

# *“Welcome One Another Just as Christ Has Welcomed You”*

A Study of Romans for the  
Diocese of West Texas, Fall 2009

Optional Study and Reflection Session 11:  
“Women as Leaders in Paul’s Congregations”  
(Romans 16:1-16)

*Whenever we are beginning to teach a course on the writings of Paul, we usually begin by asking people what their understanding of Paul has been up to that point. More than half of the people frequently say something like, “Paul doesn’t like women,” or, “I don’t like Paul, because I don’t think his theology is good for women.” What they mean, we think, is that they understand Paul to be one of the people who want to silence women in the churches, and to deny women any public roles of leadership in the Christian community. The last chapter of Romans is one of the most powerful pieces of evidence to counter the claim that Paul thought women should not exercise leadership in Christian communities. After we look at this passage, we can consider the question of how Paul got the reputation he seems to have. The translation of the passage does not pose any special issues (beyond one that is noted below), so we have simply put our notes into the New Revised Standard Version.*

*The Passage:*

*New Revised Standard Version, with Commentary*

**Romans 16:1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon (diakonos) of the church at Cenchreae, 2 so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever**

**she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.**

*In these very first verses of Chapter 16, we get an inkling of what has happened in the interpretation of Paul's attitude toward the women in his congregations. It appears that Phoebe is the person who has been charged with traveling to Rome to deliver Paul's letter, and she is thus the person also charged with answering questions and generally representing Paul's point of view to the churches in Rome. Travel was difficult and dangerous at the time. Phoebe may have some other people with her, to help ensure her safety, but she is nonetheless the appointed leader and spokesperson.*

*In the NRSV, she is called a "deacon," the most obvious English equivalent to the Greek, diakonos. In the King James Version, she is called a "servant"; in the NRV, she is called a "deaconess;" in the NIV, she is called a "servant," with "deaconess" in a footnote. However, all of the versions translate the same word as "deacon" in Philippians 1:1 and in 1 Timothy 3. These translations reveal the assumptions of the translators, that women did not hold formal positions of responsibility in the early church, because they were not holding such positions in the experiences of the translators. In the time of Paul, positions in the church were probably relatively informal, with "servers" (diakonoi, or deacons) and "overseers" (episkopoi, or bishops) and "elders" (presbyteroi or priests) carrying out various tasks for the well-being of the Christian community, which might comprise a whole network of small house churches. But the translations, when read in the context of churches where only men were ordained as deacons, priests, and bishops, imply that women did not carry out significant roles in Paul's churches, an implication which is clearly far from the truth. When we change our assumptions, and listen for how Paul actually describes the women who are working side-by-side with him, then we see them more clearly in their full stature.*

*Note also that Phoebe is described as a "benefactor" of Paul and others. It would appear, from the evidence of the New Testament, that an important ministry of some women around both Jesus and Paul was financial (see Luke 8:3). In a time when most women did not have control of*

*their own money, it is interesting to take special note of these women and their boldness in many aspects of their lives.*

**3 Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, 4 and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. 5 Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. 6 Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. 7 Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. 8 Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. 9 Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. 10 Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. 11 Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. 12 Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. 13 Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother-- a mother to me also. 14 Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. 15 Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. 16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.**

*Of the 29 people and groups who are greeted here, 9 appear to be women (Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus' mother, Julia, Nereus' sister). They are described, variously, as those "who risked their necks for my life," "who worked very hard among you," "who were in prison with me," "who are prominent among the apostles," "who were in Christ before I was," as "workers in the Lord," "beloved," and "as a mother to me." In other words, Paul saw women as significant co-workers in the Gospel, and he does not use any distinction in language in addressing his male and female co-workers. Women traveled for their work in Christ, they were*

*arrested and imprisoned, they taught, and they did the works of love that characterize those who build up their fellow Christians.*

*So how did Paul get a reputation for dismissing women as leaders in the churches he founded?*

*There are several reasons:*

1. *Some of the letters that bear Paul's name were written by his followers, who wanted to carry his teaching forward into the issues facing the next generation. This is generally accepted to be the case for 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Thessalonians; most biblical scholars also understand Ephesians and Colossians to fall into this category. It would appear from these writings that women's roles in the churches underwent a change in the late first century, a change that restricted their activities, and made their roles more like those of the society around them. Can you imagine a setting in which that would be the case? What might be the various motivations of members of the community that would bring about a change in women's roles? What does it mean to you that there is evidence of changing standards of behavior within the New Testament itself?*
2. *There is what appears to be an insertion from one of these other letters into 1 Corinthians 14:33-36, in which there is a direction for women to "be silent in the churches." The insertion was most likely made by a copyist, who made a marginal note, linking Paul's discussion of prophecy with a counsel such as 1 Timothy 2:11-12. When the next copy was made, the marginal note was inserted into the text of the letter. It isn't hard to see that Paul's own train of thought continues most logically from 1 Corinthians 14:33 to 14:37. And if Paul thought that women should be silent in the churches, his directions to the women prophets in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 would be nonsensical.*
3. *But, having arrived at 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, we come to the issue that, while Paul was quite radical in some ways, he was still very*

*much a man of his times. For him, certain customs (such as proper hairstyles for men and women) were “natural,” and therefore intended by God. His assumptions about hair are a caution to all of us that we are conditioned by the culture in which we live, and we should always be on the alert for how this conditioning can cause us to miss what God is actually doing in our midst. The women prophets at Corinth may have had practices and traditions that Paul did not understand. I wonder what they would say to us about the controversy over their hair....*

4. *You might want to take note of other women who are leaders in Paul’s churches, such as Chloe, probably a wealthy businesswoman, whose “people” bring news to Paul in Ephesus concerning what is going on in Corinth (1 Cor 1:11); Euodia and Syntyche, significant leaders of the house church in Philippi, who had “struggled beside” Paul “in the work of the Gospel” (Phil 4:2-3); and Lydia, founder of the church at Philippi, whose story is told in Acts 16.*

*It is our hope that a more accurate, historical understanding of the roles of women in Paul’s churches may help our churches live more surely into the core of Paul’s ethical teaching, succinctly stated in Galatians 3:27-28:*

*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*