

PHOEBE

WOMAN'S OFFICIAL PLACE

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"THE SCRIPTURE SAITH, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn, and the laborer is worthy of his hire" - I Tim. 5:18. An earnest brother has asked me to answer eight questions on woman's sphere in the Church. Seven of these are concerning Phoebe; therefore, we will use her biography as containing the solution to the brother's problems.

What is woman's official position in the New Testament Church if she is an official? The questioner remarks, that scholars say, The New Testament ministry is masculine, and Paul says, "But I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over the man" (I Tim. 2:12). I trust this first query will be clearly and satisfactorily explained by considering the questions about Phoebe.

What was Phoebe's work which Paul advised the saints to "assist her in whatever business she hath need of you?" - Rom. 16:2. First, the word "business" (pragmati, Gr.) does not mean material, or financial business alone; but any affair, or matter, or interest that might enlist her concern. The word business (chreias) in Acts 6:3 is a different word. Second, the word "servant" in this verse is "diakonon" (Gr.), that is, "deacon." It has the masculine ending only; but is used also in the feminine gender. This is unusual, agreeing with Paul's words - "there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). We shall see, therefore, that whatever is the sphere of a deacon, the word applies to women as well as to men.

The verb "diakoneo" means to serve, to wait on, to furnish, to supply. "Diakonia," the exact word used in the verse we are studying, means a messenger, a deacon, a minister of the church. Other Greek words are translated servant and minister in the New Testament; hence, by our common version, we cannot know when the word deacon is used, except in five instances where it is so expressed - Phil. 1:1 and I Tim. 3:8, 10, 12 and 13. The word "deacon," as a verb or noun, is translated servant, or minister about 36 times in the New Testament.

Generally it is supposed that a deacon is a man, not a woman; a man who serves in material things only. It has this latter use in Matt. 8:15; John 2:5, 9; Luke 8:3. But it is not limited to material service by any means. In Acts 1:17 and 6:4 and 20:24, it has a spiritual use only. This is what we wish the reader to see clearly, that the word "deacon" is used more often with reference to spiritual matters than to material affairs.

It is surprising in how many connections the word deacon is employed. For example, it is used in reference to Jesus - "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto (deaconed), but to minister (deacon) and give His life a ransom for many" - Matt. 20:28. "Jesus Christ was a minister (deacon) of the Circumcision" - Rom. 15:8. See also Gal. 2:17. It is used twice of Satan's servants - "His ministers (deacons) are transformed as the ministers (deacons) of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works" - 2Cor. 11:15. It is used twice of the angels - "Angels came and ministered (deaconed) unto Him" - Matt. 4:11. "Are they not all ministering (deaconing) spirits, sent forth to minister (deacon) for

them who shall be heirs of salvation?" - Heb. 1:14. It is used of the Holy Spirit - "How shall not the ministration (deaconship) of the Spirit be rather glorious?" - 2 Cor. 3:8. Note verse 9 also. Observe its use concerning the prophets - "Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister (deaconed)" - I Pet. 1:12. Study the frequent uses of the word with reference to Paul and the other apostles; for example - "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers(deacons) by whom ye believed?" - I Cor. 3:5. "Who also hath made us competent ministers (deacons) of Jesus Christ; . . . in all things approving ourselves as the ministers (deacons) of God" - 2 Cor. 3:6 and 6:4. Finally, note that the word deacon is used with reference to all the saints - "For the perfecting of the saints unto a work of ministering (deaconing) unto the building up of the body of Christ" - Eph. 4:12.

In all the aforementioned citations, the word deacon has a spiritual use. It is evident therefore that its chief and highest employment is spiritual of which its material use was only a figure. Believing that we now have the answer, we again ask, What was Phoebe' s work? Was it material, or spiritual? was her chief duty to mend men' s socks, as one fellow put it? Was that the way she served, or deaconed the Church? The phrase "whatsoever business" (affairs) implies that she rendered a variety of service. It is not at all reasonable to suppose that the Holy Spirit would make such prominent and important mention of Phoebe if she did nothing more than mend socks for "many and for Paul." and can anyone honestly dodge the fact that she was an official?

The Assembly In Cenchrea

Let us study Phoebe and her career more closely. Cenchrea was a seaport town nine miles east from Corinth, where was one of the most noted assemblies under Paul' s ministry. But for this commendation of this elect lady, we would not have known that there was a church in Cenchrea. Whether that church had a bishop or elder as Phi. 1:1, is not stated. Certain it is, it had a "deacon," and that deacon was a woman. Her name was Phoebe, which means "radiant, shining," a spiritual luminary of a seaport, or "lighthouse" assembly. It is no small item that the Apostle commends this woman to the church at Ephesus; for they were supposed to be the highest grade of saints. (The first twenty verses of Rom. 16, belong properly with the Ephesian letter). She was indeed an Ephesian saint in spirit and in truth. Furthermore, he calls her "our sister;" not simply a sister, but literally, "the sister of us" - the sister of Paul and of all who were with him in Rome when he wrote the letter to the Ephesians.

For some reason, Phoebe was about to visit the Church in Ephesus, or was already there; and it was a joy to Paul to write in her behalf a word of commendation. We repeat that this lady must have been an important character, and her deaconship an important service, else the Holy Spirit would not have moved the Apostle to record this biography of her to be read for two thousand years. Study the two-fold exhortation in his recommendation - "Receive her in the Lord worthily of the holy ones and assist her in whatsoever matter she may have need of you." To receive her "in the Lord," was to receive her "as the Lord;" for bear in mind that she went to Ephesus as "a deacon," in full fellowship at Cenchrea. Tho there may have been other deacons there, Phoebe received the chief commendation. This implies also that she was going to Ephesus on the Lord' s business, rather than on any financial speculation trip. She was going to the Church, not to the city. Her spiritual

deaconship was to be exercised in the Church in Ephesus, and that by Paul' s direct authorization in the closing days of his ministry. Her mission to Ephesus was not to buy, or sell, or mend clothes, but "to wash the saint' s feet" in the laver of the Word," so that their work and walk might be unto "all pleasing, fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" - Col. 1:10. Truly, hers was "the work of a deacon unto the building up of the body of Christ" - Eph. 4:12.

Then consider the other entreaty - "assist her in whatever affair." Could the chief Apostle have admonished the chief (Ephesian) assembly to grant such unbounded aid to any but a chief woman? Could he dare to say, "Whatever matter," if he did not have the utmost confidence in her wisdom, spirituality and competency as a minister of God?

Phoebe' s Past Record

"For she hath been a succourer of many and myself also." Was Phoebe a "succourer" materially, or spiritually? The foregoing reflection suggests that it was spiritual, ministering God' s Word. Nevertheless, let us study the word succour. It is from the Greek word "prostates," which means, "one who stands in front, a front-rank man, a protector, a front-rank protector, a chief, a ruler, a leader." Hence, this elect lady was a front-rank protectress, a lady chief, or leader. In writing to Timothy (I Tim. 3:1-12) about bishops and deacons, the Apostle uses this very word three times: but there it is translated "ruler" instead of "succourer." A real bishop ruleth (succours) well his own house. If any one knows not how to rule(succour) (or lead as a front-rank protector) his own house; how shall he take care of (or manage) the church of God? See also verse 11. Do you mean to say that Phoebe ruled, or led Paul? By no means; but by ruling well her spiritual house, she became a front-rank protectress of the Apostle' s spiritual interests.

These words of Paul indicate that the office of a deacon was no small office, and that it was closely associated with the office of a bishop. Almost the identical qualifications are required for either (I Tim. 3). Add to this, the fact noted before, that Jesus and the apostles filled this office, and we are overwhelmed with the magnitude of the place. And since Phoebe was called a "deacon," it follows that her ministry was of no small weight. Neither was she a "novice," or a newly planted one; because Paul forbids such being made an officer.

A Problem To Solve

Here arises a difficulty. Our beloved brother Paul exhorts his son Timothy, saying, "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection: but I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" - I Tim. 2:11, 12. Apparently, we are up against it. Nevertheless, Phoebe was not silent. She did teach; not only women, but men also. She did exercise some authority, not simply by Paul' s consent, nor because he could not get rid of her, but by his positive authorization. Men who like to do all the talking themselves and thereby compel women to fold their God-given talents in a napkin, imagine that by the above words, they have all women by the throat. However, note how easily the Word loosens their iron grip.

In the first place, the word "silence" (esuchia, Gr.) is rendered "quiet" in verse two. In Luke 23:56, the same word is translated "rested;" and in Luke 14:4 and Acts 11:18,

"peace;" and in Acts 21:4, "ceased." Therefore, the word "silence" here does not mean absolute cessation of speech, but cessation of anxiety, of carnal activity, of unwise or untimely activity, of officiousness, as in I Cor. 14:33 - "He is not the God of confusion, but of peace." The word "silence" here means to be at rest, to be gentle and yielding, and not officious. Again, note the phrase "usurp authority." That does not rob woman of all authority, or deprive her of holding some spiritual office. But she is forbidden to "usurp." I wonder if some men had not better take this home to themselves. Authority is here granted her scripturally, as truly and emphatically as if she were a man. And a man who "usurps authority" is in just as bad a case as if he were a woman. Indeed male usurpers are doing more harm today than the women; for a "legion" of fellows, because they speak in tongues, or have license from some sect and are glib talkers, assume authority which God never gave them, not intended that they should have. On the other hand, some modest women have proved by their spiritual prowess that they were authorized from heaven to minister (deacon) the Gospel to others.

Paul' s words are plain. The kingdom apostles were the divinely ordained channels for the giving forth of kingdom truth. No woman was to arise and introduce some doctrine different from theirs; nor to assume rulership not endorsed by them. Neither should any man. The women as well as the men who went everywhere preaching the Word, were in full harmony with the apostles (Acts 8). Likewise, no woman nor man either, should teach in the Church any doctrine different from Paul' s Gospel; for the whole range of Church truth was revealed sovereignly to Paul. Neither should any woman style herself an officer, nor an authority on doctrine. If God called her, it would become evident. "A man' s gift (a woman' s also) maketh room for him." Such a woman, like Phoebe, would gladly move in full fellowship with Paul and his associates; indeed she would be regarded as one with them. Present day examples of "usurping authority" are the Fox Sisters, founders of Spiritism, and Mrs. Eddy of Christian Science (ill) fame.

Observe also a deeply spiritual truth here. Woman as subject to man is the most fitting symbol of the Church' s relation to Jesus as her Head. John writes of the same officious "woman Jezebel," who poses as "a prophetess" and "teacher." Ritualistic Rome and apostatized Protestantism answer to Jezebel today. They assume, or usurp the authority in doctrine and practice which belongs to Christ alone. Hence, their adherents say repeatedly, "My church does not teach that; my church believes this; our church does not stand for that." Such are the women whom Paul forbids "to teach or usurp authority over man." No true saintly woman will yield to that spirit in any assembly, but will let her "moderation, or yieldedness, be known to all, " knowing that "the Lord is at hand," looking on, to sustain and comfort the faithful witness and reprove the usurper.

This is exactly what the Apostle teaches in the following verses, which he gives as the argument for the preceding instruction. "For Adam (figure of Christ) first was formed; then Eve (figure of the Bride of Christ): and Adam was not deceived; but the woman, being deceived, has become in transgression." Eve should have heeded the voice of God and turned to her husband when the tempter appeared. Likewise, the Church should always turn to Christ, accept Him as her Head and Teacher, and not usurp the teachership or headship, as apostatizing Christendom is doing. As far as we have any record, men only were appointed apostles and bishops, because the man represents Christ as the Head of the Church, which is represented by the woman. Christ Jesus is termed "the Apostle of

our profession" (Heb. 3:1) and "the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls" (I Peter 2:25).

NOW THE SEVEN QUESTIONS

1. What is woman' s official position in the New Testament Church if she is an official? Certainly according to the preceding facts, woman has official position in the Church. She is never called an apostle, or bishop, or shepherd. However, she may have the office of "deacon."

2. What was Phoebe' s work in which the Ephesian saints were to assist her? It was a spiritual ministry. She fed and taught the word of grace with such fervor and depth that she became a chief protector of Paul and others and of their message. She was a "deacon" indeed.

3. What is a corresponding service today? The service of a woman, who knows Paul' s message and believes it with all the heart, that sees a need and is moved by the Spirit to give out the Word to saint and sinner, and seizes the opportunity. By the providences of God - the unqualifiedness, or indifference, or shrinking of men - such a woman may be pushed to the front, as was Phoebe in Cenchrea. Note also that her usefulness is not limited to one place: but she becomes "a succourer of many."

4. How did Phoebe become "a servant (deacon) of the Church at Cenchrea?" By the Church' s call? Or by divine appointment? This is no small query. The answer is nowhere stated explicitly. Jesus chose the twelve apostles. Paul became "an apostle by Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal. 1:1). After it was evident that Paul was "a prophet and teacher," divinely so appointed (Acts 9:15 and 2 Tim. 1:11), the Holy Spirit separated him for a specific work and sent him forth by means of four other workers in Antioch (Acts 13:1-4). Later on, he authorized Titus to "ordain (place down) elders in every city" (Titus 1:15). Timothy was anointed with the Spirit by the laying on of the hands of Paul and certain elders (I Tim. 4:14 and 2 Tim. 1:16): but nothing is recorded as to how or when either he, or Appollos, or any of Paul' s co-workers were called or commissioned to their various offices and ministries. The inference is sufficient that the call was invariably from God. When the Spirit made the Church to recognize that call, a door of utterance was opened to them, which no man could close. The simplicity of the divine call and commission to spiritual ministries has been corrupted and the offices warped by organized, carnal authority, which is not real authority. Hence, unqualified and often unsaved men have been installed in the sacred place of ministering God' s Word; while God' s choice was shoved aside. Therefore, the Holy Spirit, again and again has moved unexpected men and women to stand forth, amidst great opposition from Christendom, and publish the pure Gospel of divine grace. Of course Phoebe' s call was from Jehovah. Her "gift made room for her, and brought her before great men," even Paul and others.

5. If it was by the call of the Church, in what form of action did the call consist? This question was partly answered before. No ironclad manner of procedure is outlined in the Word. Let Phoebe' s gift and call be acknowledged, and not opposed thru envy; then the Holy Spirit will direct as to how she shall be commissioned.

6. If a woman becomes pastor, is she not "usurping authority?" Above we said that a woman is no where called a shepherd, that is pastor (which is mentioned once only, Eph.

4:11). We say also, it is nowhere recorded that a woman should not be a pastor, or shepherd. If God calls a woman to feed His sheep, certainly she is not usurping authority, tho some sectish men may object. And is it not far better for a competent woman to feed the sheep than for them to go unfed and uncared for? Doubtless this was exactly Phoebe' s deaconship at Cenchrea. Her career is recorded as a sample of woman' s sphere in the church. If the Lord has placed a man in charge of a flock, no Spirit-led woman will assume authority over him. Nor will any Spirit-led brother assume to displace a woman whom God has set in a certain place in the Body. If he does, he will get the worst of it. "Touch not mine anointed (whether men or women), and do my prophets no harm."

7. Was Phoebe the only lady chief? Nay, verily. Paul wrote to his true yoke- fellow, "Help those women which labored with me in the Gospel and with Clement and with other my fellowlaborers" (Phil. 4:3). He refers to Euodius and Syntyche who "strove together for the Prize" with him and with others. Priscilla and Aquila were dear "fellow-workers." He says of them, "Who for my life laid down their own neck; unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the assemblies of the Gentiles." There was also an assembly in their house in Ephesus (Rom. 16:3-5). Philip the evangelist had "four daughters who did prophesy" (Acts 21:9).

Old Testament Fore-gleams

Deborah was a striking character in the time of the Judges. She was known as "a prophetess, a judge and a mother in Israel." She led in one of the greatest battles recorded. Barak would not have marshalled his army against the Canaanites if she had not spurred him on and held him up. Deborah and Jael won the victory; so that the honor was ascribed to a woman for that day' s triumph (Judges 4 and 5). Huldah the prophetess appeared on the scene about 700 years later. She was God' s mouth-piece to Israel at that time. Josiah the king, a man who did right thru-out his thirty years reign, recognized her office and gift and gave heed to the words of her mouth. The sixty-eighth Psalm is dispensationally a millennial pentecostal note of praise for divine power. In the R. V., the eleventh verse reads thus - "The Lord giveth the word: the women that publish the tidings are a great host." This is in full accord with Joel' s prophetic word, that under the outpouring of the Spirit, "the daughters shall prophesy" (Joel 2:2 and Acts 2:17).

Men who decry women' s deaconship exclaim that a female ministry is a sign of weakness. Yes, truly. God is pleased to "choose the weak things of the world to confound the mighty" (I Cor. 2). His own Son Jesus took the place of weakness, or dependence upon His Father, that the Spirit' s power might be displayed thru Him. When men are too wise and strong in themselves to submit to Jehovah, and are too proud to be weak, helpless and dependent upon Him; He is compelled to use women who will hear His voice. Men tie God' s hands. Thank God that some women are willing to be "in subjection" to and move in dependence upon His arm.

Let the brethren arise, learn Paul' s Gospel from the heart, yield to God' s distinct call; like the Apostle, forsake all; preach the word of grace without fear or compromise. Let them come to the front as "set for the defense of the Gospel," and declare "all the counsel of God," and not wait till Deborah again commands Barak to marshall his army. "Watch ye (for the opportunity); stand fast in the faith; quit you like men; be strong" (in the Lord, of

course) - I Cor. 16:13. "Preach the Word," or never again raise your voice against "those women" who are helping Paul in the Gospel and striving together with him for the Prize.

To the Sisters, let me appeal. Arise by faith to the occasion. Are you timid and feel weak? There is hope for you. "The lame take the prey." Start a cottage Bible class. If you cannot teach, get a few together and read the Word together. Open a small mission. Venture out. Do not plan big things; trust the Big God. "Be not faithless. Only believe" and move forward.