

Was Phoebe a Deaconess?

Romans 16

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The following is an excerpt from
The MacArthur New Testament Commentary on Romans 16.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well. (16:1–2)

Paul devotes these two verses to the commendation of a single individual, **Phoebe**,... **a servant** and a member **of the church which is at Cenchrea**. Cenchrea was the neighboring port city of Corinth, from which Paul wrote this letter, and **the church... at Cenchrea** doubtless was a daughter church of the one at Corinth. It was from Cenchrea, at the end of his first ministry in Corinth, that Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila “put out to sea for Syria” (Acts 18:18).

Paul could **commend** this woman not only for what she had done as a faithful **sister** and **servant** of Christ but also for what she was soon to do in further service to their Lord. It is almost certain that **Phoebe** delivered this letter in person to the church at Rome, a responsibility of considerable magnitude.

The name **Phoebe** means “bright and radiant,” and from Paul’s brief comments about her, it seems that those words did indeed characterize her personality and her Christian life. Paul commends her to the church at Rome in three different ways: as a sister in Christ, as **a servant** and as **a helper of many**, including himself.

In Christ, we belong to God not only as “fellow citizens with the saints” in His divine kingdom but also are brothers and sisters in His divine “household” (Eph. 2:19). To refer to Phoebe as **our sister** meant that she was a devoted member of the family of God, and the context makes clear that she was especially dear to Paul.

Paul next commends **Phoebe** as **a servant** beloved by those she served in her home church at **Cenchrea**, and probably in the mother church at Corinth as well.

Servant translates *diakonos*, the term from which we get *deacon*. The Greek word here is neuter and was used in the church as a general term for servant before the offices of deacon and deaconess were developed. It is used of the household servants who drew the water that Jesus turned into wine (John 2:5, 9), and Paul has used the term earlier in this letter (Rom. 13:4, twice) to refer to secular

government as “a minister of God to you for good” and even of Christ as “a servant to the circumcision,” that is, to Jews (15:8). When *diakonos* obviously refers to a church office, it is usually transliterated as “deacon” (see, e.g., Phil.1:1; 1 Tim. 3:10, 13).

In 1 Timothy 3:11, Paul declares that “women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.” Some argue that he is referring to wives of deacons, rather than to an office of women deacons. But it makes no sense that high standards would be specified for the wives of deacons but not for wives of overseers (or bishops, who are also called elders, see Titus 1:5), whose qualifications he has just given in verses 1–7. In this context (3:1–10, 12–13), the office of deaconess is clearly implied. The “likewise” in verse 11 ties the qualifications of these women to those already given for the offices of overseer and deacon. In verse 11, Paul did not refer to those women as deaconesses because *diakonos* has no feminine form.

During the first few centuries of the church, the role of a woman **servant** (*diakonos*) was to care for fellow believers who were sick, for the poor, for strangers passing through, and for the imprisoned. They also were responsible for helping baptize and disciple new women converts and to instruct children and other women.

Whether or not Phoebe held some official title or not, Paul commended her as a highly-proven **servant** of Christ and implored the church at Rome to **receive her in the Lord**.

As mentioned above, Phoebe was entrusted with carrying this letter to the church at Rome. There were, of course, no copiers or carbon paper in those days, and even the simplest writing materials were very expensive. It is therefore highly unlikely that Paul, through the hand of Tertius (v. 22), made more than one copy of this letter. Since Paul realized that letter would become part of God’s written Word, he knew that the truths he imparted in this letter had the mark of divine authenticity. He would therefore have made certain that this epistle to the Romans was entrusted only to the most reliable of persons.

Paul knew that the journey from Corinth to Rome would not be easy, and would involve considerable sea as well as land travel. When this special lady arrived in Rome and presented believers there with Paul’s letter, they must have realized his great trust in her even before they read this personal commendation. It would be immediately evident that she deserved their greatest appreciation and respect.

Travel in those days was often hazardous, and the few inns that existed usually were connected with the worst sort of taverns, many of which were also brothels. The only safe places to stay were with a friend or a friend of a friend. Consequently, letters of commendation were routinely given to travelers by friends who had relatives or friends along the way who could provide food, lodging, and sometimes escort through dangerous areas. Such help was especially important for Christians and even more especially for those who were Jewish, who often were subjected to persecution not only by Gentiles but by unbelieving fellow Jews.

Such letters of commendation are mentioned several times in the New Testament. When Apollos “wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren [at Ephesus] encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him” (Acts 18:27). Paul included a commendation of Titus and certain other faithful men in his second letter to Corinth, saying, “As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you;

as for our brethren, they are messengers of the churches, a glory to Christ. Therefore openly before the churches show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you” (2 Cor. 8:23–24). John alludes to such a written commendation in verse 9 of his third epistle.

Phoebe was to be received into fellowship **in a manner worthy of the saints**, that is, as a true and faithful believer. Jesus promised that when believers minister to “one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them,” they do it for Him (Matt. 25:35–40). Christians are to **receive**, to love, to minister to each other in a way that is distinct from the world around us and that it cannot comprehend. We are to embrace, serve, and care for all those who genuinely name the name of Christ (cf. Matt. 18:5–10).

Paul requested that the Roman church **help Phoebe in whatever matter she may have need of** them for. **Matter** is from *pragma*, from which we get *pragmatic*, and refers to anything that was done or carried out. It was often used of business transactions, and probably carries that idea here, as indicated by the King James’s rendering of “business.” Paul not only was giving a commendation of Phoebe as a faithful Christian but also was giving a letter of reference, as it were, in regard to whatever business **matter** she may have had in Rome.

That idea is reinforced by Paul’s speaking of her as a **helper**, which translates *prostatis*, which was commonly used to signify a patron, a wealthy person who encouraged and financially supported an organization or cause, as in a patron of the arts. In other words, Phoebe was no ordinary **helper**, but one of high esteem and integrity and likely was a businesswoman of considerable wealth. She used her influence and her financial means, as well as her personal time and effort, as **a helper of many fellow believers and of myself [Paul] as well**.

That statement says as much about Paul as it does about Phoebe. The esteemed apostle readily and graciously acknowledged his personal indebtedness to and love for a Christian sister, whom he memorialized in these two verses in the Word of God. And, although God inspired no woman to write a part of Scripture, he used Phoebe to transport the first copy of this marvelous letter, which is one of the bedrocks of New Testament theology. This woman was emblematic of those countless women of God whom He has used and honored with great distinction within the framework of His divine plan.

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