

The current debate about women serving in the diaconate swirls around Romans 16:1 and Phoebe, whom Paul introduces as a “servant” of the church in Cenchreae. Was she a servant or a deacon, an officer of the church?

“Fighting over Phoebe”

Romans 16:1-2

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Text Comment

v.2 The term translated “patron” is patient of a number of meanings but the ESV is typical in rendering it “patron,” “helper,” or “benefactress.” The suggestion seems to be that Phoebe was a woman of means which would, of course, explain not only how so many Christians were in her debt, as was Paul himself, but how it was possible for her to travel as an independent woman on a sea voyage from Cenchreae to Rome. Indeed it has often been supposed that she traveled to Rome accompanied by her servants. If other Christians had accompanied her to Rome they would likely have been mentioned by Paul here in Romans 16.

As you know Paul ended some of his other letters with greetings and personal notes. There was a surprising measure of mobility in the first century and people whom Paul had met elsewhere were now either visiting or living in Rome. He sends greetings to them. We’ll take a closer look at this list of names next time. But we begin with the first name, in this case not someone who was already *in* Rome but, very likely, the one who carried Paul’s letter *to* Rome. In other words, the Roman Christians had not yet met Phoebe, but they soon would, so Paul provides an introduction.

Just two verses this morning and, at first glance they seem to be harmless enough. Phoebe was a Christian woman from the church in Cenchreae, the harbor town of Corinth as Piraeus is the harbor town of Athens. Remember, Paul wrote Romans from Corinth at the end of his third missionary journey. Apparently Phoebe had plans to travel to Rome for some reason and Paul took the opportunity to send his letter with her. It was an ordinary way to deliver mail in those days. There was no postal service *per se* and letters were often sent with the next friend who happened to be going that way. So Paul not only asked Phoebe to carry to Rome and deliver to the church what would turn out to be one of the most famous and perhaps the most influential letter in the history of the world, but was careful, at the appropriate place in the letter, to introduce this Christian woman and commend her to the Roman believers. The fact that Paul introduces Phoebe to the church in Rome, meaning certainly that she was coming and that they did not know her, has long convinced scholars that it was reasonable to assume that she was herself bringing the letter. She is the only one so introduced in chapter 16; the only person mentioned who is not already in Rome as part of the congregation in the capital. Everyone else is greeted or mentioned as sending greetings; only Phoebe is commended to the Roman Christians. Only she is introduced; everyone else mentioned in the chapter the Roman believers already know. That suggests that Phoebe and the letter are to arrive at the same time.

So far the first two verses of chapter 16 are unremarkable and utterly uncontroversial. Women were a large part of the burgeoning Christian church in the first century and there is no prejudice detectable in the New Testament regarding their place in the church or the value of their gifts and their graces. Pagan observers of Christianity would later comment on the quality of Christian women. Their faith and their obedience mattered in the church and they were expected both to grow in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and to serve him in the church in the world as fully as any man. Indeed, in almost all matters touching the Christian life men and women are addressed without distinction in the New Testament. Both men and women were referred to as brothers or the brethren, a signal compliment to women in those days. It identified them with regard to their importance and their status as equal to men in the church of God. This is utterly unlike the sentiments regarding women you find everywhere else in the Greco-Roman world and for that matter among the Jews. As Lydia in Philippi, as Priscilla – who is herself mentioned in v. 3 – Phoebe was another able, intelligent, godly woman whom Paul was happy to employ as his emissary to the congregation in Rome.

We don't know any details of Phoebe's life. It's a good guess that she was a widow because it is certainly less likely that a married woman would travel so far in those days unaccompanied by her husband. She either had no children or they were grown – the latter perhaps more likely – as, again, a mother with small children would be less likely to travel alone by sea. I don't suppose Phoebe herself had any idea that her name would go down in Christian history as it has. She was going to Rome anyway and was happy to carry the great apostle's mail. She knew Paul, he knew her, and no doubt she counted it a privilege to be entrusted with the delivery of his letter to what was probably by then the most important church of the entire Christian church of that day. But I can't help but wonder if she knew that letters from the great apostle to the Gentiles were likely to be more than simply correspondence; that they would be, if they were not already, understood to have a divine imprimatur attached, in other words, that she would be carrying an original piece of the Word of God! I don't know.

I also wonder whether she knew what Paul had written about her near the end of the letter when he handed her the sealed scroll; or was it a nice surprise that Paul had planned for his Christian friend and helper to hear such compliments paid to her when the letter was first read out to the church with Phoebe sitting there to hear them?

So, what more is there to say about Phoebe and Paul's gracious introduction of this good woman? Well the Devil is in the details, or, more accurately, in one detail. Paul says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a *servant* of the church at Cenchreae. It is that word *servant*, the Greek *diakonos* that has lots of Presbyterians arguing nowadays. The word usually means simply "servant." For example, in 15:25, just up the page, Paul says that he was going to Jerusalem "bringing aid" to the saints. "Bringing aid" is a verbal form of the noun *diakonos* Paul uses to describe Phoebe in 16:1. Paul was going to Rome *to serve* the saints there. Still further up the page, at 15:8, *diakonos* is used again in v. 8 of Christ himself who became a *servant* to the circumcised, that is to the Jews. The word occurs many times in the New Testament – more than thirty – and is used of household servants and of servants in the church. Paul describes himself as a servant of the church in one place (Col. 1:24-25). With respect to spiritual service the word is applied to Christ, to Paul, to the apostles as a group, to Timothy, to Tychicus, and to Ephaphras, as well as to Phoebe. This is no great surprise; even today we use the word and the idea in many

ways ourselves. We talk about *servers* who bring our food in restaurants. Politicians will talk about themselves as being *servants* of the people and so on.

But, four times in the New Testament the word *diakonos* is also used of the *deacon* as a church officer. For example, when Paul opens his letter to the Philippians he writes:

“To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the elders and deacons...”

“Deacon” there is the same *diakonos* Paul employs in Romans 16:1 and no one doubts that in Philippians 1 the word refers to an officer of the church.

And in 1 Tim. 3, Paul lays out the qualifications to be met by those who are chosen to be the church’s elders and deacons. An elder must be such and such a man, with these characteristics; a deacon must be a mature Christian man with this sort of character. You remember how that chapter goes.

So, the question then is: how is the term “servant,” *diakonos*, used here in Romans 16:1? Is Phoebe a church officer, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae, or is Paul simply saying that she is a faithful servant of the Lord from that church or, perhaps, that she is serving the church in particular in this embassy on Paul’s behalf, bringing his letter to the Romans? Is the term being used in a general sense or in its technical sense? Is Phoebe being commended to the Roman believers as a worthy Christian woman or as an officer of the Cenchreaen church?

This question had not been of any particular interest in our church for many years, but suddenly it has become controversial. In Bible-believing Presbyterian circles as in Scripturally faithful Christian circles in the western church altogether, virtually without exception, church officers, including deacons, have been men and men only as in most of Christendom throughout virtually all its history. The *Book of Church Order* of our Presbyterian Church in America specifically reserves the office of deacon to men. Obviously the founders of our church did not think Phoebe was being identified by the Apostle Paul in Romans 16:1 as a church officer, as a deacon in the official sense, else they would not have restricted the office of deacon to men only. That was the tradition inherited from the Reformation and, indeed, as we will see, from apostolic Christianity and through the centuries hardly anyone ever questioned that tradition of male-only deacons.

But our age is quite different from all ages that have come before it particularly in the manner in which it views the nature of sexual differentiation and of the relationship between male and female and the influence of feminist thinking and practice in the culture has raised the issue of Phoebe’s status in new ways. Few were agitating to open the office of deacon to women when I graduated from seminary in 1975. There was actually an attempt to do so in the old *Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod* – the denomination of conservative ex-Northern Presbyterians to which our congregation belonged until the entire denomination was absorbed by the PCA in 1982 – but it came to nothing. But the feminist ideas of the culture have awakened an interest in the question among a number of our men, understandably mostly younger men.

Now, to be fair, they will hardly admit that their interest in changing the church’s law and practice to allow women deacons is simply a form of capitulation to our feminist culture. They

argue very passionately that the Bible, in fact, teaches us to do so. Perhaps they will admit that the changes in the culture alerted them to biblical data that they had ignored or missed before. It would be the brave man who was not willing to admit that modern feminism has created the climate in which it became inevitable that the restriction of the diaconate to men would be reconsidered.

Still it is a biblical argument that our men make and make passionately and a great deal of it concerns Phoebe. And a number of our churches across the denomination have taken to creative ways to introduce women into their diaconates so as to circumvent the male-only restriction of our *Book of Church Order*. For example some churches elect men and women to their diaconates but ordain neither to the office, on the assumption that if there is no ordination, technically at least there is no formal church office and the *BCO*'s restriction of church office to men would not apply. So they have a diaconate composed of both men and women, but no one is ordained to the office of deacon. You can easily imagine how that slight of hand plays in other parts of the church. Many, and I would say understandably, feel that the church's law is being flouted by people who have been unable to persuade their brothers with their argument from the Bible.

At the General Assembly of our church, meeting in Nashville this past week, one of the more contentious issue raised and discussed was this one. Overtures, or requests for action on the issue came from a number of presbyteries, some seeking in one form or another to relax the restriction of the office to men, others to tighten it and make it even more explicit. In general the result was the latter. The Presbyterian Church in America does not seem poised to make a change on this point.

A case is wending its way through the courts of the church, a case that originated in the Northern California Presbytery and concerns the fact that, for all intents and purposes, some of the churches in that presbytery have women deacons even though the law of the church seems rather explicitly to forbid the practice. In these churches women are elected to be deacons and are called deacons; they are simply not formally ordained to the office because that act would be a direct and public violation of church law. Neither are the men ordained to the office of deacon in some of these churches so that there will be no distinction between the men and the women serving as deacons. Some ministers and elders of that Northern California Presbytery complained of the toleration of this practice in their presbytery and eventually the complaint reached the General Assembly's Standing Judicial Committee, the supreme court of our church. We'll learn next October what the SJC's ruling will be in this particular case.

So, you will understand why the name of Phoebe, this dear woman from the church in Cenchrae, is suddenly on everyone's lips. Up to this point the only New Testament woman we argued about was the Virgin Mary. Move aside, Mary; make room for Phoebe! Was she a deacon or was she simply such a servant as any faithful Christian ought to be? Advocates of women deacons, understandably, see Phoebe as their standard bearer: a woman deacon commended by the Apostle Paul.

Now, certain things are admitted on all sides. *First*, there were women officers in the post-apostolic church. I use the term officer advisedly. There is no biblical term that corresponds to our "office" or "officer." But women were ordained to a certain status that carried with it certain

specific responsibilities and that is all we mean when we use the term officer in reference to the Christian church. *Second*, these women were referred to as *deaconesses*, in Greek at least. The Latin term for this woman officer was the feminine form of the word “servant.” *Deaconess* is obviously a feminine form of the term deacon. The word “deaconess” does not appear in the New Testament but it does appear in the materials of early Christianity, those first four centuries after Pentecost that we refer the patristic period. For all we know “deaconess” is a term invented by Christians. *Third*, in 1 Timothy 5 Paul refers to an order of older widows who served in the church in works of charity and compassion. There seemed to be an age requirement for this order as Paul instructs Timothy not to “enroll” women in that order until they were sixty years of age. Many commentators, Calvin for example, assume that Paul in Romans 16:1 meant to identify Phoebe as a member of that order of widows referred to 1 Tim. 5. Charles Hodge, the great American Presbyterian of the 19th century, calls Phoebe a “deaconess” which he defined as an *elderly female* who ministers to other women. There was no order quite like Roman Catholic nuns in apostolic Christianity, but there was an order of single women – widows – who devoted themselves to works of compassion, mercy, hospitality and discipleship. We don’t actually know that Phoebe was a member of such an order of widows, but she might have been. Again, Paul’s reference to her as a *diakonos* might mean only that she was a faithful servant of the Lord and the gospel, as all Christians are to be.

Fourth, though some would dispute this, it seems virtually certain and is generally admitted that early Christian deaconesses were such women as are described in 1 Timothy 5 and were not, therefore, simply deacons who happened to be female. They occupied a separate office, not the same office as the men. For example, Olympias, John Chrysostom’s friend and associate in Constantinople in the late 4th and early 5th centuries was a deaconess who headed an order of deaconesses in a monastery that sat right next to the cathedral where John was bishop. Olympias’ ordination to the office of deaconess was actually somewhat controversial and commented on at the time precisely because she entered the office far younger than the sixty years Paul had mentioned and the emperor had recently reaffirmed as the proper age for entry upon this office. Olympias was herself a widow. That surely suggests that everyone understood the order of deaconess to have its biblical origin in 1 Tim 5 and the order of widows, not in Acts 6 or Philippians 1 or 1 Timothy 3 where the office of deacon is discussed. No one disputes that there were deaconesses in the early church. But it seems very clear that they were not simply deacons who happened to be women. That Olympias was a deaconess and ruled over an order of deaconesses is further evidence that she did not hold the same office as male deacons. There was a strict sexual differentiation between deacons and deaconesses in early Christianity. So far as we can tell from the evidence available the church’s deacons were always men and only men. The women occupied a separate order, the order of older women Paul describes in I Timothy 5.

A key question in the current debate is the significance of Acts 6:1-6. One of the reasons, I would say the obvious and primary reason, why deacons have always been male in the Christian church, at least until the rise of liberal Protestantism in the 19th century, is that in Acts 6, in addressing the need for a better organized ministry of mercy in the Jerusalem church, the apostles provided very specific instructions: “pick out from among you seven *men* of good repute.” The word for “man” there is *aner*, the more specific Greek term for the male human being. The word for man is gender specific. And, in fact, the seven people whose names are

mentioned in Acts 6:5 as having been chosen by the church and ordained by the apostles were all males. Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, and so on.

For centuries, it has seemed *the* insurmountable problem for advocates of women deacons that the apostles, in establishing the office of deacon explicitly instructed the church to select *men* for that office. Nowadays advocates of women deacons, fully aware of this problem, are most likely to argue that Acts 6 does not describe the origin of the office of deacon at all, so the apostles' instruction to choose men in that place is irrelevant to our contemporary question and interest. They argue that the seven men ordained in Acts 6 to superintend the church's ministry of mercy were temporary officers or, perhaps, proto-deacons. They point out that the term "deacon" does not appear in Acts 6. That is true, though the noun *diakonia*, "service," and the verb *diakonein*, "to serve," both appear in the passage. What is more, the specific responsibility of the office being created is explicitly described there as the superintendence of the charity of the church, which everyone understands to be the function of the diaconate in the apostolic church and ever since. It is not so easy to dispense with Acts 6. And therein lies the rub.

In those early chapters of Acts, Luke is presenting a representative account of the earliest Christian church. His narrative is not intended merely to tell the story, though it does that, but as well to describe the life and work of the church as it developed in those earliest days *as a pattern for the generations to follow*. It is very hard for me to believe that Acts 6 does not provide us with an account of the origin of the office of deacon, all the more because if it does not we are then given no explanation *in the New Testament itself* what a deacon is or what a deacon does. The term and the office would then appear in Phil. 1 and 1 Timothy 3 without prior explanation.

The early church, the church in the generations following the apostles, certainly thought that Acts 6 described the origin of the diaconate, so much so that 300 years later the Roman church still had only seven deacons! The apostles had said to the Jerusalem church "pick out seven men" and three centuries later the Roman church, by that time a very large congregation, accordingly still limited its diaconate to seven members. Obviously the Roman Christians thought that deacons are described in Acts 6. That was, it appears, universally the understanding of the early church.

Taking all the evidence together then, Paul's commendation of Phoebe as a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchreae is hardly evidence that there were women deacons in apostolic Christianity, women occupying the same office as men. But some of you, perhaps especially you younger folk, are listening to this and thinking, "What is wrong with men and women together in the same office?" In your world today men and women are thoroughly mixed in together in every institution, in school and university, in business, in the military, in law, in government. Men work for women bosses now as a matter of course. It can very easily seem to many younger Christians today that the church is simply out of touch and needs to adjust to changes that have taken place in the modern world all the more because you may be inclined to think of those changes as altogether for the good; an increase of freedom, opportunity and liberty for women.

We cannot address such a large question in any detail. You are well aware in any case that in the church of God the question is never to be what does the culture demand of us but what does God require of us in his Word. Our culture has been changed profoundly by the feminist revolution.

We are living in a world that in this fundamental respect is utterly different from the world of any previous generation anywhere on earth stretching back to the very beginning of human history. Men and women have never related to one another as they are relating to one another in our culture today. But that revolution was certainly not motivated by a desire to conform the life of mankind to the will of God. What is more, it is hardly clear that the world is a better place because of the revolution that has occurred in our view of men and women or in their relationship to one another or their callings in the world. One thing that very much concerns me about young adults today, and so young people in the church, is that they have grown up in a feminist world; it is the only world they know. They have no idea how utterly different this world is from all that has gone before. But our world is not normal; it is profoundly abnormal. You may have seen the recent article in *The Atlantic* entitled over-dramatically “The End of Men: How Women are Taking Control of Everything.” There were problems with the article but a great many commentators have observed that feminism has been terribly destructive of American manhood, of manhood in all its nobler aspects. I don’t suppose that there is a romantic comedy that you have seen in the last ten years in which the subtext did not include the unwillingness of men to commit. Are you aware of how utterly foreign that idea would have been to American culture in the years before the feminist revolution? Nobody thought of men as characterized by unwillingness to commit. Men were everywhere anxious to commit. They pursued women with a view to committing to them and then together with them building a home and family. It was fundamental to their basic and fundamental understanding of their nature and calling that they were committers. That is how fundamental the feminist revolution has been; it has stripped the American male of his nature. But it hasn’t been good for women either who, according to virtually every survey, are less happy than they used to be. Marriage is in terrible shape in our culture. With respect to marriage we are the laughingstock of the world. More of our children, upwards of 40%, are being born out of wedlock, many more people are living alone; healthy and happy relationships are more and more the exception rather than the rule. A much larger number of Americans now find their family a source of pain rather than joy. Men are descending from rather than ascending toward true masculinity and women are carrying more and more of the burden of life in our homes and in our society as a whole. Women more and more must be both men and women, a heavy burden indeed! Are we to rejoice in these developments? This is an abnormal world in which we are living.

For us the blessing of the Lord lies in obedience and in the church the fruitfulness of life will be found in our conforming ourselves to the Word of God. Whether sexual ethics or the offices of the church, the only truly important questions remain: what does God say? How has God made the world to work? What will be the standard of his judgment of our lives? And it has seemed to virtually the entire church and it seems to me to be the rather straightforward teaching of the New Testament that deacons are to be men and only men. Whether you understand why is beside the point. What has God said?

Let me say that the men who are now arguing the contrary in our church are good men. There are several of them in our own Presbytery of the Pacific Northwest, men whose work and ministry I admire. Dr. Greg Perry teaches New Testament at our Covenant Theological Seminary and has recently published an article in the seminary’s journal in favor of women deacons. It contains a long technical, scholarly and elaborate article; it does a lot with Greek grammar and so on. I suspect it will be convincing only to those already convinced. But he dispenses with the evidence

of Acts 6 most cavalierly in a single paragraph at the very end of the piece. Most of these advocates of women deacons are young men, most of them are city fellows, living and working in highly feminized urban environments and though they would hotly dispute the charge, I believe they are not fully aware of the influence of the culture upon their thinking. They want to believe, and no doubt do believe, that they are following where the Bible leads them, but I survey the arguments and am not persuaded. I am certainly not at all persuaded, and they shouldn't be either, that the mention of Phoebe as a *diakonos* in Romans 16:1 is enough evidence to set aside two thousand years of Christian practice and conviction.

In our church, advocates of women deacons, to the man, assure us that they have no doubt that the offices of elder and minister should remain male only. They assure us that their advocacy of women deacons should not be construed as a capitulation to the culture. They are willing to defy the culture and reserve the offices of elder and minister to men as they admit the New Testament clearly requires. I am sure they are entirely sincere in these affirmations and assurances. But it is not for that reason entirely easy to believe that they or the generation coming behind them will say the same thing in ten or twenty years. The pressure of the elite culture is relentless. It comes through the impressions that are made upon us subtly or with a jack hammer every moment of every day that we are listening to the radio, watching television, seeing a movie or reading a newspaper or out in our working world. The culture's determination to eliminate remaining distinctions between men and women and their respective callings in life is likely to grow stronger and less forgiving as time passes not weaker.

But then, the issue is not what the culture is likely to demand or what we fear may come later from decisions made today. The issue remains: what are we taught in the Word of God? What does the Bible teach us about deacons: are they to be men alone or men and women without distinction? I'm quite sure that Phoebe, if we could ask her, would say, "Oh, in my day deacons were always men. No question about that. We had deaconesses [she might say, 'I was one myself'] but no male deacons." But, because the question would not interest her very much because she had absolutely no ax to grind, she would hurry on: "But have I ever told you about my trip to Rome, that trip on which I carried Paul's letter? I still remember the day the ship sailed from Cenchreae."

Now *that* is a story I would like to hear!