

Phoebe, Traveling through Time

By Dianne D. McDonnell

Some people believe that the New Testament culture was so restrictive and limited in its treatment of women that a woman could not become a minister that served a congregation of both men and women. Rather than pursuing this avenue at length winding our way through secular sources, let's go directly to a scriptural record that answers this question. We will need to go to the inspired Greek to slip past the preconceived notions of the King James translators, but hang on and I'll try to make the way clear and easy.

As we begin our journey we must understand two words of the language spoken where we are going. Both words take on special meaning and become like code words, so we must comprehend their dual meanings or we could get lost before we reach our final destination.

The word for minister

Jesus made it obvious in Matt 20:25-27 that he had no patience with those who would set themselves up as pompous rulers over God's people. He set down a simple criterion for those who would lead his people. Ministers must see themselves as "servants" and the highest, most prominent leaders as "slaves". Let's look at the words of Jesus in Matt 20:25-27, "But Jesus called them to Himself and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your *servant*. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave--'" (NKJ)

A new double meaning

From that time forward, the term "servant" now had the double meaning of "minister" when linked with a Christian serving God. In all the following scriptures the Greek word for servant, "*diakonos*" (dee-ak'-on-os) is correctly translated as "minister" by the New King James:

Col 1:23 ... which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a *minister*.

Col 1:7 ...Epaphras, ..., who is a faithful *minister* of Christ on your behalf,

1 Cor 3:5 Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but *ministers* through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?

1 Tim 4:6 ...you (Timothy) will be a good *minister* of Jesus Christ, ...

Eph 3:7 of which I became a *minister* according to the gift of the grace of God ...

Eph 6:21 ...Tychicus, a beloved brother and faithful *minister* in the Lord, will make all things known to you;

"*Diakonos*" has the Strong's number 1249, which is a handy system of word identification to simplify tracking Greek words. In Greek, words vary in their endings according to how they are used in the sentence, so numbers make it easier to be sure we are still dealing with the same word. We find eight other examples of *diakonos* translated as minister in the KJV or NKJ in 2 Cor 3:6, 6:4, 11:15, 11:23; Gal 2:17, Romans 15:8, Col 1:25 and 4:7.

Minister, not deacon

Oddly enough *diakonos* gets mistranslated as “deacon” in three places -1 Tim 3:8, 3:12, and Phil 1:11- but the word is the same and rightfully should be translated as “minister” in these places as well. The Greek *diakonos* always meant minister to the New Testament church. In the 1Timothy passages our word’s proximity to instructions for women leaders seems to have sent the translators into consternation, unable to accept what they saw in the Greek so they substituted the word “deacon” for “minister”. See 1 Tim. 3:11 in the New American Standard, RSV or ASV, “Women must likewise be...” as Paul begins listing requirements for women leaders that are much the same as the requirements for men. The KJV arbitrarily adds the word “their” to the text and translates “wives” instead of women, and all translations magically turn both men and women into deacons rather than ministers!

This was impossible since the office of deacon was set up well after the time of Paul. The seven men that were selected to “serve tables” in Acts 6:3-5 were not called “deacons” but were called “the seven” as you see in Acts 21:8. Philip, one of “the seven” became an evangelist, and had four daughters that were prophetesses, Acts 21:8,9. Not one of “the seven” is referred to as a “*diakonos*”. Imagine the confusion that would have occurred if they tried to use the same word for TWO different types of service! Let the inspired Greek scriptures set us straight on this point! Because of the words of Jesus the word for servant, “*diakonos*” became a word for “minister” when referring to a Christian leader. “*Diakonos*” should rightfully be translated “minister” in all three scriptures, 1 Tim 3:8, 3:12, and Phil 1:11, as well as in Romans 16:1.

In every instance, the word for minister is 1249, “*diakonos*” when it is linked with a specific Christian leader. If there is a woman involved in verses near-by, then the word was translated deceptively to hide the fact that New Testament women were able to serve in leadership roles!

Words with new meanings

In our own language several words have taken on new meanings. The word “gay” meant “joyful” in the 1800’s and today has the meaning of one who is homosexual. So now, to avoid confusion, we don’t use “gay” to describe just any joyful person because it now has a new meaning. In the same way, Paul did not refer to a Christian leader as a “*diakonos*” unless that person was a minister. In the NKJ the words translated “servant” which indicate Christian leaders normally are not from the Greek word *diakonos* but a Greek word meaning slave.

The King James translators usually translated the Greek “slave” as servant and the Greek *diakonos* as minister--- until they came to Romans 16:1!

Whoever desires to be first

Jesus’ words in Matt 20:27, “And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your **slave**--” also set the precedent for apostles to refer to themselves as a slave, the Greek “*doulos*” but also usually add that they were apostles. So Paul sometimes refers to himself as a “*doulos*” or slave as he does in Titus 1:1, and quickly adds, “and an apostle of Jesus Christ...” The well known apostle James uses this term for himself in James 1:1

and does not need to add that he is an apostle. Peter calls himself a “*doulos*” and an apostle in 2 Peter 1:1. Jude uses the word for slave in Jude 1:1 and identifies himself as the “brother of James”. The beloved apostle John likewise refers to himself as a “*doulos*” in Rev 1:1. In all these scriptures the KJV translates “*doulos*” as servant.

However, none of the apostles except Paul ever referred to themselves as a “*diakonos*” for they were not ministers but apostles. Apostles train and supervise ministers and have a higher responsibility before God. Only Paul refers to himself as both a “*doulos*” a word now sometimes linked with the word apostle or a literal slave, and a “*diakonos*,” now indicating a minister.

Carrying letters

The New Testament, except for Revelation, is made up of letters written by church leaders and hand carried to the location, usually by ministers. Paul often mentions the name of the person who is to deliver the letter near the end of his message, as he does in his letter to Ephesus, “But that you also may know my affairs and how I am doing, Tychicus, a beloved brother and faithful minister (*diakonos* 1249) in the Lord, will make all things known to you; whom I have sent to you for this very purpose, that you may know our affairs, and that he may comfort your hearts.” Ephesians 6:21-22. So the minister Tychicus carried the letter to Ephesus and explained it, and also carried a different letter to Colossi, Col. 4:7,8. From Phil 4:18 we calculate that Epaphroditus carried back the book of Philippians on his trip home. In Phil 2:25 Epaphroditus is referred to as an “apostolon” or apostle/messenger. So we see that a trusted minister (*diakonos*) or apostle usually carried Paul’s words to their destination.

The background

During the winter of 55-56 AD Paul dictated the book of Romans to Tertius in Corinth, Romans 16:22, and sent this epistle by a woman who lived in Cenchrea, the eastern harbor of Corinth. Phoebe traveled first by ship, and then continued inland to Rome. It was a journey of over 800 miles! Such a long trip, alone in New Testament times, would have been very difficult and dangerous. Had she been discovered with Paul’s communication it would probably have ended her life. In chapter 16, towards the end of the book of Romans, Paul gives this introduction of Phoebe, “I commend (or favorably introduce) to you our sister Phoebe,” Paul is introducing her to the congregation because they don’t know her and the letter that she has carried becomes her means of acceptance into the church at Rome.

In describing this woman Paul uses a male noun, the word we have just discussed, “who is a “*diakonon*” of the church which is at Cenchrea.” This is, of course, our famous 1249 word, repeatedly translated as “minister” when it refers to a male Christian leader! But, as I said, when it refers to a woman is translated deceptively-- and so it was translated “servant”. But was this woman carrying the book of Romans really a servant? If so, why did Paul use a male noun that now meant “minister”? Paul referred to Apollos, Epaphras, Timothy, Tychicus, himself--and Phoebe with this same word! All were ministers.

Greek endings

As I warned you earlier, Greek uses different endings depending upon whether the word is used as the subject, direct object, object of a preposition-- but the Strong's number remains the same, 1249. In Romans 16:1 the ending of "*diakonon*" is the same as in the phrase, "Jesus Christ was a minister (*diakonon*) of the circumcision" Romans 15:8, KJV.

Two translations

There are two translators of our modern era that had the courage to risk the anger of those prejudiced against women and translate Romans 16:1-2 correctly. One is a respected male Greek scholar, Alfred Marshall, who translates this passage very literally, "Now I commend to you Phoebe the sister of us, being also a **minister** of the church in Cenchrea,...for indeed she a protectress (*prostatis*) of many became and of myself." See *The Interlinear NASB-NIV parallel New Testament in Greek and English*, page 477.

The second is an accomplished female Greek scholar, Helen Barrett Montgomery, who translated *The New Testament in Modern English* in 1924. She bravely and honestly translated, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a **minister** of the church at Cenchreae. I beg you to give her a Christian welcome, as the saints should; and to assist her in any matter in which she may have need of you. For she herself has been made an **overseer*** to many people, including myself."

*Mrs. Montgomery, a missionary, and the first woman to head a major religious denomination in the United States--the American Northern Baptists, put a footnote to "overseer" as follows, "The Greek word *prostatis* is a very strong one. It is the noun corresponding to the verb used in 1 Timothy 3:4, 5, 12. It is variously translated champion, leader, protector, patron."

Tipping the scales

It is this word "*prostatis*" that tips the scales irretrievably in Phoebe's favor. Most translations inately translate the word as "succourer" or "helper", but she was no more a "helper" than Bill Gates is a poor computer nerd!

Thayer's Greek Definitions reveals the true meaning of *prostatis*:

1) **A woman set over others** 2) a female guardian, a protectress, a patroness, caring for the affairs of others and aiding them with her resources.

A radiant woman

Paul tells us about converting honored Greek women in Thessalonica north of Corinth in Acts 17:12, "Many of them therefore believed, along with a number of **prominent Greek women** and men." (New American Standard)

Phoebe, whose name translates as "Radiant", must have been like these women--affluent, with her wealth giving her power and prominence, and God's Holy Spirit giving her a bright shining confidence that must have inspired most women of her day. Since Paul used "*prostatis*" to describe her, it is obvious that this woman "set over others" was not a servant as we use the word today, but a servant-minister as were Apollos, Tychicus, Timothy and Paul himself. Had she NOT been a minister, Paul would have used a different word to avoid confusion.

Business in Rome

Phoebe was wealthy enough to easily afford the long journey from Cenchræa and she was using her influence and money to help members of the church, including Paul! She had business to accomplish in Rome beyond bringing Paul's letter, probably church business, and Paul urged Roman Christians to treat her "in a manner worthy of the saints" and "assist her" with this business. Was she intent upon bribing some Roman official to set a member of her congregation free from prison? We won't know until the resurrection. We can know with certainty that Phoebe was, as Paul was, a minister of Jesus Christ, and a true ministerial servant of the church--serving both men and women as one "set over others" in responsibility. She risked her life, her wealth-- everything to stand for the truth.

Clear evidence

There are many other women leaders described in the New Testament and several of them obviously taught and served both men and women, but their stories will have to wait for another article. Now we have wound our way through the maze of mistranslation to end up looking clearly at this one woman, this bright shining, radiant example of a self-sacrificing, serving minister willing to put her life and fortune on the line! We see that there is a scriptural example of a woman minister. She is absolute proof that we have been wrong in our doctrines about women not participating in church services or as leaders. We have misunderstood the words of Paul when he corrects local wives causing disturbances--the unconverted Corinthian wives prophesying falsely, just as the priestesses of the Oracle of Delphi did some thirty miles away; 1 Cor 12:2,3; 14:13, 14:32, 36. We misunderstood when Paul corrects women in Ephesus who were teaching falsehood, myths and doctrines of Artemis!

Culture and Tradition

The culture of that day DID hold back women-- but God circumvented that culture! Phoebe is our proof. The restrictive culture of that day did not prevent Jesus Christ from selecting a woman and then empowering her to be His minister and to do His work. Today our modern culture does NOT hold women back-- but the church does!

The ministers of today need to remind themselves that the word for minister means servant. Male or female servant-ministers should set about serving the people of God as bravely and selflessly as Phoebe did. One start in that new brave and selfless ministry would be to stop going solely by old traditions and start permitting the women of God to pray aloud in God's churches, read scripture, and participate according to their knowledge and experience within God's church. Phoebe was a minister and an overseer and carried the book of Romans to Paul-- proving that God does not hold women back! Why do we?