

“Phoebe the Servant”
Romans 16:1-2
(Preached at Trinity, February 12, 2012)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. We have finally entered the final chapter of the Book of Romans. It is a most unusual chapter of Scripture. It is filled with greetings—some members of the Roman church, and others who were with Paul in Corinth who joined Paul in sending his greetings.
 - A. There are 33 in all. 24 were in Rome and 9 were in Corinth.
 - B. One thing unusual here is that Paul had never been to Rome and yet he speaks of these Roman Christians as though he knew them well.
 - C. We can see here Paul’s pastoral heart. He cared deeply about people. He was interested in them.
2. We catch a glimpse into the early church in this chapter.
 - A. There are few books of the Bible as theologically meaty as Romans. Paul has dug deep in discussing theological truth, yet we find that it wasn’t written to theologians. It was written to common Christians that Paul was interested in teaching. It demonstrates for us the importance of doctrine in the life of regular Christians.
 - B. We also find here in this final chapter that Christians are engaged in many different kinds of service. Paul is commending these various individuals, each giving themselves to the labors of the Gospel.
3. The chapter begins with a commendation of Phoebe.
 - A. During this time when Christians traveled they depended heavily upon the hospitality of other believers. Letters of commendation protected the church from deceivers who might take advantage of their graciousness.
 - B. Phoebe is otherwise unknown in Scripture. She was from Cenchrea which was a harbor near Corinth. In **Acts 18** we read that Paul passed through Cenchrea as he travelled from Corinth to Ephesus. He may have met Phoebe on this trip. She is most likely the one Paul charged with carrying this letter to Rome.
4. Paul refers to her in two ways:
 - A. First, he refers to her as “our sister.” This is reference to our unity in Christ by adoption. It is equal to the word “brother” or “brethren.” Paul is commending her as a fellow believer.
 - B. Second, Paul refers to her as a δῆακονος . The word can be translated in various ways. The most basic meaning is “servant.”
 1. Sometimes it is translated “minister.”

Ephesians 6:21 NAS - " But that you also may know about my circumstances, how I am doing, Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, will make everything known to you."
1 Timothy 4:6 KJV - "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained."

2. But this is also the same word that refers to the office of deacon.

1 Timothy 3:8 NAS - "Deacons likewise *must be* men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain,"

 - a. There are many such Greek words that can have multiple meanings.
 - ἀνὴρ can be translated man or husband
 - γυνή can be translated woman or wife
 - πρεσβύτερος can refer to a person of age or it can refer to the office of elder
 - διάκονος can refer to a servant or the office of deacon
 - b. Only the context can give clarity regarding these words.
5. So how do we translate the word here? This has often been an area of dispute. Most Bible translations translate it “servant” but there are some that have translated it deacon or deaconess. Two in particular:

Romans 16:1 RSV - "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae,"

It is interesting that the ESV is an update of the RSV but has changed the word to “servant”

Romans 16:1 NIV - "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae."
6. This is no small matter and churches have come down on both sides of the issue.
 - A. Some are very theologically liberal. They deny the inerrancy, authority, and centrality of Scripture and so they are often motivated by the trends of culture. Many of these today ordain women into both the diaconate and the pastoral ministry.
 - B. Others, however, are very conservative and take the Bible very seriously. Although they stand very strongly on the masculine limitation on the office of pastor they believe the Bible allows the inclusion of women to the office of deacon. John MacArthur and John Piper are in this camp. Others included in this position were James Montgomery Boice and Charles Hodge. Most of these classify the deaconesses as having a particular ministry to the women of the church.
7. The question is, does the Bible teach that women can be included among those ordained to the office of deacon?
8. This morning I want to accomplish two things.

First, I want to answer the question regarding women ordained to the office of deacon. Second, I want to address the all important topic of women in service to the church.
- I. First, does the Bible actually teach that woman should be included in the office of deacon?
 - A. First, let's examine the text
 1. It is true that Paul refers to Phoebe as a διάκονος

But is this sufficient to conclude that she held the office of deacon?

 - a. We should note that this would be the only example of such in the NT – we'll look at **1 Timothy 3** in a moment

- b. It is also significant that Paul uses the same word just a few verses earlier.
Romans 15:7-8 NAU - "Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. ⁸ For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises *given to the fathers*"
- c. Paul had a very keen concept of the importance of service. But this doesn't mean that service is limited to those holding an office.
- 2. It is also true, however, that there is nothing in the work of the office of deacon that would necessarily prohibit women from participating. After all, the office of deacon is a service office, not an office of oversight. The policy of Bethlehem Baptist Church gives a good overview of some of the duties attached to the office of deacon:
"Deacons would care for the building and grounds; supply the communion and baptismal needs, as well as all other food and fellowship materials; administer a fund for the manifold material needs of the people and be ready to step in during crises of all kinds; handle the greeting and welcoming ministries; and provide practical assistance in job-hunting, housing matters, legal-aid, child-care, etc. In general, they would be ready to assist the elders of the church in any "service" that would support and promote the ministry of the word."
- 3. It is also true that one could read into **Verse 1** an official meaning—that this description of Phoebe was more than just that of general service. That it describes more of an official position.
Leon Morris – "The form of expression here makes it more likely that an official is meant than the more general term "servant", though in view of the wide use of the term for the general concept of service this is far from being proved. Phoebe is certainly called a deacon; the question is whether this is an official position or general service."
- 4. But all of this is insufficient proof that Phoebe was a deacon.
John Murray – "If Phoebe ministered to the saints, as is evident from **Verse 2**, then she would be a servant of the church and there is neither need nor warrant to suppose that she occupied or exercised what amounted to an ecclesiastical office comparable to that of the diaconate."
- 5. As you can see, this is no easy question, as evidenced by the wide range of views regarding the passage.
- B. A look at **1 Timothy 3** helps give clarity to the Phoebe passage.
 - 1. Chapter 3 of 1 Timothy describes the two offices of the church
 - a. **Verses 1-7** describe in detail the office of Pastor
 - b. **Verses 8-13** describe the office of Deacon
 - 2. **Verse 8** compares the office of deacon with that of the pastor
ὡσαύτως – "In like manner" or "in the same way" – this connects it particularly to the previous verse. They must be men of a good reputation—above reproach. They must be honorable men.

3. Like the pastor they are to be devoted to their wives and have their households in order. Compare:
 - 1 Timothy 3:2 NAS** - "husband of one wife"
 - 1 Timothy 3:4 NAS** - "*He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity*"
 - 1 Timothy 3:12 NAS** - "Let deacons be husbands of *only* one wife, *and* good managers of *their* children and their own households."
4. The verse that is open to diverse interpretations is **Verse 11**
 - a. It begins with the word γυνή. This is one of the Greek words that can be translated in more than one way depending on the context. γυνή can be translated woman or wife
 - b. Translations are mixed:
 - 1 Timothy 3:11 KJV** - "Even so *must their wives be grave*"
 - 1 Timothy 3:11 ESV** - "Their wives likewise must be dignified"
 - 1 Timothy 3:11 CSB** - "Wives, too, must be worthy of respect"
 - 1 Timothy 3:11 NAS** - "Women *must* likewise *be* dignified"
 - 1 Timothy 3:11 NIV** - " In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect"
 - c. This leaves it open to the possibility that instead of speaking of the wives of the deacons it is speaking of women who *are* deacons.
5. There is nothing grammatically that connects these women to the men. In other words, it doesn't actually say *their* women or *their* wives.
6. However, there are some strong arguments that this is not speaking of separate women serving as deacons.
 - a. It would seem very strange for the entire chapter to be referring to men, and especially the verse before and the verse after **Verse 11** and then suddenly insert a verse on female deacons.
 - b. It seems particularly strange that immediately after **Verse 11** Paul states that the deacons must be the husbands of one wife - γυνή
 - c. After describing the office of deacon, in **Verse 13** Paul pronounces a blessing upon those who serve faithfully "For those who . . ." – The word translated "those" is in the masculine.

- II. We must not, however, diminish the great service of women to the church
- A. There is no doubt that Phoebe had performed distinguished service at her church.
 1. Of all of the ways Paul might have described her he called her a servant. If I wrote a letter describing you how would I describe you?
 2. Paul pointed out her service to both the church and to himself in particular. **Romans 16:2 NAU** - " for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well."
 3. This is one of the most common and most needful gifts for the building up of our Lord's church.
 - 1 Corinthians 12:4-5 NAU** - "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord." - διακονία

4. Paul spoke of the gift of “helping”
1 Corinthians 12:28 NAS - "And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, *various* kinds of tongues." The word refers to helping, or serving, or assisting
 5. Phoebe had proven herself a faithful servant of the church. She was a faithful helper assisting in whatever task needed to be done. She was so faithful and so dependable that Paul entrusted her with this letter. She had no knowledge that an entire book of the NT had been entrusted to her care, even the Book of Romans!
 6. And Paul admonished the church to help her in whatever things she needed. Travel was dangerous in the first century and lodging was often scarce. Paul is saying, this is a faithful saint. She’s coming on an important errand. Give her your care and hospitality.
- B. The Bible is filled with examples of women who gave themselves in service
1. There are the many women who served Christ.
 - a. Martha ministered to Jesus
 - b. Mary poured expensive spikenard over His head
 - c. Peter’s mother in law waited upon Jesus
Matthew 8:14-15 NAS - "And when Jesus had come to Peter's home, He saw his mother-in-law lying sick in bed with a fever. ¹⁵ And He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him." - διακονέω
 - d. Don’t forget while most fled, the women were present at the crucifixion. And it was the women who had come to anoint the body of Jesus.
 2. The Book of Acts mentions several women as faithful servants
 - a. After the arrest of Peter Mary, the mother of Mark, opened up her house for a prayer meeting.
Acts 12:12 NAS - "And when he realized *this*, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying."
 - b. One particular lady by the name of Dorcas had given herself in service to the church.
Acts 9:36-39 NAU - " Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated *in Greek* is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did. ³⁷ And it happened at that time that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body, they laid it in an upper room. ³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, imploring him, "Do not delay in coming to us." ³⁹ So Peter arose and went with them. When he arrived, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments that Dorcas used to make while she was with them."

- c. After the conversion of Lydia her first impulse was that of hospitality
Acts 16:14-15 NAU - "A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. ¹⁵ And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us."
3. When a lady became widowed and didn't have family it was the responsibility of the church to care for her. But there were specific guidelines. Only the faithful were taken under the care of the church – those who had given themselves in service.
1 Timothy 5:9-10 NAS - " Let a widow be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, *having been* the wife of one man, ¹⁰ having a reputation for good works; *and* if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, *and* if she has devoted herself to every good work."
4. Godly women are to be ever mindful of their duty to teach and influence the younger women
Titus 2:3-5 NAS - "Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips, nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, ⁴ that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, ⁵ *to be* sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be dishonored."

Conclusion:

1. The point of all of this is simply this. There is a consistent patter of male leadership in the church . Ecclesiastical offices are to be held by men.
2. Phoebe isn't being commended as a deacon but as a faithful servant of Christ.
 John Murray – "Phoebe is one of the women memorialized by the New Testament by their devoted service to the gospel whose honor is not to be tarnished by elevation to positions and functions inconsistent with the station they occupy in the economy of human relationships."
3. Do you have to hold an office to give yourself in service? I ask this to the men and women. Do you have to be a pastor to care for the saints, to visit the sick or minister to the hurting? Do you have to be a deacon to give yourself in service?
4. A healthy church needs both men and women to give themselves in service. I pray that if I need to give a commendation for any of our women I could write, "She is a servant of our church who has served faithfully."