

## Session 11 - Phoebe and the Role of Women as Deaconesses in the Church

(Romans 16:1, 2, 7; I Timothy 3:11 - 13)

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me.”

Romans 16:1, 2

### I. A Brief Historical Review.

- A. Three groups of women during the post-New Testament period were thought to be recognized in special categories – the virgins, widows and deaconesses (we don’t know this for certain as references to these groups of women in the post-New Testament writings are rare.) Virgins probably were not organized but consisted of younger women who dedicated themselves to chastity, asceticism and service. Women were considered of great value to the church if they were or had been married and were mothers. (I Timothy 3: 11 – 13) Widows were almost certainly organized (enrolled) and took on specific services (I Timothy 5:9, 10). Deaconesses most likely worked hand in hand with the male ministers yet focused on working with females (given the social distance between men and women in society at that time). They frequently must have been the wives of deacons (and perhaps other church leaders) but it is not clear that this was a necessity. Deaconesses specifically assisted in the teaching and baptism of women (for women, according to some sources, were often baptized in the nude). They generally did not teach the men. From reading the early church fathers, however, it is not always easy to separate widows and deaconesses yet the recognition of these women for a special ministry is almost certain.
- B. Alexander Campbell believed that deaconesses were appointed in the New Testament church, yet he did not push their appointment during the early Restoration movement. “From Ro. 16:1 as well as from I Tm. 3:11 it appears that females were constituted deaconesses in the primitive church. Duties to females , as well as to males, demand this.” (“Order” *The Millennial Harbinger*, 1835)
- C. Robert Milligan, a 19<sup>th</sup> century leader of the restoration movement, assumed the work of deaconesses though this work did not extend to a teaching ministry. “The Diaconate of the primitive Church was not confined to male members. Deaconesses were also appointed to attend to the wants of the sick and the needy, especially of their own sex.” (“Of Deacons”, *The Millennial Harbinger*, 1855)
- D. Other supporters of deaconesses included E.G. Sewell (1893), Hayden (1894) who viewed deaconesses as wives of deacons, G.C. Brewer who lent tacit support, J. D. Thomas, and C. R. Nichol. Restoration leaders who did not

support the office of deaconess included David Lipscomb, Gus Nichols, and Burton Coffman.

- E. Despite the widely varying opinions regarding the appointment of deaconesses in the New Testament church, few churches in the Restoration movement have actually appointed deaconesses.

## II. Romans 16:1, 2, 7.

### A. Phoebe.

1. These two short verses (16:1, 2) have been the center of the debate over whether women were appointed officially as deaconesses during New Testament times.
2. Phoebe is referred to as both *diakonos* and as a patroness or protectress.
3. Many argue, including lexiconographers, that the term *diakonos* is used in the New Testament both in a general (e.g. Matthew 22:13) and the specific sense as a church official (I Timothy 3:8). The term used is the same and only the interpretation of the context assists in making this distinction.
4. In the secular world, the *diakonos* was used to describe various types of service, such as messengers, bakers and even statesmen.
5. On the one hand some would argue that Paul often uses *diakonos* in the general sense of servant or minister. (I Corinthians 3:5 and II Corinthians 3:6) He uses the term in a general sense in Romans 16:1.
  - a. These women could not be deacons in the special sense because one qualification of a deacon is that he be the husband of one wife and a woman clearly cannot be the husband of one wife.
  - b. These women clearly could have carried out many of the functions of deacons (that is, servants) but this does not necessitate that they be formally recognized as deacons (hold an official office). Their service would probably have been service to other women (see II, A, 4, d below).
  - c. Not all parts of the body can be the head (that is, hold a position of spiritual leadership), yet they are equally valuable parts of the body. (I Corinthians 12:22)
  - d. We should be more concerned with the work of a servant than the official role of a servant.
  - e. Romans 16:1 is not a passage to which we should look for doctrinal guidance. (It is a theologically insignificant postscript.) Rather Paul is giving honor to whom honor is due. The women in Romans 16 were fellow workers, no more and no less.
6. On the other hand, some would argue that Paul appears to be using the term *diakonos* in the special sense in Romans 16:1.
  - a. She is specifically noted to be a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchrea (unlike Paul's use of the term *diakonos* in referring to Tychikos [a dear brother and faithful servant] in Ephesians 6:21). In addition, if she had

simply been singled out for her service, she probably would have been considered one of the “sisters”, such as Mary in 16:6.

- b. Phoebe was a leader of the church at Cenchrea because of her status and labor for the entire church, not just her labor for women. Phoebe’s actions were not gender specific.
  - c. It is not at all clear whether Phoebe (or male deacons for that matter) were officially appointed or simply recognized by this special designation if they fulfilled a special service (unlike the specific appointment of elders). The term *diakonos* is not used in Acts 6. (See below.)
  - d. The use of *diakonos* in Romans 16:1 cannot be distinguished from its use in Philippians 1:1.
  - e. The work of the deaconess was not limited to women. (Actually, if one accepts that women were appointed in the New Testament church as deaconesses, there is no direct evidence in scripture regarding whether their work was limited to women or not.)
7. Phoebe is also described as a *prostatis* (protectress or patroness). Romans 16:1 is the only time this word is used in the New Testament in the feminine form. The use of the word is of only indirect significance to the question of whether women served as official deaconesses in the New Testament yet is important to consider.
- a. The word in its various forms could mean both one who rules or leads (I Thessalonians 5:12) as well as one who cares for or gives aid to (Romans 12:8). The evidence for the word in Romans 16:1 probably leans toward personal care in this passage rather than a governing officer.
  - b. She probably was a woman of wealth and some influence.
  - c. She may have been a widow (her husband is not mentioned) and therefore was a property owner and patron of the church in Cenchrea.
  - d. She had served Paul (possibly supporting him financially).
  - e. Her role as a patron (rather than manager) parallels her work as a servant and possible role as a deaconess.

B. Junia (Junias), an interlude.

1. Almost all commentators agree that “Junias” in Romans 16:7 was a female and the proper translation is Junia. She very well may have been a relative of Andronicus (wife or sister). Early Christian writers unanimously took the name to be feminine (e.g. Origen).
2. The passage could read that Junia was an apostle or was recognized as outstanding by the apostles.
3. The term “apostle” or *apostolos* could mean one who had directly been sent by Christ (such as the twelve and Paul) or others specifically sent out as evangelists (Barnabas in Acts 14:14). It is clearly in the latter sense that Junia is being recognized.
4. The best rendering is probably that Junia was a fellow evangelist (a messenger of the word) with Paul. She suffered with Paul in the role of

evangelist. Just as Priscilla and Aquila, Andronicus and Junia worked as a team. (During New Testament times it probably would have been extremely difficult for a woman to move about alone as an evangelist though she may well have served in this role near her home.

### III. I Timothy 3:11 – 13.

- A. Did Paul provide special instructions for women as deacons? If so, they are found in I Timothy 3:11 – 13.
- B. The Greek term (derived from *gyne* and translated wife or woman) probably refers to either wives of deacons or deaconesses themselves. (A less likely interpretation is that the passage refers to women in general.)
- C. On the view that Paul is referring to the wives of deacons:
  - 1. The argument is made that Paul would not sandwich qualifications for deaconesses (3:11) between the qualifications for deacons (3:8 – 10 and 3:12, 13).
  - 2. In addition, why didn't Paul simply use the term *diakonos* to refer to the women?
- D. On the view that Paul is referring to deaconesses:
  - 1. The argument is made that Paul would not have given qualifications for the wives of deacons but not for the wives of bishops (elders).
  - 2. The term *diakonos*, used in 3:8, covers the entire passage (3:8 – 3:13).
  - 3. Verses 3:12, 13 may have been an "afterthought" thus explaining the structure of the passage.
- E. That the office of deacon (as opposed to simply being recognized as a servant) was recognized is clear from this passage (3:10). Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether there was a formal appointment (ordination) of deacons or whether deacons (and deaconesses) served well and after a time gain the recognition by the church (3:13). If the latter is true, then the distinction between male and female deacons is much less clear (neither serve in a position of authority) and the possibility of female deacons (deaconesses) becomes more likely.

### IV. Conclusions

- A. One difficulty in interpreting Phoebe (and therefore women) as *diakonos* resides in the appointment and role of deacons in the New Testament (a position which is not as clear as the role of bishop/elder).
- B. The work of a *diakonos*, that is a servant, is unambiguous in the New Testament -- work that was highly valued. The emphasis upon servanthood is equally applicable to men and women.
- C. The distinction between widows who had devoted themselves to the work of the church and deaconesses (if one accepts that women filled this role in the New Testament) is not entirely clear. Their work would have been very similar.
- D. Though women clearly worked hand in hand with men in New Testament times (Romans 16:3) and women taught men in private settings (Priscilla and

Apollos), there is no indication that, if one accepts a more official role for some women as deaconesses, deaconesses worked equally in service of men and women. Rather the role of a deaconess was probably more as that of a servant to women who were not accessible to men in Greco-Roman society.

- E. Women have never been widely recognized as deacons in the Restoration movement. Nevertheless, many Restoration leaders believed that key women servants in congregations could (and should) be appointed as deaconesses.
- F. There is nothing inherent in scripture or in the history of the church which suggests that, if women are appointed as deaconesses, they hold authority over men.
- G. There is nothing inherent in scripture which suggests that women evangelists and servants did not work hand in hand with men during New Testament times despite societal barriers.

#### References

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