

Title: Summer series on women in the bible: Phoebe (Φοίβην)

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Scripture: Romans 15:30-16:7

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Romans 1:1-4 Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—² the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures³ regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life—was a descendant of David,⁴ and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 1:16-17: For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, ¹⁷ just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith”.

Romans 16:1 -16:7: I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. 2 I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me. 3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. 4 They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. 5 Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.: 6 Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. 7 Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

(Romans 16:1-2: Συνίστημι δὲ ὑμῖν Φοίβην τὴν ἀδελφὴν ἡμῶν, οὗσαν καὶ διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐν Κεγχρεαῖς, 2 ἵνα αὐτὴν προσδέξησθε ἐν κυρίῳ ἁγίως τῶν ἁγίων, καὶ παραστήτε αὐτῇ ἐν ᾧ ἂν ὑμῶν χρῆζῃ πράγματι, καὶ γὰρ αὐτὴ προστάτις πολλῶν ἐγενήθη καὶ ἐμοῦ αὐτοῦ.)

1 Corinthians 14: 33-40: God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people.³⁴ Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.³⁶ Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? ³⁷ If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command.³⁸ But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored.

³⁹ Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰ But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

When I travel, I rather enjoy visiting churches on Sunday, as it gives me an opportunity to appreciate the rich heritage within Christianity. For example, on my last trips to Sydney, I made a point to be part of the Hillsong churches, well known for their contemporary Christian music, and also known for their particular Pentecostal evangelical Christianity.

One thing I quickly noticed is that none of those leading worship were women, maybe except a few female voices on the praise team. It was fairly typical 40 years ago not to have women leading in worship as the numbers of qualified women were just starting to grow. Today this difference is far more noticeable.

Many congregations base this decision around a primary verse from what we read for scripture today that came from Paul's letter to 1 Corinthians:

“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says” (14:34, NIV)

The early church fathers, such as Tertullian (210AD) and Origen also directly use this verse starting in the 3rd century to remind congregations not to have women speaking in church.

Someone out there might be thinking now is a good time to get her out of the pulpit. Not yet...

It all fits a fairly straightforward well-packaged picture of the early Church. Men and women know their place in the community and in the household. Such structure often provides comfort for some individuals. We do have a nicely, neatly packaged perspective primarily coming from this one verse.

And then we have the readings from another of Paul's letters, the letter sent to the Christian community in Rome. Many argue that Paul's letter to the Romans is the deepest theological letter of all of Paul's 13 letters.

In the Greco-Roman world, when a letter was sent to a community, it would be read aloud by the person carrying the letter. The person reading the letter would be standing in the place and authority of the person writing the letter. Further, typically a letter was written by a small group of people, sometimes called a school, led by the letter writer and included the person delivering the letter. That individual would answer questions from those assembled with the assumed authority of the letter writer. That person would have been in the discussions so could answer questions with authority. Therefore, the person officially carrying and reading the letter would need to be a capable leader and one who would carry respect of the entire assembly.

So who carried, the letter to the Romans, read it in the place of Paul, and answered questions?

Phoebe.

My guess is that you have not heard of her before.

(bear starts coming up with iPad)

Hello there.

You want to read the book of Romans for everyone?

I'm not quite sure we have enough time for that in the service today.

We did read a couple parts already.

Yes, this is my bear. Phoebe. Some of you might have highly energetic bears at home.

Thank you for helping. Yes, we remember that your day is on Sept 3.

Did the bear surprise you? Was it something unexpected?

Did hearing about Phoebe reading the letter to the Romans surprise you? Maybe that was unexpected.

Maybe it was unexpected to the early church as well. Or maybe it was not that surprising to them.

Romans 16 is the personal section, leading off, as is tradition, by the introduction of the letter carrier:

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me” (Rom 16:1-2)

These verses say so much and carry so much weight.

Phoebe was a deacon from the Cenchreae, the city on the other side of Corinth. Being a deacon was an important office within the early church going back to the Apostles. You might remember the stoning of Stephen. He was among the first seven deacons. Phoebe was an important leader in the wider Corinthian community.

Paul only identifies five deacons in his letters:

He put himself in that group

Tychicus, Epaphras, Timothy, all three close associates.

Phoebe.

Likely Phoebe was doing the same things as the other four individuals.

Phoebe was also a benefactor to the church. In Greco-roman times, women could own property, and could inherit property¹. In a time when many men would have died in war or in other required

¹ For those who want a scholarly and yet accessible book on the subject, I would highly recommend the recent book written by Susan Hylen, one of my Candler professors.

services, many women were the head of their household as well as women owned property. Some of them were wealthy. Remember that women with means financed Jesus' early ministry as well as being heavily involved in Jesus' early ministry. So Phoebe was both a central person to the ministry as well as would have had significant status and wealth in the greater Greco-roman society.

And yet, here is Phoebe carrying, reading, and responding to the letter in the place of Paul to the congregation in Rome, to both men and women, in the center of the Empire. Paul certainly wanted the best person for this assignment, and that was Phoebe. She was on a journey, and Paul reminds the congregation of their obligation of hospitality towards her during this journey.

Well, that simple picture of the NT church just got shattered.

And note that multiple other strong female leaders were mentioned afterwards.

- Priscilla who returned to Rome after founding the Corinthian church.
- Junia who Paul named as an apostle and who was in Christ before Paul.

Phoebe is respected today by both Catholic and Orthodox Christians. She has her own day on September 3. (as I was reminded just a bit earlier)

How do we bring these concepts together? Paul wrote both 1 Corinthians (54AD) and Romans (<60AD). No scholar even begins to dispute that point. They likely were written less than 6 years from each other. Phoebe would have effectively been from the Corinthian church, and yet, we see her reading and speaking to the entire congregation in Rome.

A few things when looking at the 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 passage:

Paul talks about women prophesying three chapters earlier in what is a common area of the letter (answering Chloe's questions). Paul talked about women preaching with some noticeable discomfort about what women should wear when preaching.

The passage in 1 Corinthians 14 is primarily about order and unity in church gatherings. We read multiple cases of one group should be silent during certain situations when the community comes together.²

The phrase "Not allowed to speak" from the Greek might be translated³ in this context as to "talk or chatter". So read some of the verses again:

"Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to chatter"

"it is shameful for a woman to chatter in church".

One sees a very different picture of what might be happening. Chloe's people might have commented to Paul that the women might be talking among themselves a lot during the gathering of the community. I'm betting there were some men doing it as well, so likely this is a stereotypical comment, or a situation where women were adjusting to a space that is so egalitarian. Paul is

² To keep silent (σιγαω), to keep silent, keep secret, to hold one's peace. Passive form (participle), so to be concealed, to be kept in silence. It is used in 14:28, 30, and 34 for forms of keeping the assembly orderly.

³ The word to speak (λαλεω), is a bit more about talking, often in the NT in an important form, but in classical Greek, it often meant something more like "talk or chatter".

making the point that there should be order by everyone in the congregation, particularly after addressing order by those speaking or contributing to the worship of the congregation.

Where does the law say anything about this issue? The only apparent reference seems to be Genesis 3:16⁴, and it is not applicable in this case. Feels like the uncomfortable writing of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11, appealing to not offend angels.

It seems that the issues around 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is a case of taking a passage way out of its original context. Even the early church fathers were suspect to this temptation particularly to raise their arguments against other congregations. In one case, Tertullian, the very group he argued against eventually was a group he joined. And some of you thought divisiveness was a modern thing.

The early NT church had a number of important female leaders throughout the first two centuries, and yet, we don't often remember the amazing contributions of these female leaders, even though to the careful reader, we can see their impact and contribution. Likely women had influence in writing these letters. It is likely that Phoebe was part of the discussions, with Paul, Timothy, and others. Likely Phoebe was not the only woman involved in the NT writings.

We want to hear the inspirational stories of everyone in the early NT church. After all, Jesus instructed all of us to make disciples of ALL nations. Understanding and reviving the current church community based on the early NT church is central in our Campbell and Stone tradition. Digging deeper into these stories changes what our perception of what really happened in the NT church. These understandings enable all us to affirm everyone's humanity and efforts in bringing the Kingdom of Heaven upon the earth, following along Jesus' ministry.

And it is fair to say we might find that the early NT church was not as egalitarian as we wish it would have been. Certainly even Paul struggled with the balance between the egalitarian beloved community and what was needed to move the Gospel forward. We should not be surprised there were issues somewhere. But to quote my NT professor, Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson,

“We should not be surprised that Paul sometimes made decisions as a Jewish 1st century male. We should be concerned that the church made little additional progress in the following 19 centuries”.

Therefore, be open to how the spirit is moving and speaking a fresh word to us today. Be open to God breaking into our world, in the breaking of the Kingdom of God upon the earth, that we receive new insight on how to fulfill Jesus' statement to us: “go and make disciples of ALL nations”.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ Genesis 3:16: “Your desire shall be to your husband, and he shall rule over you” is the only counter mention, but weak at best