Clement is preceded by honourable mention of two women, Euodia and Syntyche, who, says Paul, 'laboured side by side with me in the gospel'. The verb he uses is quite a strong one (*synathlēo*); he uses it earlier in the letter when he speaks of all the Philippian Christians as 'striving side by side for the faith of the gospel' (Phil. 1:27). Whatever form these two women's collaboration with Paul in his gospel ministry may have taken, it was not confined to making tea for him and his circle - or whatever the first-century counterpart to that activity was. (Euodia and Syntyche are more often remembered for their failure to agree on some matter. It is difficult to agree with others all the time; what would Paul's response have been on an earlier occasion if someone had sent an exhortation: 'I entreat Paul, and I entreat Barnabas, that they be of one mind in the Lord'?)

As for the "true yokefellow" who is asked to help Euodia and Syntyche, we have already mentioned the possibility that this may have been Luke, but other suggestions have been made.

But the list of co-workers is not exhausted. In Rom. 16:9 Paul sends greetings to 'Urbanus, our fellow-worker in Christ'. Urbanus bears a name that links him with the city (Latin *urbis*) of Rome, where he evidently resided, but it was apparently in some other place that Paul had come to know and value him as a co-worker.

Then, among the co-workers who were with Paul when the letters to the Colossian church and Philemon were being written, there are some who call for more attention. There was Jesus surnamed

Justus, who is mentioned along with Aristarchus and Mark as one of the three co-workers of Jewish birth who were in Paul's company at the time and who had been a 'comfort' to him (Col. 4:11). Like a number of other Jews who we meet in the New Testament, he has both a Jewish name, Jesus (Joshua or Jeshua), and a Gentile (Latin) name, Justus. Of him no more is known than what Paul says of him to the Colossians. Then there was Demas, one of Paul's co-workers of Gentile birth (Col. 4:14; Philem. 24). His name is a shortened form of Demetrius, Demosthenes or Democritus. But Demas is best remembered not as one of Paul's co-workers but as the man who later deserted him 'for love of this present age' (2 Tim. 4:10). An eccentric interpretation of Demas's action was voiced by James Butler Stoney, who held that Demas left Paul in order to conduct an evangelistic campaign in Thessalonica, his love for the 'age' or 'world' being evidently a love for the souls of its pagan population. But in that case Paul would not have used a severe verb which means that Demas left him the lurch, or given the strong impression that Demas's love for 'the present age' was of an unworthy kind.

One further colleague is mentioned by Paul towards the end of the letter to Colossae—Tychicus, who was apparently the bearer of that letter (Col. 4:7) and at the same time of the letter to the Ephesians (Eph. 6:21). To the recipients of both these letters he was to bring the latest news of Paul. Paul describes him as 'our dear brother and a trusty servant' (i.e. a trusty servant of Christ) - in fact, as his own 'fellow-slave' in the Lord (using the same word as was used of Epaphras in Col. 1:7). Tychicus was himself a native of the province of Asia, as we learn from Acts 20:4, where he is listed among Paul's fellow-travellers on his last journey to Jerusalem. The evidence of Paul's letters indicates that those fellow-travellers were delegates from their respective Gentile churches, carrying contributions for the church in Jerusalem, so Tychicus was probably commissioned on that occasion to carry the contributions from one or more of the churches of Asia. He is mentioned also on two occasions in the Pastoral Epistles as a messenger of Paul (2 Tim, 4:12; Tit. 3:12).

Paul mentions many other friends whom he does not explicitly call co-workers but from whom he certainly would not have withheld the designation.

The last chapter of the letter to the Romans contains the names of several such people, over and above those whom we have already mentioned. There was Tertius, for example, who co-operated with Paul by taking down the letter at his dictation; he sends his Christian greetings to the recipients in the first person singular (Rom. 16:22). Erastus, the city treasurer of Corinth, and 'our brother Quartus', named almost immediately after Tertius's salutation (Romans 16:23b), were probably also co-workers. Erastus perhaps made good as city treasurer; we find him later occupying a higher position in the civic administration—the position of aedile (curator of public works).

If Tertius, Paul's amanuensis, may properly be called one of his co-workers, so also may Phoebe, who carried the letter to Rome—nearly a four-weeks journey, whichever way she went. Two further pieces of information are given about her: she was a servant (minister or deacon) of the church of Cenchreae (presumably a daughter-church of the metropolitan church of Corinth, situated near the city's Aegean harbour), and she was 'a helper of many—and of myself as well', Paul adds. The word translated 'helper' (*protstasis*, 'patroness') occurs only here in the New Testament; it is related to the verb rendered 'gives aid' in Rom. 12:8. It implies that she was in a position of some affluence or influence, in which she was able to render material aid to others, including Paul himself. If he refused to accept financial support from the Corinthian church, he obviously appreciated the kind of help that Phoebe supplied. She may have been on the point of making a business trip to Rome; Paul commends her to the fellowship and hospitality of her fellow-Christians there (Rom. 16:1 f.).

Again, if Tryphaena and Tryphosa (who, to judge by their names, may have been twin sisters) were 'workers in the Lord', they served the same Master as Paul served, and were therefore co-workers of his in some sense, together with 'the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the

Lord' (Rom. 16:12). The same may be said of that Mary who 'worked hard' among the Christians of Rome (Rom. 16:6). These women are otherwise unknown to us. Their record is on high, no doubt, but it is also preserved, if concisely, on earth.

Finally, there is a man named Onesiphorus, whose help meant much to Paul when he needed it most. He is mentioned twice only - both times in one of the Pastoral Epistles (2 Tim. 1:16-18; 4:19) - but the little that is said of him is eloquent enough. His name is quite like that of Onesimus - it means 'profit-bearing' or 'profit yielding' - and Paul proved him to be true to his name. He rendered Paul great help in Ephesus (evidently his home city) - by contrast with 'Alexander the coppersmith', who did him 'great harm' (2 Tim.4:14 f.) - and in times of trouble, says Paul, 'he often refreshed me; he was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me eagerly and found me.' The imprisonment to which Paul refers here involved restriction perhaps greater than the house-arrest under which he lived for two years (Acts 28:30); it may have been not only difficult to find the apostle but dangerous to be recognized as one of his friends. Was it because of the danger of being publicly associated with him that, as he wrote, 'at my first defense no one took my part; all deserted me' (2 Tim. 4:16)? All the more, then, would he have appreciated the courage and determination shown by Onesiphorus. One writer has drawn a vivid and moving picture of 'one face in a drifting crowd' as 'this stranger from far coasts of the Aegean ... threads the maze of unfamiliar streets, knocking at many doors, following up every clue, warned of the risks he is taking but not to be turned from his quest; till in some obscure prison-house a known voice greets him, and he discovers Paul chained to a Roman soldier.'

Plainly, too, Onesiphorus had the active support of his family as he went out of his way to be of service to Paul. No wonder that Paul bespeaks the mercy of God on Onesiphorus and his household both in their earthly life and at the great day.

The men and women mentioned, and others un-mentioned, must have esteemed it a great honour to be Paul's fellow-workers in the highest of all enterprises. And Paul, for his part, was warmly appreciative of their fellowship and collaboration. They ministered comfort to him and strengthened his hands in the Lord. One can well believe that, without their self-denying aid, his own ministry would have been much less effective than it was.