

Meet the Mighty Women of God Who Mentored Paul

No one has been more misunderstood than Paul in regard to his view and attitude toward women. Secularists accuse him of being a misogynist and male chauvinist. Many Christians, while respecting Paul, insist that he confined women to subordinate roles toward men in all areas of life. Both are wrong.

Paul was, in fact, a friend of women and a champion of their equality in Christ. In my latest book, *Paul, Women and Church*, I show the many positive relationships he had with women as friends, coworkers, fellow ministers and even a spiritual mother.

For example, in his letter to the church in Philippi, a church that Paul had founded with a group of praying women, he mentions two women by name and then says, "Help those women who labored with me in the gospel ... " (Phil. 4:3b).

Professor Gerald F. Hawthorne says that the Greek phrase translated "labored with" is a metaphor that means "to fight together side by side with." This clearly indicates that Paul sees these women, not as peons under him, but as highly esteemed members of his team who have labored at his side in the cause of Christ (Hyatt, *Paul, Women and Church*, 38).

There are several such women coworkers mentioned respectfully by Paul, but I will confine this essay to two women who seemed to function, at one time or another, in a nurturing, mentoring role toward Paul. One is a coworker named Phoebe, and the other is an unnamed spiritual mother.

Phoebe: A Woman Highly Respected by Paul

Phoebe was a woman 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 obvious in the Greek (Rom. 16:1-2).

In Romans 16:1, Paul refers to Phoebe as “a servant of the church at Cenchrea.” The 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 (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*, or “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.

Paul also said that Phoebe had been a *prostatis* to many, ““and

of myself as well.” 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.

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,” militates 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. She had “stood before” him. She is obviously held in very high esteem by him 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 business she has need of you* (Romans 16:2).

Paul’s “Spiritual Mother”

In Romans 16:13 Paul sends greetings to Rufus, “and his mother, who is like a mother to me.” This is obviously not Paul’s biological mother, but is a woman who has been a spiritual mother to him. We know little about this woman, but at some point, in Paul’s spiritual journey, she had offered encouragement and counsel to Paul and been like a mother to him.

The identity of this woman can perhaps be identified by comparing Paul's words in this passage to Mark's Gospel, which also mentions an individual named Rufus. Since Paul's letter and Mark's gospel were both written to the same Christian community in Rome, and within a few years of each other, it is likely that the Rufus mentioned by Paul and the Rufus mentioned by Mark are the same person.

In his Gospel, which was originally written to the church in Rome, Mark tells of Simon of Cyrene being compelled to carry the cross of Jesus (Mark 15:21). He mentions that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus and the way he presents these two names indicates that Alexander and Rufus were well known to the Christians in Rome.

Mark obviously expects his audience to make the connection when they read that Simon of Cyrene is the father of these two individuals who are part of their community. The Rufus of Paul, therefore, is most likely the Rufus of Mark, the son of Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of Jesus.

Paul never mentions a spiritual father in his writings, but he does make a point to send greetings to his spiritual mother. His spiritual mother was likely an African woman from Cyrene (Cyrene is located on the north coast of Africa), the mother of Rufus and the wife of Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of Jesus.

Concluding Thought

No, Paul was not a misogynist, nor did he confine women to subordinate roles. He treated women with dignity and respect. This is obvious in Luke's account of the beginning of Gospel in Philippi.

Luke tells how they found a place where certain women met for prayer each Sabbath. Luke says, "And we sat down and spoke to the women who had assembled" (Acts 16:13b). Note how personable is Paul. He does not preach to the women, nor does

he hand out his card or brochure and move on.

Paul sits down, looks them in the eye, and has a one-on one conversation with them. This was the beginning of Christianity in Europe. No wonder the famed British scholar, F.F. Bruce, wrote, "The mainstream churches of Christendom, as they inch along towards a worthier recognition of the ministry of women, have some ways to go yet before they come abreast of Paul" (Hyatt, *Paul, Women and Church*, 21, 31). {eoa}

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

Dr. Eddie L. Hyatt is a Bible teacher, author, historian and ordained minister. His books are available from Amazon and from his website where you can also read of his vision for another Great Awakening in America and around the world. Go to .