

Sister Phoebe—Romans 16:1-2—4/14/2013

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Today in our study of Romans we enter the final chapter so turn with me to Romans 16 and let's start by reading Romans 16:1-16. [READ]

Do you get the sense that this is a section of greetings?

In verses 3-16, Paul sent greetings to numerous believers in Rome.

Verses 21-24 include greetings from believers with Paul.

But in addition to greetings to Christians in Rome & from Christians with Paul, we find this person in verses 1-2—this sister Phoebe.

And kids, I don't mean Phoebe Giraudeau who is the sister with 7 brothers, assuming baby #8 is a boy.

I mean Phoebe the faithful lady in the 1st century church at Cenchrea.

What Paul says about Phoebe in verses 1-2 will be our focus today as what is said about her has much to teach us.

It's easy to breeze over verses like these and assume there's not much doctrinal depth or practical truth intended or found in such a text.

But as we dig into the details of Romans 16:1-2, what we find are 3 incredible insights in the life of the early church.

We find implications about how churches functioned & what they valued & how they viewed roles of women and men & money & more.

For example, we find ideas of how the early church viewed relationships and membership and how women served and how God used money and homes and other means for blessing.

There's a lot to cover, but I'm going to try to get it all in today.

Today I want you to note 3 important insights into the function of the early church that can help you better understand your role and relationships in the church today.

From Romans 16:1-2, we're going to outline 3 important insights into the NT church that can refresh our perspectives on the church today.

To start, look at Romans 16:1 & let's read it again. [READ]

Note that Paul referred to Phoebe as our sister, meaning he considered her a fellow member of the family of God.

It was like calling her a Christian or a believer or follower or disciple of Jesus, but he chose to use the word 'sister' for her.

Why did he do that and why have you probably heard Christians call each other brother or sister or even uncle or aunt?

What's being communicated by such terms?

It's family, right? The point is that we're family.

We as Christians in the local church are spiritual family.

I treasure my relationships with you as more than friends because we share the same heavenly Father and the same ultimate home in heaven.

We have the same authority in the Word of God and the same Master in the Lord Jesus and so we follow the same path.

We share the same need for the rescue from sin and we cherish the same salvation by grace through faith in Christ as our Savior.

We've even been born by the Holy Spirit into that new life of faith in Christ by which we call on God as our Father.

The NT refers to us as adopted children of God in His family.

That's what's behind Paul calling Phoebe our sister.

She was our sister—meaning she was not only his spiritual sister, but that she was part of a larger family that included the church in Rome.

She was a member at the church at Cenchrea, which was the port in Corinth facing toward the east.

Corinth was located next to an isthmus connecting portions of modern day Greece that had a port facing west and a port facing east.

So the church at Cenchrea was probably part of the church at Corinth or a plant out of the Corinthian church.

But Phoebe was not only a family member in that local church.

Paul stretched that family togetherness from Corinth to Rome.

And this mention of Cenchrea, by the way, is part of how we know that Paul wrote this letter from Corinth.

This verse helps put this letter in the chronology of Acts 18-20 like we have done in examining his travels because Paul was apparently sending Phoebe as his letter carrier.

Please catch that distinction here—Paul greeted people in Rome and sent greetings from people in Corinth to Rome, but he did not greet or send greetings from Phoebe.

He sent Phoebe in person.

If you ever wondered how these letters of the Apostles were delivered and received and viewed rightly as authentic, here's a peak into it.

Paul sent this letter by Phoebe and he sent his commendation of Phoebe in the letter.

The specific people mentioned in the church at Rome would recognize that Paul knew them and they would recognize others that sent greetings and those relationships would authenticate Paul's letter.

They would then know this was from Paul as an Apostle of Christ and as their fellow Christian.

And then Paul's commendation of Phoebe in the letter would affirm her in their eyes as a trustworthy sister in the Lord.

The commendation of Phoebe in verse 1 would affirm to them that she was a member in good standing in the church at Cenchrea that they could view as part of their spiritual family.

This was how people traveled when they did not have hotels & when inns for travelers were sparse or were used as brothels.

So people would plan to stay with friends or relatives or with friends of friends or relatives.

And when they did not know the people they would be staying with, they carried along a letter of commendation for the host to make a connection somehow with the traveler.

This was especially needed in the early church as they faced persecution and needed to know who could be trusted.

So this is how they tracked membership in the church from city to city.

We know from the records in Acts that the early church knew their numbers and who was among their numbers.

And we know from Jesus' words about church discipline and the NT commands for body life that each church must know who is in the family and who is not in the family.

So there was this system of letters of commendation from one local church to another that we find in several NT letters.

For local church leaders to faithfully shepherd the flock entrusted to them and for all believers to know who to treat as Christian family, they had to track church membership.

And when messengers were sent between churches or Christians relocated, they needed to have trustworthy connections with the family of believers between locations.

And Paul's commendation of Phoebe is an example of that.

The word for commendation used for this practice meant Paul stood with Phoebe, giving a picture of the close family support.

That tight-knit, loving commitment is a fresh reminder of how we are to function as brothers and sisters in the church today.

We are a church family and I thank God for how you not only say that but live it out day after day and week after week.

When there's a crisis or need, you are there for each other like family should be to pray or meet needs or offer counsel or help or to reach out to rescue from error or sin and restore.

I know we all fail at times, but I want to affirm what you are doing and urge you to keep it up and excel still more.

And for those of you who are disconnected or lightly committed or who have slacked off or never plugged in, I want to encourage you to fully engage in and enjoy the strengthening relationships of the church.

That's the 1st insight we outline today—#1—note the importance of membership in the family of the church.

Then as a 2nd insight from Romans 16:1-2 this morning--#2—note the importance of women in the ministry of the church

2nd note the importance of women in the ministry of the church.

Sister Phoebe was entrusted with the NT Scriptural letter that functions most like a systematic theology of the NT.

This dear lady was in charge of delivering this treasured treatise at a time when the printing press was not available and you could not download an electronic to print at home.

Presumably there was one original copy and Phoebe carried it.

From verse 2, we learn that Phoebe was probably a woman with some financial means because she was a helper of many and even of the Apostle Paul.

That word helper is the word for benefactor or patron or protector and most likely means that Phoebe had provided housing and financial support for Paul and others.

So when she traveled, we might assume that she probably did not travel alone and that she was well protected.

But whatever the case, she was the letter carrier and that was a vitally important role in the early church.

Yet we learn more about this dear lady's significance in ministry from what's said of her in verse 1.

Literally, she was a deacon of the church in Cenchrea.

Your English translation probably says that she was a servant of the church at Cenchrea and that's correct, but the word for servant is the word we get our word deacon from.

And she's mentioned as being a diakonos ekklesias—a deacon of the church, meaning she served in that local body of believers in that city.

Of course in today's language, when I say this lady was a deacon of that church, it raises all kinds of questions.

Did she hold an official church office?

Was it the office of deacon or deaconess?

Does that mean the NT church had women leaders?

Answering those questions requires first that we understand this word diakonos and its various meanings and uses in related noun forms and also in the verb form.

We saw one noun form for diaconal service last week in Romans 15:31 in Paul's request that his service for Jerusalem prove acceptable.

That SERVICE is the Greek word 'diakonia', which is a general term for serving or service or ministry.

It can refer to serving meals or tables or serving the Word of God or serving people or making a contribution.

And the verb form is similarly broad in meaning to serve or meet needs or minister or care for or wait upon.

We saw the verb form in Romans 15:25 for Paul serving the saints.

And that generally broad idea of a diakonos as a servant is true throughout the majority of times it is used in the NT.

It can refer to someone serving wine at a wedding or functioning as a general servant of others or of being a servant of Jesus as His follower.

We saw it used in Romans 13 about government leaders as servants of God for protecting good and punishing evil.

It is so general that I've wondered if we totally miss the point by making it an office when it should have been what all Christians do.

I mean, all Christians should be serving Christ and His church.

It is only in Philippians 1:1 when the letter is addressed to the overseers and deacons and in 1st Timothy 3 where qualifications for deacons are given that this term can have any technical sense.

The other 20+ times it's used, it's not referring to a deacon as any special office in the NT church.

But Philippians 1:1 and 1st Timothy 3 raise that possibility and those passages are where we get the idea of deacon being a church office.

But I think that vagueness should caution us against being too dogmatic and against reacting when others disagree.

In my experience though, most of those intense reactions are about women deacons and the real issue is the role of women in the church.

Part of that comes from misunderstanding what a deacon is.

In the NT, a deacon is merely a general servant in the church.

The NT does not teach that deacons are the main leaders or rulers of the church because those functions are for those the NT calls overseers or pastors or elders.

So if you are from a church background like I was where deacons were in charge, I understand how this can be confusing.

But when we understand that deacon is merely a general term for servant, it helps us not to cry heresy about women deacons.

That's why I want you to grasp what's clearly stated in verse 1—that Paul referred to Phoebe as being a servant of the church in Cenchrea.

However general or specific you take that word servant in Romans 16:1, the point not to miss is that this was a special lady who had significant ministry in the church at Cenchrea.

Whether she was one of many Christians serving or she had an official role of deacon, she was recognized as a servant of that church.

She served in that local body and verse 2 tells us she blessed Paul and others by meeting needs and supporting them.

Her ministry mattered and made a difference in that church and probably in all that occurred in the area of Corinth.

So by entering the debate over female deacons and the role of women in the church, I do not want us to lose sight of the fact that women were vital parts of the body of Christ in the NT.

Though the NT is clear—in places like 1st Timothy 2—that women are not to teach or exercise authority over men, that does not diminish the importance of women being involved ministering in the body.

Though the NT is clear—in 1st Timothy 3 and Titus 1 and other passages—that women are not to hold the office of elder or pastor or overseer—that does not mean women don't matter.

There are many men also who do not hold the office of elder or pastor or overseer or whatever other words translate those three terms that are used interchangeably for those who rule and teach and lead the church.

So the NT limiting of the church leadership office to men and the public teaching of men to men does not mean women lack areas to serve where they can make a huge impact.

Phoebe's role was huge and the role of other women alongside of Jesus in His earthly ministry was huge and the hospitality and care of many NT women in the early church were huge.

So women in that day or in our day dare not look at the NT as mainly focused on what they cannot do in ministry.

That's the wrong perspective.

The right way to look at it, both for men and for women, is to consider all that you CAN do as a Christian with your specific gifts in God's good, wise, loving design for you.

And God's design and gifting of you includes your gender as a male or female and your age and stage of life and how long you've been a Christian and what your relationships and responsibilities in life are.

The right perspective is to look at what you CAN do and what He has gifted you to do and then open your eyes to the needs and opportunities around you and get serving.

Then no matter what you think of whether Phoebe served generally or held a church office, you can be like her as servant of her local church.

Do you see that as the emphasis we need to grasp?

#2—note the importance of women in the ministry of the church.

With that in place, let's turn over to 1st Timothy 3 and recall what I've said before and how we've chosen to function in the life of this local church at this point in history.

As you are turning to 1st Timothy 3, you might peruse chapter 2 to recall that 1st Timothy 2:8 gives a command for men in church and then verses 9-15 discuss the role of women in the church.

So there is a distinction between the genders.

As much as our society today wants to wipe away all distinctions between God's obvious design of male and female, the Bible is clear that men and women were created equal but different.

Men and women are equal in bearing God's image and in being welcomed to God through faith in Christ and in more ways.

But the Bible is also clear that men and women have different roles in God's design for the home and the church, for marriage and ministry.

That involves different function just like the Lord Jesus had a different function as God the Son though He was always fully equal with God the Father.

As God the Son, Jesus submits to God the Father and similarly God the Holy Spirit is sent out by the Father and the Son.

But those different roles and functions do NOT mean the 3 Persons of the Trinity are not equal.

And similarly, the different roles and functions of women in the home and the church do not mean they are not equal with men.

They simply mean that God had different plans for good and needed purposes.

Men and women use their gifts in different ways for complementary blessings to each other & to children and to the church & the world.

That explanation of biblical gender roles is often termed complementarianism because it emphasizes that men and women complement each other.

And that's complement with an e, not compliment with an i—it's completing one another not merely saying nice things to each other.

If you look at 1st Timothy 2:12, that's the verse I quoted earlier about women not teaching or exercising authority over men.

And then in 1st Timothy 3 the focus returns to men as those who would teach and exercise authority in the office of overseer in the church.

1st Timothy 3:1-7 give qualifications of an overseer, which is a term used interchangeably with the terms for pastor and elder.

So in the NT, an overseer is a pastor is an elder though today pastors are thought of as paid church staff.

Similarly in English the term bishop has many mixed up hierarchical ideas though it's really just this term overseer.

So just realize this—the NT is clear that the church should have one office of leaders called overseers or pastors or elders or bishops.

And then there is probably a second office of servants or deacons, though all Christians are responsible to serve.

We get the idea of deacon as a servant more than others from 1st Timothy 3:8-13 where deacon qualifications are listed after overseers.

So after explaining the qualifications for overseers in 1st Timothy 3:1-7, verses 8-13 discuss qualifications for deacons.

Look there with me and let's read 1st Timothy 3:8-13. [READ]

Notice what we find there—in verse 8 they are men, but then verse 11 mentions women likewise and then verse 12 goes back to men clearly described as male husbands.

So which is it—are deacons only men or are they men and women?

Here's my answer—YES!

Yes, it seems that deacons are men and yes it seems like deacons serve alongside of both men and women.

In other words, it seems that male leadership of deacons is maintained in keeping with the rest of biblical teaching.

But it is also clear that women serve in deacon ministry as wives of deacons or as female deacons or as Christians serving deacons.

In one of those ways, Phoebe was a deacon of the church in Cenchrea—and whether she had an official office of deacon at that early point in the church development, I do not know.

She served in that church either as a deacon or as a Christian recognized for her serving ministry particularly in meeting needs.

Since Phoebe is mentioned after Romans 15 uses this root word for diaconal serving for this gift of money to meet the needs of saints, she may have been gifted to give.

Her recognition may have been because of her generosity and hospitality, which are the important point we come to last today.

But before we move on to verse 2 and our last point for today, let me list for you the 4 points from my sermon on 1st Timothy 3:8-13 that I gave June 27, 2010 entitled “What is a Deacon?”

And if you want to listen to that sermon or read my notes, our website is quickly being updated and I wouldn't be surprised if the audio and notes for 2010 will be up on the website this week.

Or I can email you my notes, but here are my points that tried to draw out this general role of serving among men & women.

1st Timothy 3:8-13 teaches us that a deacon is (1) a servant of Christ's church; (2) a Christian of proven character; (3) a coworker with both men and women; and (4) a receiver of great reward.

1st Timothy 3:8-13 reveals a deacon as (1) a servant of Christ's church; (2) a Christian of proven character; (3) a coworker with both men and women; and (4) a receiver of great reward.

In applying that text, we as a church have men as coordinators of various ministry areas that involve men and women serving together.

We want every Christian to be committed to the church serving because that's the biblical model, but we've reserved the title deacon for men heading up aspects of ministry.

We also do so because diaconal ministry in Acts 6 is led by men.

Others today use the title deacon or deaconess for all those serving and we understand and respect that as a way to be biblically faithful under the male leadership of elders.

But at this point in history amidst the confusing language of church cultures and with the need to uphold biblical role distinctions and encourage male leadership, we chose to use the title deacon for men.

The term itself is not a big deal and it's not a hill to die on.

The bigger hill to die on is that God made men and women equal in His image with different roles in the home and the church.

And the failure of the church to teach those equally vital roles has led to all the confusion over marriage and homosexuality and the other perversions that our culture is trending toward.

But to get back to Phoebe in Romans 16:1, the other hill to die on is that male and female Christians should faithfully serve in the church.

Whatever we say about the term diakonos for Phoebe, we need to say that she was recognized for her vital service in the local church in Cenchrea.

And that should lead us to note the importance of women in the ministry of the church.

From Romans 16:1, we should note #1, the importance of membership in the family of the church and, #2, the importance of women in the ministry of the church.

Now let's move on quickly verse 2 and a 3rd and final point.

#3—note the importance of generosity in the life of the church.

#3—note the importance of generosity in the life of the church.

Read Romans 16:2 again. [READ]

Phoebe presents both a need for generosity in the Roman church and an example of generosity in her home church.

Paul exhorted the Roman Christians to receive Phoebe—that is, to take her in to your life as a sister in God’s family

They were to exercise hospitality to her, to love her though she was a stranger and to treat her as the Lord would treat her as His own.

They were also to treat her in a manner worthy of the saints, suitable to someone who was holy and set apart for God.

That term saint, just like the term sister, was not some special exalted status for advanced Christians.

The Bible never teaches that sisters are only nuns or that saints are only dead people or super-holy people with robes on.

It was a term used generally of all Christians because when God saves us, He sets us apart as His holy vessel for His good purposes and He views us as holy in the righteousness of Christ.

She was to be treated like they would treat Jesus if He visited.

They were also to help her in whatever matter she may have need.

That could have included giving her a place to stay and meals to eat and help in transitioning to a new home and life there.

It could include helping her if she had some business to conduct there.

Basically they were to take care of her like she was in their own family and like she was holy to the Lord.

And if that were not reason enough to do so, Paul ended verse 2 with mention of Phoebe’s track record of doing the same for him & others.

He explained that Phoebe was not some moocher or cling-on who only wanted free food or another hand-out & who never gave or served others.

If there are givers and takers in life, Phoebe was a giver and so it was only right to give to her what she needed as she arrived in Rome with this letter from the Apostle Paul.

As I mentioned earlier, that word ‘helper’ means she was a supporter, a patron, a benefactor.

So she had been generous with her money and stuff and home.

Since Cenchrrea was a port on that stretch of land by Corinth, many travelers would come through there by sea or land.

And the need for Christians to open their homes and host believers that traveled through there must have been great.

The Apostle Paul would have been one of those travelers in his missionary journeys and his stays in Corinth.

So it’s probable that verse 2 is referencing Phoebe’s hospitality to open her home to Christians.

We’re simply told that she supported & helped many.

And since Paul had also been helped by her, he wanted to be sure that the Roman Christians knew this was a faithful, gracious lady who should be cared for generously.

They should show her gracious, welcoming hospitality for she was someone known to do the same for others.

By presenting this need & citing Phoebe’s example, verse 2 gives our 3rd point—note the importance of generosity in the life of the church.

Note how important it is for Christians to open their homes and to give to meet needs and to care for brothers and sisters.

In our individualistic, self-indulgent times, we need these reminders of the value of reaching out in relationships in the body of Christ.

We need to refresh our commitment to having people in our homes and opening up our lives to others.

For example, I want you to be encouraged by the significance of hosting a Care Group and having people over for dinner and opening your home and life for others to enter and share.

Be challenged and strengthened that the hassle is worth it because it preaches to your kids and neighbors and church family about treasured fellowship of the family of God.

And be deepened and devoted in your commitment to giving because it trains your heart and demonstrates to others to focus on eternity and on spiritual treasures that matter most.

The early church sold everything at times to give to the life and ministry of the church when the need was there.

Who knows what Phoebe gave up to be the carrier of this letter from Paul to the church at Rome?

We're not told, but it must have involved some sacrifice.

So note the importance of generosity in the life of the church.

From Romans 16:1-2, we note the importance of (1) membership in the family of the church, (2) women in the ministry of the church, & (3) generosity in the life of the church.

I pray those insights renew and strengthen your commitment to the blessings and opportunities of the church of Jesus Christ.

And if you are not part of His church, we'd love to talk with you to lead you to know Christ or to connect you to His church.

Please let us know how we can serve you.

Now pray with me as we close.