

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR MAN FROM START TO FINISH

Part VII: God's Righteousness Exemplified In Paul's Personal Messages, Romans 15:14-16:27

C. The Role Of "Deaconess" In Paul's Exemplary Life And Ministry

(Romans 16:1-2)

I. Introduction

- A. Many evangelical churches today have created the office of "deaconess" where women are put in leadership over men in the local church, and they cite Romans 16:1-2, the case of Phoebe, as the basis for this action.
- B. This issue needs our study, for Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12 taught that women were **not** to exercise authority over men in the church, but to be in subjection to them, Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, fn. to 1 Timothy 2:12.
- C. We thus study Romans 16:1-2 in its wide context for our insight, application and edification on this issue:

II. The Role Of "Deaconess" In Paul's Exemplary Life And Ministry, Romans 16:1-2.

- A. Paul urged his believing readers at Rome to receive Phoebe, a sister in Christ, whom he commended as a "servant" of the church which was at Cenchreae, Romans 16:1 ESV, NIV, KJV.
- B. This word "servant" comes from the Greek term *diakonon* that is declined from *diakonos* that **technically** means "servant, helper" **or** "deacon" **or** "deaconess." (U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 574; Arndt & Gingrich, A Grk.-Eng. Lex. of the N. T., 1967, p. 183-184) [The context eliminates the meaning "deacon" for this verse.]
- C. We list major arguments surrounding the meaning of this term in this verse (as follows):
 1. The major arguments in favor of *diakonos* meaning "deaconess" in Romans 16:1 are as follows:
 - a. Paul's qualification of the term *diakonos* in Romans 16:1 by the phrase "of the church" arguably "strongly" suggests a recognized position in the church at Cenchreae, Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 499.
 - b. In addition, some hold that 1 Timothy 3:11, in mentioning the Greek term *gune* that means "woman, wife, bride" (Ibid., U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 723; Ibid., Arndt & Gingrich, p. 167), refers to "a separate office of deaconess" distinct from that of deacon in the preceding context, Ibid., Ryrie, fn. to 1 Timothy 3:11.
 2. However, arguments that view *diakonos* as meaning a mere "servant" in Romans 16:1 are as follows:
 - a. All **other** uses of *diakonos* in Scripture outside of Romans 16:1 in the context of referring to an office in the church refer to **male deacons, never to female deaconesses**, Ibid., Arndt & Gingrich.
 - b. In addition, Romans 16:2 that helps to comment on Romans 16:1 explains that the basis of Paul's call for his believing readers to receive and assist Phoebe do **not** stem from some claim that she held an office of oversight at Cenchreae, but from her having been a "protectress, patroness, helper," the Greek term being *prostatis* (Ibid., Arndt & Gingrich, p. 726) to many and to the Apostle Paul himself.
 - c. Also, the argument from 1 Timothy 3:11 that by *gune*, Paul meant qualifications of deaconesses is weak in view of the context, for after mentioning the qualifications of these women, Paul returned in 1 Timothy 3:12 to address qualifications for deacons that he had started to do back in verses 8-10. (Ibid., Ryrie, fn. to 1 Tim. 3:11) This fact strongly suggests that *gune* in 1 Timothy 3:11 does **not** refer to "women" who were prospective "deaconesses," but to "women" who were the "wives" of prospective deacons in the context!
- D. Even were *diakonon* in Romans 16:1 to mean "deaconess," this office could not involve oversight over men:
 1. Paul himself did not let women teach or exercise authority over men, but to be in subjection, 1 Tim. 2:12.
 2. Further, though some argue that we today are not bound by Paul's 1 Timothy 2:12 prohibition of women ruling men because Paul's ancient Middle Eastern culture left his prohibition fitting only those of his day, rather, Paul based his prohibition on the order of creation, what trumps ensuing cultures, 1 Timothy 2:13.
- E. We are left with two logically and Biblically acceptable conclusions from this study (as follows):
 1. It is possible that Phoebe had an official title as "deaconess" in the church at Cenchreae, but served under male leadership in that church as a "mother" figure helping with homemaking work for the saints. Akin to this idea, the mother of Rufus in Romans 16:13 had functioned much as the Apostle Paul's own mother.
 2. It is also possible that Phoebe was merely just a helper in subjection to men without holding an office of deaconess in the church, a woman who had gained notoriety for her many helpful works. The household of Stephanas in 1 Corinthians 16:15 was similarly known for its self-appointing efforts to serve the saints!
- F. Yet, with many churches now making women deaconesses to rule men in violation of 1 Timothy 2:12-13, it is wise to heed 1 Corinthians 8:12 and avoid wounding consciences by not instituting the office of deaconess!

Lesson: *Phoebe was a helper, be it in an official or an unofficial capacity, who served under the authority of men.*

Application: *May we accept the ministry of women who help the saints under the authority of men in the church.*