
Exegesis 21: Was Phoebe really a deacon?

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An exegesis of Romans 16:1,2

Phoebe has become something of a *cause célèbre* in the debate surrounding women deacons. Her celebrity status hinges on the use of the word *diakonos*: was Paul saying that Phoebe held office as a deacon in the church at Cenchrea or, as most translations have it, that she was a servant of that church? The issue was highlighted at the BEC Study Conference on *The Ministry of Women* (see *Foundations* No. 35) with women deacons supported in the paper *A Diaconal Role for Women*?

Commentators are divided on the issue, even those who are avowedly Reformed. For example, John Murray states that “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”¹ whilst Charles Hodge calls her a “deaconess”² and John Calvin refers to “her office”.³ CEB Cranfield, widely respected for his exegesis of Romans, believes that it is “virtually certain”⁴ that Phoebe held office as a deacon, whereas his colleague CK Barrett believes that the use of the word is too early to allow for certainty in the debate and that “the question...is wrongly put”.⁵

The list of commentators could be lengthened ad infinitum, but it has to be said that the weight of opinion favours the view that Phoebe held diaconal office. In the light of this, the chairman of the BEC Study Conference commented that “there seems to be a gap between theory/theology and practice. Whereas a significant number of commentators and theologians agree...about a diaconal office for women, not many evangelical churches have female deacons”.⁶

Given such divergence, it would be presumptuous to suggest that a definitive exegesis of the verse is easily attained. However, I feel that there are some points that have not been given the attention they deserve and others that have been made and need challenging.

Beginning with the context, verse 2 seems to indicate, as EK Harrison has noted, that Paul “is not stressing office but service”.⁷ The emphasis is upon what Phoebe has come to do and not whether she comes holding an office in the church at Cenchrea. This is seen in the phrase “give her any help she may need from you” and Paul’s description of her as a “great help”, which is clearly not a term that suggests office.

Turning to **the use of *diakonos* in the NT**, the word occurs 29 times in all, 21 of which are Pauline, but it is very rarely used with the more technical meaning “deacon”. In fact, excluding Rom. 16:1, there are only 3 instances where the word can possibly bear that meaning, Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8,12. This alone should make us very cautious in ascribing to any use of the word the aspect of office. In each of those 3 instances, the context makes it clear that Paul is referring to an office in the church; such contextual evidence is entirely absent from Rom. 16:1,2 (see above).

Dunn argues that *diakonos* “could be understood simply in terms of a regular pattern of service undertaken by Phoebe on behalf of her local church...but this would probably have been expressed by use of *diakoneo* (cf. 15:25) or *diakonia* (cf. 1 Cor. 16:15)”.⁸ But

as we have seen, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the NT authors, mostly Paul, have deliberately chosen to use *diakonos* when they **do not** have the office of deacon in mind. That is to say, they have used *diakonos* to refer to “a regular pattern of service”, the context providing the specific details, as is indeed the case with the use of both *diakoneo* and *diakonia*.

But is there any significance **in the use of *diakonos* with a genitive**? DJ Moo asserts that “with the official sounding addition “of the church of Cenchrea” it is more likely that Paul is identifying Phoebe as holding the office of deacon”.⁹ Is he right? In addition to Rom. 16:1, *diakonos* is used in a genitival construction 17 times in the NT, and in each instance *diakonos* cannot mean deacon; in every reference the word is used functionally.¹⁰ Far from supporting Moo’s assertion, then, the evidence points in the opposite direction: the fact that Paul refers to Phoebe as a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchrea is more likely to indicate function than office.

Are there any other specific **grammatical arguments** that support the case for understanding *diakonos* as meaning “servant”? Against what I have been arguing, both Cranfield and Dunn believe that the presence of the participle *ousa* (“who is”) with *diakonos* “points more to a recognized ministry”.¹¹ But there is no reason to suppose this to be so. Although the participle is governed by the verb “commend”, Paul is equally likely to commend someone for their service to the Lord as he is for their official position in the church. Indeed, it could be argued that he is more likely to commend someone for their service than for their office. This interpretation is strongly supported by the fact that Paul’s commendation of her and his request that she be hospitably received are made on the grounds that “she has been a great help to many people, including me” (v. 2b); that is to say, on the grounds of service, not office.

Conclusion

I believe that the above arguments go a long way towards showing that, although Phoebe served the Cenchrean church, she did not hold office in that church as a deacon. Although prevailing opinion is weighted against this interpretation, I do not believe that alternative exegeses make better sense of the context, the NT use of *diakonos* or the grammar of the verse.

If the above interpretation is granted, where does this leave the debate on women deacons? In terms of the exegesis of specific verses, we are still left with the very complex data of 1 Tim. 3:11. But would it not be careless, perhaps even reckless, for churches to make what amounts to a significant and historic change in church polity on the basis of one much disputed verse?

Postscript

I am very much aware that the tone of a paper such as this can so easily sound negative, which is a matter of very real regret because Paul is saying something tremendously positive in these verses. It is clear that our concern, the issue of women deacons, was not his concern at all. Although I believe that, along with the rest of the NT, these verses offer no support for the idea of women deacons, it would be wrong in the context of the ongoing debate about the role of women in our churches to neglect the implications of what Paul was saying to the church in Rome. There are significant **challenges** here for us.

Firstly, **the humble service of every believer is to be greatly prized and encouraged.** Do we recognise and teach that to serve is to be Christ-like and is a privilege of the highest order? Do we encourage every member of the body to believe that they too can serve the Lord and that their service is vital for the glory of God and the well-being of the church? Do we foster creative service, encouraging people to actively look for ways to serve? And do we acknowledge faithful service when it is given, avoiding “both congratulation (which corrupts) and silence (which discourages)”¹² It seems that Paul had no qualms in writing commendations that would doubtless be read by the very people he was commending.

And, secondly, **that includes the service rendered by women.** The right use of God-given gifts by the women in our churches must never be disallowed or discouraged; as with Phoebe, they have a tremendous amount to give. We must ask ourselves if we are afraid to allow women to perform “headline” tasks. Phoebe was presumably in Rome on “church business”, serving the Cencrean church and, by implication, representing them. Are we secure enough to see that, far from such sponsorship threatening recognised offices and authority in the church, it is something to encourage and be thankful for?

References

- ¹ J Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 Vols (Eerdmans, 1965), 2:226.
- ² C Hodge, *Romans* (Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 447.
- ³ J Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, 2 Volumes (St Andrews Press), p. 320.
- ⁴ CEB Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 Volumes, (T&T Clark, 1979) 2:781.
- ⁵ CK Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (A&C Black, 1957), p. 282.
- ⁶ M Johnston, “Trying to Tie the Threads Together”, Study Paper No. 6, BEC Study Conference *The Ministry of Women*, p. 6/4.
- ⁷ EF Harrison, “Romans”, in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 1976), 10:161.
- ⁸ JDG Dunn, “Romans 9:16”, *Word Biblical Commentary*, (Word, 1988), p. 886,887.
- ⁹ DJ Moo, “Romans”, in *New Bible Commentary*, 4th Edition (IVP, 1984), p. 1158.
- ¹⁰ The references are: Mt. 20:26; 23:11; Mk 9:35; 10:43; Rom. 13:4; 15:8; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4; 11:15; 11:23; Gal. 2:17; Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:7,25; 1 Thes. 3:2; 1 Tim. 4:6.
- ¹¹ Dunn, p. 886.
- ¹² JRW Stott, *The Message of Thessalonians*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP, 1991), p. 145.

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As the poor were supported from the public treasury of the Church, so they were taken care of by those in public offices, and for this charge widows were chosen, who being free from domestic concerns, and cumbered by no children, wished to consecrate themselves wholly to God by religious duties, they were therefore received into this office as those who had wholly given themselves up, and bound to their charge in a manner like him, who having hired out his own labours, ceases to be free and to be his own master...

John Calvin on Romans 16:1
