

Did Paul Have a Woman as His Pastor?

Phoebe was a woman leader for whom Paul had great respect as is borne out in the language he used to describe her. The power of his words is lost in our English translations but is very obvious in the Greek (Rom. 16:1-2). In fact, an argument could be made from Paul's own words that Phoebe had once functioned in a pastoral-type role toward him.

Phoebe Was a Minister

In Romans 16:1, Paul refers to Phoebe as, "A servant of the church in Cenchrea." The English word "servant" in this passage is misleading. It is from the Greek word *diakonos* and should be translated as "minister."

Indeed, *diakonos* is translated as "minister" in 23 places where it is used of men, including Paul, Barnabas and Apollos (1 Cor. 3:4). In this one place where it is used of a woman, these same translators chose to use the word "servant," a clear example of their bias (Hyatt, *Paul, Women and Church*, 26).

Diakonos does literally means "servant" but became a word for Christian leaders as a result of Jesus using it in response to the request by James and John for special seats of power in His kingdom. Jesus replied that whoever wanted to be great must become a *diakonos*, that is, a "servant."

From that declaration of Jesus, *diakonos* became a common designation for Christian ministers, highlighting the servant character of Christian leadership. The well-known evangelical theologian, E. Earle Ellis, wrote:

Diakonos is used frequently in the Pauline letters for those who exercise ministries of teaching and preaching. The title

is given to Paul and to a number of his associates who are active on a continuing basis as traveling missionaries or as coworkers in local congregations. In terms of modern function, it best corresponds to the modern designation "minister" (Hyatt, Paul, Women and Church, 27).

Designating Phoebe as a *diakonos* shows that she was a "minister" from the church in Cenchrea who had been sent by that church to Rome on a special assignment. Paul recognizes her as such by using the same word for her that he uses for himself, for Barnabas and for Apollos.

Phoebe Was a Woman "Set Over" Others

Paul also said that Phoebe had been a *prostatis* to many, *and of myself also*. The KJV and NKJV translate the word as "helper," but *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon* says that *prostatis* refers to "a woman set over others" and that it describes Phoebe as a "guardian, protector and benefactor." *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* says that *prostatis* is a word of "dignity" and indicates the high esteem with which she was regarded.

These definitions are correct for *prostatis* is made up of the prefix *pro*, meaning "before," and "*istemi*," meaning "to stand." It, therefore, literally means "to stand before" and identifies Phoebe as a leader with the qualities one would expect in a modern-day pastor (Hyatt, *Paul, Women and Church*, 28).

Phoebe Had "Stood Before" Paul

Some will argue that Phoebe was merely a patroness to Paul who supplied financial support for his ministry. However, the overall sense of the passage, including Paul's designation of her as a "minister," mitigates against such an interpretation. She was one who had "stood before" others, including Paul himself.

An argument could be made from this passage that Phoebe had, at some time, functioned in a pastoral type role toward Paul. He obviously holds her in high esteem, for he exhorts the Roman believers, both men and women, to receive her and respect her “in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints,” and to assist her “in whatever manner she may have need of you” (Rom. 16:2).

Women Pastors in the New Testament

The tradition against a woman functioning as a pastor is so strong in some circles that it will not even be considered. Part of the reason is a misunderstanding of the nature of New Testament Christianity. Whereas the modern church tends to be institutional, official and programmatic, the New Testament church was dynamic, fluid and Spirit-led.

This is reflected in the fact that the English noun “pastor” is found only once in the entire New Testament. The Greek word from which it is translated, *poimen*, literally means “shepherd” and is found 18 times in the New Testament. It is used only once of Christian leaders, in Ephesians 4:11, where it is listed as one of the ascension gifts given to His church by the victorious, ascended Christ.

In introducing these ascension gifts, Paul makes it clear that they are given to women as well as to men. He does this by using gender-inclusive language when introducing these gifts in Ephesians 4:8 where he says, “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.”

“Men” is a poor translation of the Greek word *anthropoi*, which is gender-inclusive and literally means “people.” The translators of the 2011 NIV got it right by translating the passage, “When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.”

If Paul had wanted to confine these leadership gifts to men only he could have signaled that desire by using gender-

specific language. Instead, he makes it clear that these gifts are given to both men and women but using the Greek word *anthropoi*, meaning “people.”

What About Women Being Silent?

“But,” some will protest, “What about Paul’s calls for female silence and submission in 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12?”

A careful examination of those passages reveal that Paul is responding to local situations in Corinth and Ephesus, and his statements were never meant to be applied across the board to all women and all churches everywhere.

To make those two passages the controlling passages concerning women leads to the denial of the fact that Paul recognizes numerous women preachers and teachers who are his coworkers and fellow ministers in the gospel. These include Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia, Tryphena, Tryphosa and those women in Philippi whom he says, “labored with me in the gospel” (Phil. 4:3).

Conclusion

Yes, Phoebe was a respected Christian leader in the early church with qualities we would expect in a modern-day pastor. The evidence indicates that she may well have functioned in a pastoral-type ministry toward Paul at some point in his life. {eoa}

This article was derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt’s latest book, Paul, Women and Church, available from Amazon and his website at .

Dr. Eddie Hyatt is an author, historian and biblical scholar. His books on church history, church order and spiritual awakening are available from Amazon and his website at .