

Phoebe: A “deaconess”?

By Tim Bench

The character, identity, and role of “Phoebe” from the Book of Romans has for many years spawned a plethora of discussions on an array of topics; these typically center around the role(s) that Phoebe, and women in general, filled in the 1st century church and subsequently, the roles women are to fill in today’s church, as well. Discussions regarding Phoebe are specifically often centered around the moniker “deaconess” assigned to her in Romans 16:1 in several translations of the Bible (multiple other translations use differing wording than “deaconess”).

The purpose of this brief study is to analyze specifics on what the New Testament tells us the role of women within churches it to be, and thus, we will attempt to ascertain whether or not “deaconess” is an accurate an apt descriptor for Phoebe. Broader questions for discussion might include; are women allowed, as per New Testament instruction, to hold leadership roles within the modern church (i.e. a “deacon-level role)? Was Phoebe thus a female “deacon” in the 1st century church? Has this term garnered support over the past few years as more and more denominations have allowed women to acquire leadership roles in churches? Where does the term “deaconess” even come from, and is it Biblical? Scholars, theologians, church historians, and the like are often divided on this issue, with some holding the position that “deaconesses” are authorized in the New Testament, while others argue that it is questionable and still others suggest that there is no authority in the New Testament for deaconesses. Acceptance of the role of “deaconess” often serves as the basis for an ever-expanding list of “acceptable” roles for women in modern churches.....if

a woman can serve as a “deaconess”, after all, what would prevent her from serving as an elder or even preacher?

As with all things, the scriptures are sufficient to address these questions and to instruct us in righteousness that we might be "furnished completely unto every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). A calm and deliberate study of the Bible on this, or any other issue, will also hopefully allow us to avoid all-too-common modern vitriol when discussing gender-based topics (“Restrictions on women serving were only cultural for the times!” or “Restrictions on women in churches are just sexist and legalistic!”, for example).

Perhaps a bit surprisingly, over the years there have been prominent Church of Christ writers, historians, and preachers, some very well known, who have differed on this “deaconess” view.....Tolbert Fanning provides an excellent example.

“In the primitive churches there were also deaconesses, as Phoebe-the servant-deaconess in Cenchreae” (“Church Officers, No.3: Deacons,” Gospel Advocate, 1859, page 83.)

“The Sisters, beyond all question, were as legitimately deacons as the brethren. Paul said, “I commend to you Phoebe, our sister, who is a deacon/servant of the church at Cenchrea.’ The Apostle, not only recommended the brethren at Rome to receive her as a deacon of her church as becomes saints, but to “assist her in whatsoever business she had need of them” ... The ministering to the Savior by these Galilean women (Mt 27:55) evinced the strongest faith and an earnestness of life seldom witnessed. They were deacons, or ministers, to Jesus Christ in the most expressive way” (“The Church of Christ in History, No. 8,” Religious Historian, December 1873, 357).

From Moses Lard, Commentary on Romans, page 451....

“Phoebe was a servant of the church in Cenchrea. This much is actually asserted. Was she appointed to the service by the church, or did she assume it of herself? The question is not material. For whether she assumed the service of her own accord or was appointed to it, she performed it with the Apostle’s sanction. This stamps it right ... I am therefore of the opinion that Phoebe was a deaconess in the official sense of that word.”

Not surprisingly...

"In closing his epistle to the Romans, Paul sent personal greetings to several people who had been "a great help" to him; there are eight women named in Romans 16:1-16. The first one named was the person who appears to have carried the epistle to Rome for him, "Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea." The word "servant" is the Greek term in feminine form that is used of deacons in the New Testament literature. Many biblical scholars believe there was a female order of deacons in the first century. Among those in our own heritage who have subscribed to this view are Alexander Campbell, Walter Scott, Moses Lard, and Robert Milligan.”

Rubel Shelley, “Faith Matters-The Deaconess”.

“....the fact remains that much work of the church is dependent upon women; and it is a fact well-known to preachers, elders, and all observant Christians that, generally speaking, the women of the church are more actively interested, more faithful to duty, and more deeply spiritual than most men. The work they do is usually done promptly and efficiently, while we are often prone to neglect,

postpone, and sometimes shamefully ignore important duties and responsibilities which are ours. In my rather lengthy experience as a gospel preacher, the help and encouragement I have received from the good women of the church, has succored and sustained me through many trying and discouraging experiences. *Whether we call them "deaconesses" or "servants," or whether we refer to them simply as "sisters,"* there is much and lasting good they can do, and have done in generations past, for the promotion and advancement of the cause of Christ.”

“The Divine Organization Of The Church”, C. G. Caldwell, Sr., 11-7-1957 Gospel Guardian.

“But isn't Phoebe called a deaconess (Romans 16:1)? Yes, indeed; but policemen are also called deacons of God (Romans 13:4), the Greek word being the same in both cases (except for the gender)....In this connection, it is proper to note that if Paul had meant these women to be installed as "deaconesses" he certainly knew the word and would have referred to them in this passage by their proper title. The New Testament word "apostle" is used in its both official and limited sense and also in a secondary and more general sense when applied to men like Barnabas and Silas, who were not, strictly speaking, "apostles." The view here is that "deaconess" as applied to Phoebe, in the same manner, does not mean that she was officially a deacon in the church of the Lord. It should always be remembered that deaconess translates the Greek word for "servant," and that, for centuries, the translators have rendered the word "deacon" only when the official church office was meant. But in the case of Romans 13:4 and Romans 16:1, they usually rendered it "servant." That is the way the KJV renders both places; and the gratuitous injection of the official title DEACON into

Romans 16:1 in some subsequent versions is absolutely incorrect and misleading.

If churches were commanded to appoint women deacons, where is the record of it, either in the New Testament or in the custom of the historical church? When women deacons are appointed, they are appointed without divine authority and with no adequate list of qualifications to serve as guidelines for their appointment. If 1 Timothy 3:11 is to be construed as the standard for appointing women deacons, why, it may be inquired, did Paul list fifteen qualifications for elders, and four for so-called deaconesses? Such a view simply does not make sense.”

-from “Coffman’s Commentaries on the Bible”, James Burton Coffman, 1 Timothy 3.

“Paul’s usage of the phrase, “our sister,” identifies the way in which Phoebe is addressed. She is identified as a member of the church in Cenchrea. She is then referred to as a “servant” identifying the work she extended to the church where she was an active, caring member. Being a “servant of the church” no more implies that one is a formal appointee than the expression does in Colossians 1:25, where Paul is said to be the church’s servant. To select a person for a certain work does not necessarily make him an officer in the common acceptance of the term any more than selecting a song leader makes him an appointed deacon of the congregation. Likewise, selecting certain women to attend certain duties does not make them deaconesses in the official sense which many conclude.”

David Duester, “What does the Bible say about Deaconesses?”, www.ourgoodfight.com.

And from Howard Daniel Denham of the Truth Bible Institute....

“All together some form of diakonos is used 30 times. The only passage in which it is translated by some as "deaconess" is indeed Romans 16:1, because it stands in the feminine gender. However, that alone does not justify the translation of "deaconess." There is an assumption made by some that in the first century there was a specific office for such women. The evidence is woefully weak, and insufficient to force a meaning not demanded by either the word itself or its context here. The term diakonos had both a generic and specific meaning, as many terms frequently possessed. The generic meaning of "servant" or "minister (with the idea being that found in Matthew 20:26), derived from the etymological root meaning of "one who serves tables," is the most common one in the Greek testament, and without doubt is the best idea involved in the Romans 16:1 text.”

Differing viewpoints exist OUTSIDE the Church of Christ, as well. From the Methodists....

"In the apostolic age, some grave and pious women were appointed deaconesses in every church. It was their office, not to teach publicly, but to visit the sick, the women in particular, and to minister to them both in their temporal and spiritual necessities." I find it rather unfortunate that Wesley chose to use the word "office" in his statement, for "Paul is not stressing office but service..."

John Wesley, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 10, page 161.

From the Catholics....

“We can not be sure that any formal recognition of deaconesses as an institution of consecrated women aiding the clergy is to be found in the New Testament. There is

indeed the mention of Phebe (Rom., xvi, 1), who is called *diakonos*, but this may simply mean, as the Vulgate renders it, that she was "in the ministry [i.e. service] of the Church", without implying any official status."

-Catholic Encyclopedia.

And from William Barclay...

"Sometimes she is called a deaconess, but it is not likely that she held what might be called an official position in the Church."

-"The Letter to the Romans", The Daily Study Bible Series, page 207.

It becomes clear very quickly that this topic has been a substantive issue for many years. The primary passage which has spawned the debate on the role of Phoebe is Romans 16:1....

"I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea" (King James Version).

"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea" (Revised Standard Version).

Readers should instantly see the wording differences. In addition to the King James, which uses the term "servant", other translations such as the American Standard Version, ESV, New American Standard Bible, New King James Translation, and the NIV likewise use "servant" (translations which utilize "deaconess" include the Revised Standard Version, among others). The Greek "diakonos" (διάκονος) is the word from which "servant" is derived....

Strong's Greek Concordance (1249), "a waiter, servant; then of any one who performs any service, an administrator."

As per Thayer and Smith's "Greek Lexicon entry for Diakonos", "The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon", 1999 edition (see at www.biblestudytools.com), "diakonos" appears 29 times in the New Testament...and is translated as "deacon" 3 times, as "minister" 7 times, as "servant" 10 times, and as "servants" (plural) 9 times....thus, Romans 16:1 would be the lone example in the NT of "diakonos" being interpreted as "deaconess". Vine's Greek New Testament Dictionary additionally states "diakonos....is translated "servant" or "servants" in [Matt 22:13...](#), [Matt 23:11...](#), [Mark 9:35...](#), [John 2:5,9](#); [John 12:26](#); Rom. 16:1", another widely-accepted academic example of the word "servant" (not "deaconess") being used.

Paul uses this term for himself as a servant "of Christ" in 2 Corinthians 11:23 and 1 Timothy 4:6 and "of the church in Colossians 1:24-25. Thus, Paul, like Phoebe, was indeed a "servant" of the early church. Paul was never specified as a "deacon", but yet used diakonos to describe himself (which seems to prove in and of itself that the term was intended to mean "servant").

Here is what we definitively know of Phoebe's contributions: Paul would assign Phoebe certainly a great and important task; it is almost certain that Phoebe delivered Paul's letter in person to the church at Rome, a responsibility of considerable magnitude. Phoebe was obviously trusted, dependable, and valued in her efforts, a "servant" in her home church at Cenchrea, and probably in the mother church at Corinth also.

Whether or not Phoebe held some "official" title, Paul commended her as a highly-proven servant of Christ and

implored the church at Rome to receive her. Phoebe was entrusted with carrying this letter to the church at Rome, no small task, and was to be received in a worthy manner. Paul's speaking of Phoebe as a "helper" (prostatis), may also indicate that Phoebe was a woman of considerable wealth, as the term was commonly used to signify a wealthy person who financially supported a cause. Thus, Phoebe was no ordinary "helper", but seemingly one of high esteem, reputation, and integrity and likely was a businesswoman of considerable wealth.

"Prostasis", it should be noted, does not necessitate oversight of others, a pillar of the "deaconess", or "female deacon" argument. If so, then Phoebe would have exercised authority over the Apostle Paul....she had been his "helper", after all. Likewise, the fact that the saints were encouraged to "assist" Phoebe does not imply or insinuate did not imply her authority over them....the Greek word "paristerni" meant to "come to the aid of, help, stand by"...when this term appears in 2 Timothy 4:17, Paul was certainly NOT stating that he exercised any form of authority over Jesus Christ....yet this would be the de facto and unavoidable linguistic result of those who claim that Phoebe held "authority" over those who assisted her.

Examples abound of "diakonos" usage in the New Testament, predominantly to indicate "servants" or "ministers"the "servants" at the marriage feast in John 2:5 and 2:9, Paul and Apollos as "ministers" in 1 Corinthians 3:5, Tychicus, the "faithful minister" of Ephesians 6:21, Epaphras, the "dear fellow servant" of Colossians 1:7, Timothy, the "minister of God" in 1 Thessalonians 3:2, the "minister" of Romans 13:4, the false "ministers" of 2 Corinthians 11:15 and the "minister" (Jesus Christ Himself) of Romans 15:8 are all translations of diakonos. "Deaconess" appears one time, and one time only.

Many will suggest that “deaconess” is the correct verbiage or name to be used, and that Phoebe was thus simply a “female deacon”, without any consideration of what is demanded of a deacon elsewhere in the New Testament, 1 Timothy 3:8-13, for example....

“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.

Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”

Note the underlined segments of the verses, which describe in detail the prerequisites a “deacon” must possess. Those who hold to the view that Phoebe was a “deaconess” in terms comparable to a “deacon” are thus forced to make the Bible contradict itself; if Phoebe was a “deaconess”, summarily on the same “level” as a “deacon”, why would 1 Timothy stipulate the deacons’ WIVES are to be dignified? How could Phoebe have been the “husband” of “one wife”? Equating Phoebe as a “deaconess” thus forces the requirements for a “deacon” to be equally applied to her; doing so makes parts of another chapter of the Bible (1 Timothy) to be null, void, absurd, and utterly useless.

It is also interesting to note that the New Testament offers multiple and VERY specific guidelines for “deacons”

(see 1 Timothy 3:11 and also 1 Timothy 5:9-10). Why then are there no specific guidelines, descriptors, qualifications, or any other mentions of “deaconesses”? How would we then know the selection criteria to be used for picking a “deaconess”? (It must be again mentioned that simply relying on “deacon” qualifications to fulfill this query effectively serves to negate the entire ideal of the “deaconess”).

There is no mention whatsoever of "deaconesses" as a class or as a distinct group, although “bishops and deacons” are mentioned specifically with the saints at Philippi (Philippians 1:1). The Bible is strangely silent about “deaconesses”, and simply offers no qualifying information about such a “role”.

An important comment needs to be emphasized here. In no form, way, or fashion, is the writer indicating, insinuating, or suggesting that women are irrelevant or unimportant to the operations of the church. Nothing could be further from the truth, or serve as a more ludicrous accusation. Women’s roles are highlighted in verses such as Titus 2:3-5.

“Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.”

Women are to teach, to train young women in appropriate behaviors, and are to provide solid, Christian examples of grace, love, and dignity. God’s plan and design for men and for women may differ in some ways, but this in no way indicates that women are worthless or less “important” than their male counterparts. To highlight just a

few specific gender differences, God has appointed man to be the head of the family (Ephesians 5:23). Man is to provide for the physical and spiritual needs of his wife and children (1 Timothy 5:8, Ephesians 6:4). Likewise, women have a special place in God's plans that men do not have; women are to be helpers to their husbands, teachers of their children and keepers of the home (see Genesis 3:16 and Ephesians 5:22-24).

There are also scriptures which deal with women's place in the church, and none seem supportive of the "deaconess" viewpoint. In 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul wrote: "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." In other words, man has a head to whom he must submit, that being Jesus Christ. Woman has a head to whom she must submit... man. Jesus Christ has a head to whom He must submit... God. Christ is not inferior to God because He submits to Him, nor is woman inferior to man because she submits to him. The place and respective roles that God has appointed for both men and women has nothing to do with supposed inferiority and superiority, but with the purpose for which God created each.

1 Timothy 2 deals extensively with women's roles in the church. The Apostle Paul is speaking of the public worship of the church when it assembles together (see 2:1-2, 3:14-15). In verse one, Paul commands that prayers be made for all men, Paul using the word "anthropos" (Strong's's #444), a general word for all men and women (similar to how we might use "mankind" today), ("a human being, whether male or female generically, to include all human individuals...", from www.biblestudytools.com). Paul again uses this same word in verse four when he says, "God will have all men to be saved, and come unto a knowledge of the truth."

But in 1 Timothy 2:8, addressing prayer in the church, Paul uses a different word for man, the Greek word “aner” (Strong’s #435). This word is used only to refer to males....thus, the command then is for men only to lead the public prayers of the church. This again highlights the differing roles for men and for women, established by God. Women serving as “elders” (which is increasingly common today) violates direct and specific commands in 1 Timothy 2:11-12, 1 Corinthians 11:3, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, and 1 Peter 5:1-4.

Then, as now, women worked fervently for the Lord’s church. Philippians 4:3 specifies that certain women “labored” with Paul and others “in the gospel”. Mary “bestowed much labor” (see Romans 16:6). Mary, the mother of John Mark, provided her house “where many were gathered together praying” (see Acts 12:12). Lydia provided lodging for Paul and his companions (Acts 16:14-15). Priscilla and her husband Aquila were Paul’s “helpers in Christ Jesus, “provided their house as a meeting place and took Apollos unto them, “and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly”, apparently VERY effective teachers (see Romans 16:3-5; Acts 18:26). We are told in Acts 9:36-39 that Dorcas “was full of good works and almsdeeds...”. Examples abound of Christ-focused, dedicated women throughout the New Testament, helping to spread the Gospel via a plethora of means.

However, as politically incorrect as it may be, the inescapable fact remains; Jesus Christ embraced male leadership in the early church. Without exception, all of the Apostles were males....the likes of Mary or Martha, as devout or respected as they may have been, were not included as Apostles. Without exception, the books of the New Testament were penned by males. There simply exists no direct, specific Biblical basis for females fulfilling church

leadership roles, whether it be elders, preachers, or deacons/deaconesses.

It is this author's firm belief that "deaconess" is an inappropriate and inaccurate term for "diakonos"...

- 1.** "Deaconess" appears one time in the entire New Testament, a shockingly low number when considering that "servant", "minister", etc. appear numerous times.
- 2.** Applying the official title of "deaconess" to Phoebe, which many people today claim to do, by definition FORCES such adherents to apply the same rules for deacons AND deaconesses from 1 Timothy 3....even a cursory read of these verses immediately pose substantial roadblocks, forcing one of two scenarios; either Phoebe was NOT, and could not have been an official "deaconess", or the book of 1 Timothy is rubbish.
- 3.** No guidelines, overview, discussion, parameters, or even mention of "deaconess" appears in the NT....such specifics on deacons certainly exist. There exists no textual support for such a role, no linguistic support, and certainly no historical or theological support. If deaconess was to be a designated and specified role and title, why is absolutely no overview of this "office" provided?

I certainly hope that readers will carefully consider the arguments presented here, and will always study and utilize their Bibles and appropriate Bible-related resources when considering this, or any theological issue. There is a wide array of areas and methodology wherein women are not only allowed, but are expected to help contribute to the church

today....serving as a “deaconess” is simply not one of these ways.