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Laborers in the Lord

Romans 16 and the Women in Pauline Churches

by Christopher Roy Hutson

In our discussion of women in early Christianity, we have traditionally begun with 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and then used those two passages as the lenses through which to interpret all other references to women in the New Testament. This practice has yielded a restricted view of the topic, as if in our attempt to observe a distant scene we have been looking through the wrong end of a telescope. The world of New Testament Christianity is indeed distant from us in time, geography and culture, so that we cannot hope to understand the practices of the earliest Christians if we fail to examine all available evidence. If we are to understand the roles of women in the New Testament churches (or anything else about those churches), then we must use a wide-angle lens to gather all the information available from our sources.

Romans 16 provides a wide-angle view of the roles of women in Pauline churches.¹ Here Paul mentions twenty-nine individuals in Rome (including Phoebe, who was apparently there only temporarily).² We do not know how many Christians were in Rome at the time; however, among the twenty-nine whom Paul mentions, it is striking that ten (34%) are women. At first glance, this statistic may not seem impressive, but when we consider what Paul says about each of the twenty-nine, the roles played by women stand out in a surprising way.³

In Romans 16:1-16, Paul mentions six functions performed by individuals: deacon, patroness, co-worker, host, laborer, and apostle.⁴ For some individuals he uses descriptive terms which do not name functions: sister, kinsman/-woman, fellow-

prisoner, beloved, approved, and elect. Paul also mentions eleven individuals without saying anything about them. In this article I shall concentrate on the six functions in an attempt to understand the roles that Paul's acquaintances were playing in the churches in Rome.

Deacon (*diakonos*)

Romans 16:1-2 is a letter of recommendation for Phoebe, who was traveling to Rome from the Corinthian port of Cenchraea.⁵ There is no indication of the nature of Phoebe's business in Rome or how long she intended to stay there, but the inclusion of a letter of recommendation on her behalf suggests that she was the courier for Paul's letter. For our purposes, it is interesting that Paul identifies her not by occupation or by husband's name but rather according to her functions in the church: "a deacon of the church in Cenchraea" (16:1), and "a patroness of many and of myself" (16:2).

"Deacon," from the Greek *diakonos*, means "minister" or "servant." Since "deacon" is often used to identify an "office," and since the narrow focus of the reversed telescope works to preclude the possibility that a woman could be a church "officer," many seek to avoid calling Phoebe a "deacon." But we might ask what functions deacons performed in the New Testament churches.

Simply put, the words *diakonos* (servant, deacon), *diakonia* (service, ministry) and *diakonein* (to serve) are used in the New Testament to describe two functions.⁶ On the one hand, these words apply to those who served tables (Acts 6:1-2) and by exten-

Individuals in Rome (Romans 16:1-16)

Function	Men	Women
1. Deacon		Phoebe (16:1)
2. Patron(ess)		Phoebe (16:1)
3. Coworker	Aquila (16:3) Urbanus (16:9)	Prisca (16:3)
4. Host of a house church	Aquila (16:5) Aristobulus (16:10)? Narcissus (16:11)?	Prisca (16:5)
5. Laborer		Maria (16:6) Tryphaena (16:12) Tryphosa (16:12) Persis (16:12)
6. Apostle	Andronicus (16:7)	Junias (16:7)
Total: 6 functions	3 (or 5) men filling 3 functions	7 women filling 6 functions

sion any who attended to physical needs (Luke 8:3; Col 1:7). On the other hand, these words apply to those who performed certain liturgical functions in the church, notably teaching (Acts 6:4; 20:24; 1 Cor 3:5; 2 Tim 4:5). Paul uses the words in both senses in Romans. That is, when he says he is on his way to Jerusalem “ministering (*diakonon*) to the saints” (15:25, 31), he has in mind his collection for famine relief; yet when he discusses the parts of the body, he includes the gift of ministry (*diakonia*) in a list with prophecy, teaching and exhortation (12:6-8). Although we cannot be certain which form Phoebe’s ministry took, Paul’s identification of her as a “deacon of the church” suggests that she was formally designated to her task.⁷

Patroness (*prostatis, proistanai*).

Phoebe’s prominence has been greatly obscured by mistranslations of the term “patroness” in Rom 16:2. Ancient Roman society was an extensive network of patron/client relationships wherein a patron of relatively higher social status offered financial backing and social prestige to his/her clients who reciprocated with deference and loyalty to their patron’s causes.⁸ The financial aspect of patronage is evident in Paul’s list of gifts in Romans 12:8, where “the one who acts as patron (*proistamenos*)” falls between “the one who contributes” and “the one who gives alms.” The social influence aspect is evident in the regular application of this term to leaders in

Pauline churches. “I urge you, brothers, to acknowledge those who labor among you and who act as patrons (*proistamenos*) in the Lord and who admonish you. . .” (1 Thess 5:12). A bishop as well as a deacon should be a “good patron (*proistamenos*) of his own household” (1 Tim 3:4, 12). Double honor is accorded to “elders who are good patrons (*proestotes*). . . especially those who labor in word and teaching” (1 Tim 5:17).⁹ In Pauline circles, then, patronage of churches was analogous to patronage of a household, which suggests both influence and responsibility within the family of God.

Co-worker (*sunergos*)

Although Paul could speak of himself as “God’s co-worker” (1 Cor 3:13), he more regularly referred to the members of his mission teams as his “co-workers.”

Thus, the household of Stephanus. . . “have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. I urge you to be subject to such men and to every co-worker [*sunergos*] and laborer” (1 Cor 16:15-16). Paul’s co-workers included Timothy (Rom 16:21), Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25), Philemon (Phlm 2), Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke (Phlm 24). In addition, Paul counted two women among his co-workers in Philippi: “I exhort Euodia and I exhort Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yea, and I urge you, true yokefellow, to participate with those who [feminine] contended with me in the gospel along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers [*sunergoi*], whose names are in the book of life” (Phil 4:2-3). If, then, Paul counted both men and women co-workers in Philippi, we should not be surprised when he does so in Rome, where his co-workers, that is, his fellow evangelists, include Prisca and Aquila (16:3) as well as Urbanus (16:9).

Host

Paul does not call them “hosts” (*xenoi*¹⁰), but he does indicate that Prisca and Aquila were the principal members of a household-based cell group, when he sends greetings to “the church affiliated with their house” (*ten kat’ oikon auton ekklesian*, 16:5). That is, their household formed the nucleus of a church, and so they likely hosted the meetings in their home.¹¹ Paul may identify two other such principals of house churches when he greets “those

who are from Aristobulus" (16:10) and "those who are from Narcissus" (16:11), although Lampe argues that Paul's greetings are only to some members of those households and that the two heads of households were not Christians.¹² In any case, we hear of both men and women in this role: Aquila and Priscilla previously in Asia (1 Cor 16:19), Philemon (Phlm 2), and Nympha (Col 4:15).¹³

Labor (*kopos*, *kopian*)

Paul regularly uses the word "labor" to describe his evangelism (1 Cor 3:8; 15:10; Gal 4:11; Phil 2:16; Col 1:29; 1 Thess 3:5).¹⁴ And he applies this word to other teachers as well. "I urge you, brothers, to acknowledge those who labor (*kopiontas*) among you and are your patrons in the Lord and who admonish you. . . ." (1 Thess 5:12; cf. 1 Cor 3:8; 16:16). Also, 1 Timothy 5:17 says, "Count elders who serve well as patrons worthy of double honor, especially those who labor (*kopiontes*) in word and teaching." For Paul the "labor" that really matters is evangelism. Thus, when he greets "Mary who labored (*ekopiasen*) much for you" (Rom 16:6), "Tryphoena and Tryphosa who have labored (*kopiosas*) in the Lord," and "Persis the beloved, who has labored (*ekopiasen*) much in the Lord" (Rom 16:12), it is difficult to discern what he could have in mind other than their work as teachers and evangelists.

Apostle (*apostolos*)

There is no confusion about the meaning of "apostle," from the Greek *apostolos*, "one sent on a mission." In the New Testament that mission is to preach the gospel. There has been some confusion, however, as to the identity of Junia in Romans 16:7. Some translators have stumbled over a technical ambiguity (created by the lack of punctuation and accent marks in ancient manuscripts) to render this as a man's name, "Junias." Nevertheless, Lampe has shown conclusively that no such man's name existed in antiquity (even as a nickname for "Junianus" or some such) and that Paul is referring to a woman named Junia.¹⁵ In other words, to insist that Junia was a man is to insist on "a boy named Sue." It makes more sense to understand Andronicus and Junia as a missionary team similar to Aquila and Priscilla.

Notes

¹See Peter Lampe, "The Roman Christians of Romans 16," in K. P. Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate* (2nd ed., Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) 216-30; and James Walters, "Phoebe and Junia(s)—Rom 16:1-2, 7," in C. D. Osburn, ed., *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, vol. 1 (Joplin: College Press, 1999), 167-90.

²Although my argument does not depend on the location of the Christians named in Romans 16, I assume

Yet even when we grant that Junia was a woman, there remains some confusion about the meaning of the phrase "noteworthy among the apostles," which could mean they were (a) esteemed by the apostles, or they were (b) notable apostles. Although either meaning is possible,¹⁶ the overwhelming majority of scholars favors (b). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine why Andronicus and Junia would be esteemed by the apostles unless they were prominent evangelists or church leaders. On the other hand, given that Paul names so many women teachers and evangelists, it is not difficult to imagine that Andronicus and Junia were an evangelistic team, in which case the word "apostle" appears here in its generic sense of "missionary" (as in Acts 14:4, 14) without reference to the Twelve of the gospels.

Conclusion

Among the twenty-nine individuals Paul mentions in Rome, he includes only ten women (34%). Yet more women than men appear in active roles. Of the six functions mentioned, only three are performed by men, and only three men are identified in those functions (or five, if Aristobulus and Narcissus are in fact Christian hosts). Yet of the six functions, all six are performed by women, and Paul names seven women in those functions, mostly in teaching roles.¹⁷ This is not enough information to indicate that women predominated in the Roman church; however, it does show that admonitions for women to "keep silence" and "not teach or exercise authority over a man" were not the rule in early Pauline churches.

When we turn our telescope around and take a wider view, it turns out that Paul counted quite a few women among the teachers and leaders in his churches. We must, then, interpret the restrictions in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in light of the data from other Pauline letters. In that light, it appears that the restrictions in those two passages are aimed at specific, local situations and do not represent Paul's view for all Christians in all times and places.

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that this chapter is part of Paul's letter to the Romans and names Christians in that city. Readers may consult the standard commentaries on the debate about the original destination of this chapter.

³I am indebted to Lampe, "Roman Christians," 222, for this insight, which led me to construct the chart that accompanies this article.

⁴I use "function" as a neutral term to avoid prejudice.
(Notes continued on page 40)