

Phoebe – A Servant Leader
Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11
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Now I introduce to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deaconess in the church at Cenchreae, that you may give her a Christian welcome in a manner becoming God's people, and give her whatever help she needs from you, for she herself has given protection to many, including myself. Romans 16:1-2 (Williams, The NT in the Language of the People)

Jesus addressed the up-side down nature of the Kingdom – “the greatest would be a servant” (Matthew 20:26-28; Luke 22:26-27). Paul affirms the value and importance of the men and women who served as deacons and deaconesses in the church. Paul calls the church to love, respect, and appreciate their ministry. Phoebe is mentioned only once in the Bible, but she stands as an example of a servant leader.

- Phoebe means “bright and radiant,” and from Paul’s commendation it seems to have characterized her life.
- She is “our sister” meaning she was part of the Christian church.
- She is called a deaconess (Gk: “diakonos” or “servant” ESV) which is an official position in the church.
- She is the bearer of the letter or a member of the group carrying the letter to Rome from Cenchreae (a seaport about eight or nine miles from Corinth).
- Paul calls for Phoebe to be treated with love, respect, and provided whatever she needed to perform her duties (G4229, pragma: deed, business transaction. G3936, paristemi: to place a person or thing at one’s disposal, to be at hand or stand ready to assist).
- Paul commends Phoebe for the protection given to many including the apostle (G4368, prostatis: a woman set over others, a female guardian, protectress, patroness, caring for the affairs of others and aiding them with her resources).

Application: “A Triade for Effective Ministry” – Observe the three participants in the text: Paul, Phoebe, and congregation. Reflect: how does the synergy between the three create a dynamic for effective or ineffective ministry?

The deaconesses too must be serious, not gossips; they must be temperate and perfectly trustworthy. (1 Timothy 3:11, The New Testament In the Language of the People by Charles B. Williams)

The Williams NT translation accurately reflects Paul’s word choices in establishing the office of deaconess. There are six reasons for supporting this position:

- “Their” (possessive pronoun) used in the ESV is absent in the Greek text.
- The use of “likewise” is used by Paul to introduce character qualifications which are like the overseer office (v. 8).
- It is consistent with Paul’s record of Phoebe as a deaconess (Romans 16:1-2).
- It is consistent with the servanthood of Priscilla (Acts 18; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19), Lydia (Acts 16), and Dorcas (Acts 9).
- The function of deacons was to manage things not people (Acts 6). Thus, there is no conflict with women deacons as the role does not call for authority over men.
- The second century church fathers Ignatius, and Polycarp frequently mention the importance of women as servants to the poor, women, and pastoral care.

Note: At Calvary Chapel Chelmsford/Manchester we **do not use** the title “deacon or deaconess” but refer to people by their functional roles as servants (e.g., Sunday school teacher, youth worker, bible study leader, prayer group leader).

Additional Resources:

<https://www.bible-researcher.com/williams.nt.html>

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Phoebe-in-the-Bible.html>