

**Romans:
Phoebe and the Ministry of Women
in the Early Church**

Romans 16:1-2

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Romans 16 is a chapter filled with greetings and personal commendation, and you might be tempted to think that it is somewhat extraneous in terms of giving you any profitable direction for day-to-day Christian life; and if you think that, you're wrong because there is much to learn not only from the commendation that we are going to study today but the greetings and the words of appreciation and expressions of gratitude which this chapter is filled with. In fact, in the passage we study today, you are going to find that there is implicit guidance on a very vital subject for our own times in fact several vital subjects for our day-to-day living as Christians.

Today we are looking at a passage in which Paul commends Phoebe, servant of the church in Cenchrea, the seaport of Corinth. He commends her to the Roman church. We'll see why in just a few moments, but it is a passage that has occasioned much speculation. You see, the word *servant* that is used for Phoebe in verse one of Romans chapter 16, in some places is translated *minister* in the New Testament. In other places it is translated *deacon* in the New Testament, and those who believe in women holding office in the church often appeal to Romans 16:1 as an example of the practice of the early church in regard to women being involved in the eldership or the deaconate.

And so, this subject is extremely important for us as we begin a season of officer election; because as your eyes, as a congregation, fall down onto the sheet that has the list of nominees from the Session for the office of elder and deacon, you will notice it is a sheet of men. Now, are we doing that simply because of tradition, or because of chauvinism, or because we think it's what the Bible says and we have the opportunity in God's providence to study the clear teaching of Scripture on this matter today.

I also want to say that as we approach this subject, we should pause and recognize that there are wonderful people whom we know and love with whom we disagree on this matter. We do so in a spirit of charity and humility, but we also do so with resolution because the word of God is clear. And more than

anything else, we long to be faithful to the word of God. That's really the issue, isn't it--fidelity to the word of God.

You know, many people would say, "Why even talk about this issue? It's just not important; it's not important to the gospel." Well, let me ask you a question. Is fidelity to the word of God important to the gospel? Yes it is. Is fidelity to the word of God where the culture is pressing against us, important? Yes, it is extremely important. And so, the real issue here is the authority of Scripture. So let's hear God's word in Romans 16, verses one and two.

"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." Amen.

And thus ends the reading of God's holy and inerrant word; may He write its truth upon our hearts. May we pray.

Lord, we bow before You to learn from Your word. We pray that You would teach us that every part of Your word is inspired and is profitable for reproof and correction for instruction and training in righteousness. We ask that by Your Spirit, You would open our eyes to behold wonderful truth from Your word, and that by Your same Spirit You would apply that truth to our hearts in such a way that we would acknowledge its authority and live in its light. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Let me begin with three affirmations as we tackle the subject of women in ministry in the early church. This commendation of Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 invites us to pause and reflect on the total ministry of women in the early church, as well as to learn specific applications from Paul's words about Phoebe. But let's begin this study with three affirmations, and here is the first one. From the Bible's perspective, there is no question that women are to be involved in the ministry of the church. The only question is: how? From the Bible's perspective, there is no question that women are to be involved in the ministry of the church. The question is: how? Second affirmation. We are going to believe and do what the Bible says on this matter even if it is uncomfortable and is politically incorrect. Third affirmation. There is no way I can answer all of your questions on this subject in one sermon. So let's begin with those three affirmations, and then let me reduce those three affirmations to two propositions that will help clarify our thought as we look at this passage and others today.

Here's the first proposition for clarity's sake: 1. Women have a major ministry role to play in the church, and 2, the New Testament restricts church office to mature, qualified, gifted, male members. I'm going to seek to demonstrate those propositions today from the Bible itself, but let's begin by attending to Romans 16:1-2 and learn what Paul teaches us there.

I. Paul's words of recommendation regarding Phoebe totally dispel the myth of "Paul the misogynist."

First, I want you to see his commendation of Phoebe to the Roman church and then in verse two, I want you to see what he asks the Roman church to do for Phoebe. In verse one Paul says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea." As we have already said, Cenchrea is a seaport town of Corinth and she is a person of some significance in the ministry of that congregation, and the apostle is commending her to the church in Rome. Now you need to ask, "What's going on? Why is Paul commending this person to the church in Rome?" The background of verse one is the fact that in the Mediterranean world, as you traveled from place to place, and especially when you were sent on an errand of some importance, you often brought with you a letter of commendation from the people who were sending you. And that letter was addressed to the people to whom you were sent, because the people to whom you were sent didn't know what you looked like, and they didn't know who you were, and they didn't know why you had been sent, and they didn't know what your credentials were. And so letters of commendation were sent in order to attest to the standing and to the legitimacy of people who were doing significant errands. And so Paul is giving a commendation to Phoebe because she is doing something very important. We're going to see what it was that she was doing in just a few moments, but this is the background of this commendation.

By reading between the lines, we can learn three or four things about Phoebe. First of all, it is very probable that Phoebe is the one who is carrying this letter—this letter from Paul to the Romans to the Romans. Now, how do we know that? We know because of Romans 16:1. Why else would Paul have commended her to the church at Rome unless she was on an errand of great significance for Paul to the Roman church? The very fact that he is commending her suggests that she is on a very important errand. Otherwise the commendation seems unnecessary.

Secondly, it is very probable that Phoebe was a Gentile woman--maybe even a freed servant. Why? Because Phoebe's name derives from pagan Greco-Roman mythology. It was common for masters to name their servant this name in Phoebe's time, and it is unlikely that a Jewish family would have named their daughter after a Greco-Roman mythological figure because of fidelity to the one true God; and so, it is very likely that Phoebe was a Gentile Christian. She had been converted into the church there in Cenchrea through the ministry of the word and came from a Gentile background.

Thirdly, it is also very likely that she was a very wealthy businesswoman not unlike Lydia in Acts 16. Why do I say that? Well, because she's on a visit to

Rome and Paul doesn't tell us who those are who are with her. If she had been accompanied by a number of other members in the church, surely Paul at this time would have said, "Receive not only Phoebe but receive these other members of the church who are with her." This apparently indicates that Phoebe was doing well enough in business to have her own servants going along with her to Rome and those servants did not need to be introduced to the church in Rome. So she is apparently on a business trip to Rome with her own retinue. And on this occasion she brings the letter of Paul to the Romans.

And fourthly, we find out in verse two that she was the patroness, or helper, of the Cenchranean church. Paul says, if you'll look at verse two, that she has been a "helper of many." Now that word *helper* literally means *patron*. It indicates that she had means at her disposal and she used those means for the edification of the local church. She was a patroness supporting the local church. Paul goes on to say that she even supported his ministry. And so, not unlike the women who followed Jesus with the disciples, who gave of their own means as a stewardship to support Jesus' ministry, apparently Phoebe did this in the church in Cenchranea and in Corinth.

Now Phoebe is called a servant here, and the term *servant* is literally *diakonos*. *Deacon* she is called. And so we ask ourselves, what does this mean? Does it mean *minister* or does it mean the person holding the office of deacon? We are going to answer that question in just a moment, but let me say that it is very clear, no matter how you translate in verses one and two, that she is identified as a particularly valuable and outstanding member of the Corinthian, or Cenchranean church. Paul has a high esteem for Phoebe and he gives her this title, *servant of the church*, and that title is the standard title and role for every Christian in the New Testament. Jesus is called servant, his apostles are called servants, elders are called servants, deacons are called servants, and congregation members are called servants in the Christian church because our whole business in the Christian church is mutual edification and that means denying ourselves and ministering to one another with preference over ourselves. And so the title for every Christian is *servant* in the New Testament.

Now, let me just pause here, and say by way of application, that Paul's commendation of Phoebe in verse one is an example to us; it shows the importance of people to the Apostle Paul, and it commends to us the same attitude that Paul had—this duty of showing appreciation and gratitude for the people of God. Isn't it encouraging to see the pre-eminent theologian of the New Testament (apart from our Savior), the Apostle Paul, taking up an entire chapter of his theological masterpiece, the Book of Romans, to thank people. So often in our day we hear people pit theology over against people. Have you ever heard someone say something like this: People are more important than theology. Or something like this: People are more important than truth. Or: we should be more concerned about people than we are about theology. Well, as far as the Apostle Paul was concerned, that was a false contradiction because people and truth

were both important to the Apostle Paul. In fact, as far as Paul was concerned, truth was *for* people, it was good for them; it made their lives better and his concern for truth was not one that he held at the expense of his concern for people. And so at the end of his book, before he closes, he refuses to close until he has thanked and appreciated and commended and expressed gratitude for a whole host of people.

And that attitude, my friends, ought to be our attitude towards one another. When was the last time when you encouraged one another and thanked and expressed appreciation for one another for spiritual edification? Many of you will do that for your ministers. You will write to us and you will say, "Thank you for your spiritual edification." When's the last time you encouraged your brothers and sisters that way? When's the last time you wrote a note—"Thank you for being faithful and trusting in God through the trial that you are going through because it's a witness to me and I appreciate you, sister." When's the last time you sat down and said, "Thank you for teaching me the Word of God in that small group. It ministers to my soul. Thank you for serving faithfully as an elder of this congregation. Thank you for serving in the ministry of diaconal work through the women in the church." When is the last time that you expressed that kind of appreciation for ministry to one another? We ought to be doing that and edifying one another and appreciating one another in the church that way. Paul's example shows us this in this passage.

That's the first thing I want you to see-- Paul's commendation of Phoebe. By the way, doesn't that totally dispel the myth of Paul the woman hater, Paul the misogynist, Paul the man who just can't stand women? Here he is commending this godly woman, Phoebe, to the church and you know what? It's not going to be the last time he commends a woman in this chapter. In fact, this is not going to be the only place in the New Testament in which Paul expresses his profound appreciation for the ministry of women in the life of local congregations. Doesn't this show that Paul is a person fully capable of fully appreciating the ministry of women in the church? This chapter not only teaches the grace of Christian courtesy and the grace of caring, but it shows us something of the heart of Paul in his appreciation of the important role of women in the local congregation.

II. Paul clearly acknowledges the substantive help that Phoebe has provided to the Church and to himself.

Secondly, I'd like you to see in verse two Paul enjoins the Roman church here to show hospitality and to give help to Phoebe. He clearly acknowledges the substantive help that Phoebe has given the church back in the seaport of Corinth, and now he asks Rome to give her substantive help. If you look at verse two, Paul calls on the Roman Christians to do two things: to receive Phoebe and to help her. What does that mean? When he calls on the Romans Christians to receive her, he is asking them to show hospitality to her. He tells them that they are to do this Christianly and he uses two phrases to emphasize this: *Receive*

her. How? In the Lord and in a manner worthy of the saints. So in two phrases, he presses home the fact that he wants them to treat her with special Christian hospitality. Not just southern hospitality but Christian hospitality. Hospitality that is born out of the fact that we are united to Christ and that all who are united to Christ are united to one another. So he wants them to show her Christian hospitality.

Secondly, he asks them to help her. When he says that he means for them to give tangible aid and assistance to her. Again he presses this home with two arguments. Not only, as he said in verse one, that she's been a faithful servant in the church at Cenchrea, but he goes on to say that she has been its patroness and helper and that she has even been his patroness and helper and that for these reasons he calls on them to give her help. As she has helped the church; he wants the church to help her. And again, there can be no doubt as to Paul's evaluation of the importance of godly feminine contribution to the ministry of the early church. His appreciation is emphatic here and frankly, it is ubiquitous not only in the rest of this chapter but in his other books, he speaks to this appreciation.

Furthermore, in verse two, we see this emphasis on hospitality. Paul is very concerned that the Christian church shows radical Christian hospitality. That emphasis was a mark of the early Christian churches and it needs to be a mark of our churches as well—not simply a cultural manifestation, but something which is deliberately derived from and driven by the gospel and our grasp of the gospel. So we see here Paul commending Phoebe.

But what role does she play in the church? Is she an elder? Is she a deacon? Does she have the ministry of the word, or the ministry of the rule, or is she given the authority for the diaconal care in the church? What is it? Well, Paul clearly answers that question for us in three other places in the New Testament. Let's turn there. First, turn to 1 Timothy 2:11-15, where we read: "A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness, but I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet for it was Adam who was first created and then Eve, and it was not Adam who was deceived; but the woman being deceived fell into transgression. But women will be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self restraint."

Now it's hard to imagine four verses that would evoke a more visceral and adverse response from our generation than those. Paul's words are uncomfortable to read even in our day and age in the context of the Christian Church. But Paul is making two things crystal clear here. First, he's making it clear that women are to be the receivers of instruction in the public assembly or the church; and secondly, he is emphasizing that women are not to teach or exercise authority over men in the public assembly of the church. You see this in verses 11 and 12. Paul makes it clear that the headship of men and the authority

of the elders are never to be challenged by the women of the congregation in the public assembly. Instead, they are to receive the teaching of the elders of the church rather than give it. And that's made clear by verses 12-15 where Paul again emphasizes that women are not to teach men in the public assembly or to hold authority over men in the church. So Paul is explicitly restricting the teaching and ruling ministry of the church to qualified and called men.

And notice that this is a functional restriction, not just an official or title restriction. He doesn't say that it's 'ok' for men to hold the titles but women can do the work. He says "No, the work is to be the work of the elders of the men in the church," and he gives his rationale in verses 13-15. In those three little verses he makes it clear, first of all, that Adam's priority in creation has an impact on male headship in the church. In other words, he's saying that there is a significance in the fact that Adam was created first. Secondly, he speaks of the deception of woman in the fall as one of the reasons why men are to lead in the church. This does not mean that Paul believes that women are more gullible than men; it means that in the role reversal that occurred in the fall, we see the effects of that role reversal. When Eve was tempted by Satan she was the one who carried on the conversation. Where was Adam? He was right there. She doesn't have to go looking for him. She turns and gives him the forbidden fruit. Where was Adam? Why wasn't he speaking up? The roles were reversed and the apostle says that's what happens when we fail to keep the creational roles in the life of the local congregation.

III. Paul consistently teaches that the ministry of the word and rule in the church is to be exercised only by qualified male leadership.

Verse 15 is notoriously difficult; I won't give you the four major interpretations of it, but I will say this. Whatever the difficulties of understanding its specifics, the general point is well understood—Paul believes that the role relationship of godly, gifted qualified male leadership in the church is for the well being of women.

Now Paul establishes here that there are to be role distinctions in the ministry of the church. Yes, women are going to be involved in the activity and ministry in the church, but there are going to be role distinctions in regard to the offices of teaching and ruling and preaching in the church.

Those who argue against the interpretation that I've just given you basically say one of three things. There are only three arguments that are brought against this. Anybody you read that doesn't agree with that interpretation will say one of three things. They will either say, "Well, Paul doesn't mean what he seems to be saying here. He's really writing to a specific circumstance and this is not a general rule for all the churches." Let me invite you to look down to chapter 3, verse 16, and look at what Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:15. He says in verse 14 to Timothy: "I am writing these things to you hoping to come to you before long, but in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct

himself in the household of God which is the church of the living God; the pillar and support of the truth." In other words, Paul says to Timothy, I'm writing these things to you about the order of the church not because this is some particular urgent exceptional situation, but because this is the way it is supposed to be in the church. I'm writing this to you because this is the way it's supposed to be everywhere in the church of God.

Secondly, people will say, "Well, Paul contradicts himself. In Galatians 3, he says 'that there is neither male nor female,' and then in 1 Timothy 2, and 1 Corinthians 14, he makes role distinctions between men and women in the church and in the home, and that's just a contradiction. And we choose to agree with Paul in Galatians 3 and you are just following him in 1 Timothy and in 1 Corinthians 14. Well the first thing I would say to that is that if you look at those passages, they are not contradicting one another. They are perfectly harmonious in the way they go together. Secondly, the very idea that the inspired Apostle Paul can contradict himself opens up a whole host of problems. We can go out and find out all sorts of seeming contradictions and pick one side of the contradiction as opposed to another to believe ourselves. If we believe in the authority of Scripture, we can't believe that there are ultimate contradictions in the Word of God.

Thirdly, some people will just say, "Well, Paul was wrong. Paul was culturally bound; he couldn't see beyond his own day and time. He lived in a chauvinistic era. He was culturally bound. Or he was theologically confused." But once again friends, once you do that, what can you not reject in the Scripture? You could say, "Well, we've got to reject what the Scripture says about male/female relationships in the church because it's outdated. Well, why don't we then say, "We've got to realize that in our day and time the idea that Jesus is the only Savior of the world is just outmoded. There are many roads that lead up the mountain, and all religions have truth, and all religions can get you to God and the idea that Jesus is the only way is outmoded. Where could you stop in the Scriptures? Once you start deciding the one part of the Scripture is wrong, what about the rest?"

And so Paul consistently teaches that the ministry of the word and rule in the church is to be exercised only by qualified male leadership. Let me ask you to turn to 1 Corinthians 14, verses 34 and 35, where he reiterates this very thing. He says the "women are to keep silent in the churches for they are not permitted to speak but are to subject themselves just as the law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home for it is improper for a woman to speak in the church."

Now, first of all, that sounds harsh; secondly, it sounds like a gag order. But if you look at it in its context, it is crystal clear. If you will allow your eyes to scan back up from 1 Corinthians 14:34 to the list of things that Paul says that are done in the church in edification, it's very clear that this command 'not to speak in the church' directly relates to teaching. So Paul is not issuing a universal gag order—

women can't speak once they get under the roof of the church. I don't even think that he is saying that women can't ask questions, period. I suspect he is saying: Don't use a question to try and teach the class what you want to teach. Don't use a question to try and teach the congregation what you want to teach. He's saying that he wants women to respect the order that has been established by God in the church of elders teaching and preaching in the congregation. Paul's language in verse 34a and 35b of "keep silent" and "improper to speak" is not a universal gag order, it's a restriction against women engaging in authoritative teaching or didactic speech in the assembly of the Lord's people. Women are not to preach or teach. Paul is reiterating that there is to be a role distinction in the ministry activity of the Christian church. Yes, women participate in ministry; no, they don't preach. Yes, women participate in ministry; no, they don't rule over the church.

Thirdly, if you turn back with me to 1 Timothy, chapter 3, let's get to the sticky question of deacons. Many good evangelicals differ on this issue, but 1 Timothy 3:11 is the verse we need to look at. This is the verse we said we would come back to when we were studying deacons just a few weeks ago and it reads like this: "Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips but temperate, faithful in all things." Now, what does that mean? Is this passage talking about women deacons? Is it talking about deaconesses? Is it talking about female assistants to the deacons? Is it talking about wives of deacons? Is it talking about wives of elders and deacons?

I would suggest to you that it's speaking about female assistants to the deacons and may also include wives of deacons and wives of elders who are assisting them in their work. It is very clear in chapter 5 that women were actively involved in the diaconal work of the church, but that they weren't called deacons. And the fact that Paul doesn't call the women deacons in verse 11, speaks volumes. It's the perfect place for Paul to use the title *deacon* for women if he wants to, and he doesn't.

Furthermore, if you look back at Acts, chapter 6, verses 1-7 when the diaconate is first established, the apostles explicitly say, "Choose from among you seven men who are qualified," he doesn't use the generic term *anthropos*; Luke uses the term *andros*, the word for men.

And so in this passage it seems that we are speaking in 1 Timothy 3:11 of the women who assist the deacons in diaconal ministry and Paul is saying that they must possess godly character. It shows the involvement and qualifications of the women who are involved in the diaconal care of the church. And that is exactly what we are trying to do at First Presbyterian Church. The women of the church are not only actively involved in discipling one another but they are actively involved in the comprehensive diaconal care of the whole congregation. In fact, I want to make a challenge. Of the churches that I have seen where women hold office, I have never seen a congregation where the women are more actively involved in the ministry of the church than at First Presbyterian Church where we

don't have women as officers. It's not a matter of status; it's a matter of service. And those who are conserved to serve in the congregation are not so anxious to grasp for a status, especially when the word of God restricts the certain activity of roles in the ministry of the church. So fidelity to Scripture presses us to understand that the offices of the church are for qualified, gifted male leaders, but that women will be comprehensively involved in the ministry of the church. Let's pray.

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