

Phoebe the Co-Worker

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Hello and thank you for joining me to spend a little time looking at one of the standout women in Paul's letters. She is one of a group of men and women who Paul worked, travelled and ministered with. In fact he often called them co-workers – women who were active in ministry in many of the churches Paul founded, like the church at Philippi and churches he visited or wrote to like Ephesus, Corinth and Rome. Paul's writing show that the Christian life is about sharing with each other in a community. It is about all working together, encouraging and participating in church life. For example he says in 1 Corinthians 14:26:

What then, brothers and sisters? Whenever you come together, each one has a hymn, a teaching, a revelation, another tongue or and interpretation. Everything is to be done for building up.

The very act of remembrance that unified the new believers around the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is called a 'participation in the blood and body of Christ.' We brothers and sisters, are active participants in this meal and it is not something that leaders performed, and others watched!

So we meet Phoebe, one of 18 women mentioned in Paul's letter and for whom two verses in Romans chapter 16 have been reserved. But don't be fooled into thinking that she was just a minor co-worker who perhaps was overshadowed by her husband's status and ability! No! In fact, she heads the list of people Paul is sending his personal greetings to the church at Rome – remember Paul had not yet been to Rome so he had met them elsewhere. These are people he had worked with and he held them in high esteem. We read in verses 1 & 2:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church of Cencrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give him any help she may need from you, for she has been a benefactor of many people including me.

This is an amazing chapter, and I had previously consigned it to the ‘boring list of names’ bin! It has opened my eyes to women in the NT church. And it starts with this incredible commendation to this apparently single woman, Phoebe. We are given this outline picture of an otherwise wholly unknown person, a tiny crack in the shadowy, unreal darkness of these human lives. In fact, every name in Romans 16 belongs to a human life filled with hopes and fears and now left immortalised on the page.

Before we focus on Phoebe, let’s reflect a little on some interesting facts and statistics about Romans 16. I must here acknowledge the wonderful Marg Mowczko for this data and further information can be found on her website¹. So, 29 names are mentioned in this chapter – a list including Jewish, Greek and Roman names, men, woman, slaves and freemen! This is a remarkable illustration of the power of the new bond of the common faith in the resurrected Lord Jesus. Perhaps this brings to mind Paul’s triumphant exclamation in Galatians chapter 3 that there is *neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for we are all one in Christ Jesus*. Let’s not underestimate the tremendous divisive forces of the iron fist of Rome, the power of the legalistic Jewish religion and the low status of women and slaves at the time. This is truly remarkable.

When we dig further into this chapter, we find that ten of the 29 names are women and of these, seven are described further in terms of their ministry – Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Junia, Tryphena and Tryphosa and Persis, while only three men are (Aquila, Andronicus and Urbanus) and of these, two are alongside a female partner (Aquila and Andronicus). These numbers are worth remembering and reflecting on when we perhaps think that Paul prohibited women for an active role in Church ministry! It certainly makes you stop and think!

Let’s return to Phoebe and the verb Paul uses to introduce her to the Roman church – COMMEND! *I COMMEND to you our sister Phoebe*. Commend is significant in the Roman worlds and was used as a formal introduction meaning to ‘treat as me.’ Phoebe was not a member of the Roman church, but lived in Cenchræa, a port town near the city of Corinth. Corinth was where Paul was staying when he wrote the letter to the Romans. It seems highly likely that Phoebe acted as a postman for Paul’s letter – not unsurprisingly this was a highly important and responsible job and Paul regularly despatched his co-workers for this very purpose:

¹ <https://margmowczko.com>

to deliver his letters, and to be his representative and the letters' first interpreter for the communities that received them. So Phoebe not only travelled from Corinth in Greece to the city of Rome, but also represented Paul and his message to the Roman Christians. The letter of Romans, one of the most deeply profound and spiritual written by Paul may well have been read by a woman and perhaps first interpreted by a woman! Yet another thing to think about!! So Paul's use of the word commend also translated recommend, present or introduce, was to ensure that her entry into the community was smooth and trouble free.

Paul used three important (but much argued over) titles to describe Phoebe – a sister, a deacon and a benefactor. These are words loaded with meaning and responsibility and translated variously in other versions of the text. But, of the word sister, there is no doubt – she is connected to the new family in Christ in Corinth and therefore Rome and so she needs to be welcomed by the Roman church on that basis – as a saint in the making! This welcome has similarities with Paul's recommendation of Timothy to the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 16:10-11:

he is doing the Lord's work... so let no one despise him.'

Paul mentored this young man and he became a leader in the church and Paul's faithful friend. I have no doubt that Paul also loved Phoebe in the same way and mentored her also. There is nothing in the text to suggest she was less important and less official!

The second word is deacon, a title over which there is some contention. The Greek word is *diakonos* and newer editions of the NIV, NLT and NRSV translate it as 'deacon' – suggesting a growing acknowledgement that Phoebe was an 'official' (and I use the term loosely) minister in the church. However, translators of the KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV have rendered the word as 'servant' in:1. Perhaps this does not do her justice?

Let's look at how the word *diakonos* is translated elsewhere? In the NASB *diakonos* is translated deacon three times, minister seven times, servant ten times, and servants nine times. Paul used the same word to describe his own ministry. He also gave this ministry title to others who carried letters for him. For example, Tychicus was a letter carrier and is referred to as a 'beloved brother' and trustworthy *diakonos*. In Ephesians 6:21 and in Colossians 4:7 his role is explained by Paul as one that 'brings information' and 'to encourage your hearts.' Perhaps this gives us an insight into both the role and qualities of the deacons who carried Paul's letters. It strongly suggests to me that Phoebe would not have just dropped the letter off in a post box and

left! Rather she would likely have read them aloud to the recipients and been available to explain further the context of the letter.

Paul talks about the qualifications of the role of a deacon in 1 Timothy, and this is alongside the position of overseer, elder or bishop of the church. Now is the time for a quick aside as we consider these two and only two positions or roles in the early church that carried any weight or authority. In line with the teaching of the Lord Jesus, who shunned and often condemned those in authority in the religious and secular world – blessed are the meek, poor etc. as just one example – Paul avoided in most of his writing establishing any formal leadership authority in the church, rather focusing on a community of believers who all pulled their weight and used their gifts for the communal good. However, the pastoral letters to Timothy (considered to be amongst the last written before his death) do reflect a more organised defined church hierarchy- suggesting that towards the end of Paul’s life, churches had appointed ministers – bishops and deacons – to run church affairs. We find in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 the list of moral qualifications of an *episkopos* (overseer, supervisor or bishop) – assumed in the KJV to be a man’s role only but not in more recent translations! Here it is a little more open to interpretation! But what is common in all translations is that the overseer/bishop must manage their household well. The critical verse in this passage is verse 5;

for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God’s church? (NRSV)

Listen again – let me repeat – ‘if someone does not know how to manage his household, how can he take care of God’s church?’

Yep, we are very familiar of late with the term ‘household’ in this COVID driven world – those that are in your bubble, live within your four walls. But this is not just a 21st Century term – in the first century Roman world the term ‘household’ was equally (if not more) important! The *domus* or household was the basic unit of Roman society and the oldest Roman male, known as the *paterfamilias*, was the head. The household determined both his social standing and personal wealth – his reputation or *dignitas* was built on his household.

The family unit and dynamic was very different from today and is perhaps for another discussion. However the key point is that the householder had absolute and unconditional

authority, and unlike COVID-safe households, several generations could easily live under one roof, and along with servants, slaves, the organisation could be a large unit.

So returning to 1 Timothy – it seems that the first *episkopos* (overseers) were householders and that for the first (commonly thought) 200 years of the church, most meetings were held in homes. This is pretty clear from the many NT references to the ‘church in her/his house.’ Acts 2:46 talks of meeting in the temple and to breaking bread in their homes. Interestingly, the four places where specific congregations are designated as assemblies at *x*’s household, women were involved! Prisca, with Aquila, led a church in their house in Ephesus and later Rome. Apphia was a member of a house church with Philemon and Nympha hosted a church in her home in Laodicea. In house churches, Marg Mowczko says that the public sphere (the traditional domain of men) and the more private domestic sphere (the traditional domain of women) overlapped and women – especially wealthy women who hosted churches in their homes – had equal opportunities to minister. That last part is worth repeating – had EQUAL opportunities to minister! In the NT times, the whole household could become Christians, or just some members. In Philippians 4:2, Paul tells us that there were even a number of Christians in Caesar’s household!

In large cities such as Rome, Corinth and Ephesus there were several house churches with a network that connected them together. It seems that Paul used the expression *kat’ oikon* to distinguish the individual house churches from the ‘whole church’ (*ole`e ekklesia*) which could assemble on occasion. How these house churches were led or organised, little is known – but there does seem to be a culture (and in fact spiritual directive) of full participation with no formal leadership initially. So it seems likely that most overseers appointed by the church would have been men, but not all household churches were led by a male householder.

When it comes to deacon – if you remember that is what this digression is about, Phoebe the deacon – 1 Timothy 3:8-13 outlines the moral qualifications for this role. By the time Paul wrote this letter, the *diakonoi* were probably official deacons with a recognised position in the church. In verse 11 the women mentioned are either female deacons or the wives of deacons – depending on which translation you use (and which side of the gender divide you are on)! Let’s just consider though that up until the 4th century there was no separate word for female deacons, so it is likely that female deacons were simply called ‘women’ here to distinguish them from male deacons. The fact that Paul mentions women’s moral requirements for deacons and not for

overseers only makes real sense if there were female deacons. Early Christian writers and old Latin translations indicate that Phoebe was an officially recognised minister and leading woman in her community. But even more exciting is epigraphical evidence that indicates that Phoebe was famous and recognised as a deacon by the early church. A funeral stele from the Mount of Olives and dated in the latter half of the 4th Century reads:

Here lies the slave and bride of Christ, Sophia the deacon, the second Phoebe, who fell asleep to peace.

Clearly the early church recognised her prominence and status in the 1st Century!

You may think that the push for women leaders as a contemporary issue, but Christian historical evidence is clear – there are many such inscriptions demonstrating that women’s ordained leadership was not secretive, something to be ashamed of, but was celebrated with reverence and honour.

Let’s turn to the last of Paul’s titles he gives Phoebe – that of benefactor. The Greek word is *prostatis*, translated in the ESV as patron and NIV as benefactor. This word only occurs this once in the NT. Scholars generally agree that this word likely refers to financial assistance given to the church and missionaries like Paul. Paul tells the Roman Christians to ‘help her’ as she has been a benefactor to many – this is likely a play on two similar sounding Greek words *paristemi* and *prostatis* – perhaps leading some translators to prefer the more general idea of ‘helper.’ The verb form of *prostatis* is *proistemi* and occurs eight times in the NT in three different contexts; church leadership, household management and practising good deeds. In this context, looking at church leadership is most appropriate – the verb is used in Romans 12 when Paul talks about the differing gifts God has given us – many members, one body etc. – if it is leadership do it diligently! Paul uses this verb in various contexts, and it may have the combined sense of providing for and leading. While Phoebe was some kind of leader in the church at Cenchrea, possibly the host or leader of a congregation that met in her home, it is unlikely she was a leader of Paul – so the translation of *prostatis* as patron or benefactor rather than a leader fits well with this idea. Undoubtedly a *prostatis* (f) or *prostates* (m) was without exception an influential person in Roman society and many scholars have noted the bias against recognising Phoebe as an influential woman in using more mundane words such as ‘helper.’ Modern readers may perceive

her just as a hard-working disciple who helped Paul, but the original readers would have thought of her as a significant figure of wealth and influence in the church.

So what might you think? Maybe you think the difference to be so subtle that it does not really matter. But when we consider that early English translations were compiled at a time when female leadership had been severely restricted in the church and that woman's status in society was far less than equal with men it is not surprising that early translators rendered these ministerial titles deacon and benefactor as servant and helper when applied to Phoebe.

Phoebe was a wealthy woman who used her wealth, her mobility and her personal resources to care for the saints and to assist in the spread of the Gospel of this there is no doubt! Her example should inspire all of us to consider how we can use our advantages and opportunities to do the same. Linda Belleville in her book 'Woman Leaders and the Church' states:

With few exceptions, believers assumed a ministry role in the church not because they were approved, nor because they had received professional training, but because they possessed the appropriate gifts to handle the task!

So what changed? Well a lot! But maybe that's a topic for another day! Church ministry which was the province of the chief servant and humble disciple as the Lord Jesus would perhaps have envisioned it, transitioned into one of power and status with huge wealth and dominance over everyday life. Did this affect the position of women in ministry? Well of course it did! But perhaps that is also a topic for another time!

What is clear from Romans 16 and especially Phoebe, is that Paul honoured and elevated woman who were qualified for ministry – just as his Lord had done in associating with and affirming woman's worth and identity in their own right. Do we perhaps downplay women like Phoebe, overlooking their important role in caring, financially supporting, teaching and leading the early church using their God given gifts to serve their Lord and Master?