

## Tertius: A Ghost Writer for God

### Romans 16:17-22

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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The letter to the Romans is Paul's magnum opus. Of the thirteen letters attributed to him in our New Testament, Romans is both the longest and the weightiest—and it has had a profound impact on the course of Christianity. For example, Romans was largely responsible for the Protestant Reformation. Paul insisted in this letter that we are saved, not by our good works, but by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. That led Martin Luther to nail his ninety-five theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, and the rest, as they say, is history. The great Protestant watchwords, "justification by grace alone, through faith alone, according to Scripture alone," came primarily out of Romans, and it was a man named Tertius who acted as Paul's ghost writer when Paul dictated this letter. Well, not actually a ghostwriter, because ghost writers take another's ideas and then do the actual writing. So perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Tertius was Paul's amanuensis, Paul's scribe. Because these are Paul's words, every one of them, yet it took Tertius to get them down on parchment. And since Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit, Tertius was a scribe not only for Paul, but for God.

Nor was Tertius the only one who wrote while Paul dictated. His scribes aren't always named, but at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul took the quill and wrote, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand," the implication being that someone else had been doing the writing until that point. Just before signing off on his letter to the Galatians he wrote, "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand," suggesting that someone else's hand had done the lion's share of the writing. Colossians and 2 Thessalonians both end with, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand." And here, at the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul encourages Tertius to add his name to the document, as if to say, "Tertius has been of inestimable help to me. I am indebted to him. Indeed, I cannot get along without him."

I wonder if the now discredited executives of Enron, World Com, and Tyco ever thought about their indebtedness to their lower echelon employees, the thousands of ordinary people on whose backs they built their empires, and because of whose sweat and labor they were able to skim off their huge salaries and bonuses. Did the Tyco CEO think of secretaries working hard to make ends meet when he spent \$6,000 for a shower curtain? Did he think about men working in rain and heat at the loading docks when he laid out \$15,000 for an umbrella for his dog? Did he consider giving broader benefits to working wives when he spent \$2.1 million for his own wife's birthday party? These, of course, are anomalies. They are the over-the-top absurdities of a megalomaniac, and I'm pleased to say that the CEOs I know do not behave at all like that.

But that's not to say that we supervisors and CEOs can't do better. Do we show tangible appreciation to our secretaries and administrative assistants? Do we think of people in the mail room, and the receptionists out front, and the janitors who clean our offices, and do we ever ask how we might show our gratitude? And if we are not supervisors with employees under us, how do we treat the wait staff in restaurants, women and men who are often run off their feet to bring us our crab and vichyssoise? Do we express appreciation to the checkers at the grocery store, do we say thanks to the men who pick up our garbage, do we leave a Christmas gift for the person who delivers our mail? There are Tertiuses all over the map. They grow our food, they deliver our energy, they put the newspaper on our doorstep every morning. Let us give them their due.

My friend Frances Newman embodies what I'm talking about. Frances taught for many years at Cerritos College in Southern California before retiring a few years ago. This year's graduating class chose her as their commencement speaker, and Frances did something that I believe is unique in the annals of commencement speeches. She might have held up before those graduates the names of illustrious alumni, graduates who had gone on to greatness and success. Instead, she identified graduating seniors who had

come from broken families, abuse, crime, and poverty, students who had overcome great difficulties to earn their degrees. She interviewed seventeen of them and made them the focus of her commencement speech. Here's how her speech began: "Did you know that in this graduating class of over 1500 there is a graduate by the name of Al Khan who speaks four languages and whose dream is to return to his third world country of Bangladesh and become president? Why such a dream, I asked Al. His reply: 'I want to help my people like the people of Cerritos have helped me make them feel as fortunate as I am.'"

Then Frances talked about Arner Pitts. "After the 8th grade Arner went straight to the streets. In spite of his loving parents, brother and sister, he was attracted to the fast life and the fast money. His lifestyle landed him in federal prison for armed robbery, and there he spent five years for his crime. He had lots of time to think about his future and he applied himself by studying, reading, and planning. One day he sent letters out to colleges, asking if they would allow a felon to attend upon release from prison. And you know who wrote back? Yes, it was Cerritos College with an application inviting Arner to apply. Today Arner Pitts is graduating from Cerritos and he goes to the university to become Dr. Pitts. Just last month Arner was featured in a TV movie entitled, 'Redemption.' The film will be shown to schools and organizations as an example of how one ex-felon turned his life completely around."

Frances Newman, Doctor of Education., Frances Newman, distinguished college professor, Frances Newman, herself an unqualified success, focused the klieg lights that day on seventeen persons whose remarkable stories might otherwise never be known. Paul did the same for Tertius. Hour after hour, day after day, Tertius toiled while Paul dictated, until the moment came when Paul said, "Tertius, add your name to the letter. I want my readers to know who did the lion's share of the work." Little did Tertius know that millions over the centuries would come to know his name and thank God for his work.

And what about you? What gets you out of bed day after day? What makes you focus on work you've done a thousand times before? What inspires you to strive for excellence whether you are commended for it or not? The Italian psychiatrist, Roberto Assagioli, wrote a parable about three stonecutters building a cathedral in the fourteenth century. When the first is asked what he is doing, he replies with bitterness that he is cutting stones into blocks, a foot by a foot by three quarters of a foot. He describes a life in which he has done this over and over, and will continue to do it until he dies. The second stone cutter is also cutting stones into blocks, a foot by a foot by three quarters of a foot, but with warmth he says he is earning a living for his beloved family; through this work his children have clothes and food, and he and his wife have a home which they have filled with love. The third man wields a chisel with an even greater vision. In a joyous voice, he tells of the privilege of participating in the building of a great cathedral, so strong that it will stand as a holy lighthouse for a thousand years. Which stonecutter are you? Do you feel trapped in your job or, like the second and third cutters, do you serve a purpose greater than yourself?

There is a tradition among stone cutters and other tradesmen. Just before completing a building, they inscribe their names on the inside of the walls where no one will ever see them, as if to say, "I'm proud of my work, and I'm proud to put my name on it, whether anyone knows me or not." It happened during the building of Scheide Hall at Princeton Seminary a few years ago. During a board meeting, we trustees walked through the unfinished building, and sure enough, inscribed on the interior of the dry wall were the signatures of carpenters, electricians, and painters. A few weeks later those names were covered up, never to be seen again except by the eye of God.

However humble your origins, however repetitive your work, however run-of-the-mill your labor, let diligence and integrity be the signature on what you do. Your CEO may never reward it, the public may never applaud it, even your friends may not know of it, but God will see it and God will one day say, "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your master."