

Shoulder to shoulder: Paul's co-workers [M/F] in Christ's service

The office of deacon is also open to sisters..? These were the words used in the draft text of the new Church Order. This draft copy was tabled at Synod Harderwijk. It is introduced as follows: on the basis of their Scriptural insight the churches limit the office of minister and elder exclusively to brothers. But it is now requested that room also be made for female deacons (or deaconesses). I hasten to add that in the draft text of the new Church Order the deacons will no longer be part of the council. They will receive their own position in future.

What is your reaction? Do you exclaim: at last, it's about time! Or would you sooner be shocked: what on earth is happening? **Women in office?** This topic has already been discussed at length in the churches. It would be a pity if all the arguments would be directed only at that hot item. Let's not hone in exclusively on **women in office**, but rather broaden our view and see how both men and women were engaged in Christ's congregation. First and foremost we must, as always, let the Scriptures speak. It will then become apparent that women had an important role in the first Christian congregations. Did you know that during the first centuries of the early church the deaconesses had a unique task? And did you know that John Calvin staunchly supported the position of deaconesses?

Tonight we will zoom in on a list of Paul's co-workers in Romans 16. Just as after a film or play all the actors/players are shown, so too in this letter we are shown a list of co-workers. They are apparently helpers in the church, both male and female (see Attachment). We are going to get acquainted with Phoebe, Priscilla and Aquila, a married couple, and Andronicus and Junia, another couple, in order to show that men and women stood shoulder to shoulder. They worked together in full harmony during the establishment and edification of the first Christian congregations. This co-productivity is completely in line with the Lord Jesus, Who employed both men and women in their own various ways (Luke 8:1-13).

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

1. Phoebe *deaconess of Cenchrea*

Phoebe has a Greek name. She was named after the goddess Phoebe...also known as Diana. The name means: bright, radiant. She would not have been a Jewess as Jewish parents would not have named their daughter after a Greek goddess. Phoebe was from Cenchrea, situated close to the harbour city of Corinth on the coast (in the Saronic Gulf). How and when exactly she came to faith is not known. But the fact that she journeyed from Greece to Rome shows she was an independent person. She may have been a businesswoman, like Lydia who was a dealer in purple cloth.

This Phoebe is a *deacon* in the congregation of Cenchrea. On purpose I'm not using the word *deaconess*, for Paul uses the masculine *diakonos*. She shares this title with the male deacons mentioned by Paul in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3. She has an official task and function in the congregation of Cenchrea, a position that is characterised by providing practical hands-on aid. She has an actual function as representative or delegate of the church of Cenchrea.

Only she is not, like Paul, called a servant (*diakonos*) of Christ/God, but of the congregation. This points to an official function. The early Christian churches had a council of elders (men who gave leadership) that was assisted by *diakonoï*, consisting of men and women (Van Bruggen).

She is also called sister, maybe alluding to a co-worker's title, in the way that brother is used for Sosthenes, Timothy, Tychicus and Onesimus, as co-workers and letter-couriers. Paul calls Epaphroditus *'my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier.'* (Phil. 2:25). In like manner, Phoebe is sister. Considering the ending of Paul's letter, she may well have been a courier for his letter. She brings Paul's letter to Rome in the capacity of delegate, agent of the congregation, to deliver the letter and explain it.

assistant

Phoebe has to deliver the letter, explain it, and provide added information. She is given an extensive recommendation by Paul. He uses standard terminology, as is found in the papyrus scrolls: I recommend her (*sunhestimi de humin*). Her task to explain the letter and give added information where needed is thus affirmed. This is no mean task, considering the sensitive matters the letter contains.

You could have a position of deacon, but that does not reveal anything about how you function as one. Phoebe was obviously very active. She confirmed her task by her deeds, and had won her spurs. Mention deacon or

deaconess, and usually everyone connects it to works of mercy, because it has developed that way through history. Furthermore, concerning Phoebe we get the counter-projection: oh, she was most likely a hostess, she organised love-feasts and got a project of the ground for the homeless in Cenchrea, etc, etc. This could all very well be true, but these do not have to be works of mercy per se.

an open function

In its original meaning, the connection with love and devotion is not found in the early Christian wording of diakonia. A deacon or deaconess serves, provides assistance and supports. That *can* include financial or material works of mercy. At the same time it can be pastoral work. There was no marked distinction in those days.

Let me put it this way. All things that are being done in a Christian congregation today by both men and women, would in those days be the task of a deacon, a helper, male or female. Whether it be a job as catechism instructor, minutes secretary, ward-coordinator, organiser of fellowship meals, member of calling committee, liturgy committee, evangelisation committee, these are all *tasks that lend assistance*, and they would be the task of a deacon (male or female) in Paul's days.

Phoebe stood out. She was noticed and had served the congregation of Christ well in that city. They were prepared to hand over this *diakones* to Rome for the sake of mission work and church building work that had to be done there. Phoebe was a woman you could apparently depend on. She was willing to tackle all kinds of jobs; a woman with a willingness to help...one who knew the ropes. Paul asks the church at Rome to receive her in the name of the Lord, in a manner befitting Christians: lovingly. Do not exclaim: 'What is that woman doing here? How emancipated she is...!' Give her a warm welcome, greet her in a friendly manner. *Thankfully make use of her services*, in whatever area you need help. Accept her without reserve, so that she will have a chance to develop her talents.

Paul is preparing for his own visit to Rome and wants to promote the mutual trust between himself and the congregation. Most likely, Paul is busy taking concrete steps, preparing for the mission in Spain. For that mission plan, the cooperation of many churches was required. In Rome, they have to provide Paul with means like money, escorts, translators, transport, etc. It strongly seems that the church at Cenchrea supplied their contribution by letting Phoebe participate in this mission as their representative. Other congregations also had possibly already sent co-workers to Rome. Hence Priscilla and Aquila, and the married apostle-couple Andronicus and Junias were in that city already. What then, had made Phoebe to be the suitable choice to be sent as courier and as member of the mission team for Spain?

patroness

Phoebe had been a great *help* to many, including the apostle Paul. She was a woman you could depend on and in whom you could confide. There is something special about that word *help* (*prostasis*). It is sometimes shown in Latin as *Patrona/es*. With that word Paul really describes the task of a curator, a guardian, or trustee of goods. This person could be influential in social, financial or judicial areas. The patron or patroness would lend financial or judicial assistance. Quite a prestigious title to have. Compared to Paul, Phoebe would even have a leadership function...! Or even in charge of a Christian house congregation? But that is not Paul's argument. She has helped others in the early Christian movement and is recommended on that ground, not because she has a leadership position. She is a Generous Benefactress.

We should think of prominent and prosperous benefactors, who assist others in numerous situations, like hospitality, advice, access to social networks, material support. The more general meaning of *prostatis* is Benefactor, Sponsor, Supporter. It is used in the context of a father being cared for and supported by his son; it is in relation to lending assistance to a family member, to be their guarantor and surety.

This description fits Luke 8:1-3; Mark's mother in Acts 12:12; Lydia, the business woman of Acts 16 who offers accommodation; Nympha in Colossians 4:15; Euodia and Syntyche in Phil. 4:2-3 and the woman mentioned in 2 John:1. It is a prestigious and flattering title that probably reflected her status and stature. She offered substantial assistance and was an important intermediary, or go-between. Through friendship, a relationship existed between a female benefactress and a male recipient.

In her role of Benefactress, she offered financial assistance. When her support was business-like and judicial she was Protector. She helped many. That is a more fitting meaning of the general usage of the word *prostatis*, which points to patroness and supporter, sponsor, benefactress. The goddess Phoebe was called Curatrix, Patroness, supporter and refuge! Paul makes subtle use of that word. Phoebe no longer saw the goddess Phoebe as her Patroness, but thanks to the grace of Christ she became a patroness herself (van Bruggen). She is a real Phoebe, a support and refuge for many. A Caring person! This helpful deaconess was sometimes also called a guardian angel. And there were many like her in the first Christian church. Take Sophia, for example. On her grave (4th century) we read the following: *Here lies the slave and bride of Christ, Sophia, deaconess, the second Phoebe, departed in peace...* (see Attachment).

2. Priscilla and Aquila

greetings maintain the bond

'Say hi to...' 'By the way, regards from you-know-who.' It's nice, but it doesn't really mean much. It is a polite gesture. At best, it tells you that someone is thinking of you. But to pass on greetings in olden times was much more than a formality, or a raising of your hand in passing. If you went to greet someone, you made contact. You wanted to make a connection. That required time and attention. And via greetings you also maintained the bond. It included welcoming, acceptance, appreciation. That is what Paul asks the congregation in Rome. Not to say hello to various people, *but to keep in close contact with the following co-workers*. Young church, do not loosen the existing bonds, remain united together. Hold onto those who proved to be trustworthy. And don't join forces with those who are full of promises, but draw you away from Christ. Church of today, greet one another in the old manner. That is a good theory to apply when using social networks (hyves, facebook, etc.) in order to make contacts. But don't use these means to replace real, actual meetings and greetings. Maintain the bond also through eye-to-eye contact, by speaking with and meeting one another!

dedicated co-workers

Two of those trustworthy people on whom you could depend are Priscilla and Aquila, a married couple. They are old acquaintances of Paul's, fellow-Jews. He had met them earlier: *'There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla.'* (Acts 18:2)

We know that Paul clashed with people every so often. Peter or Barnabas e.g., resulting in a conflict. Not so with this couple. They obviously clicked well with Paul. Priscilla and Aquila would do almost anything for him. They even risked their lives for him. This is derived from the expression: "who risked their own necks" (Acts 16:4). It can also mean that they made themselves wholly available, exerted themselves, put their shoulders under it. Anyway, it concerns two very committed persons. They unreservedly put themselves out for Paul. This pair has apparently taken over some important task from Paul in Rome. It is even questionable whether Paul himself had been to Rome earlier, before his imprisonment.

This husband and wife team had an important role as pioneers in the first Christian congregation. And it is quite remarkable that Priscilla, wherever she is named, is mentioned first. She maybe had outstanding gifts and qualities. She and her husband were active in educating and equipping the brothers and sisters to their tasks. See for example what they did when they heard the learned Apollos (Acts 18:24-26).

²⁴ Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

Apollos was a competent, gifted preacher. People hung on his lips. However, there was something lacking in his knowledge, he had some blind spots, and he needed extra tuition or correction in some areas. Both Priscilla and Aquila gave him a refresher course and taught him some more, and explained to him the Way of God more adequately. Both had such insight in the Scriptures, that others could learn much from them. Earlier, they had already taken over from Paul in Ephesus, when he could no longer stay there and had to depart to Jerusalem. Now they are doing the same edifying work in Rome. Alongside Phoebe, this couple had a significant task in the work of mission and ecclesiastical upbuilding in the capital city of the Roman Empire. Shoulder to shoulder, men and women joined forces, building and establishing Christ's church. Their tasks were mutually divided and certainly not reserved exclusively for men 'in office'. That depicts much too narrow a view. It is remarkable that women had such an important role in the spreading of the gospel. Paul, who has so often been accused of female-unfriendly language, even puts them first!

from home

They worked from home and made their house available to the congregation. Priscilla and Aquila appeared to be quite well off and they used their possessions in the service of the gospel. They opened up their home and formed a house-congregation. This they had done before, in Corinth, and they do it again in Rome. This missionary couple make themselves very approachable. *When the heart is opened, the house also opens...*

We see various pointers and indicators here. In those days the Christians did not have a temple or synagogue in which to meet, so they met at home. Wherever Christians met in the homes in that gigantic city, they are called Church (ekklesia). We think of church in connection with our Sunday services. But in the New Testament, wherever Christians meet - home groups, house congregations, large or small - they are called Church. Wherever the congregation gathers, in broad or narrow context, God's Church of all ages, places and times, is represented. As we said to each other at pre-confession catechism: speaking about the Church, we should start by saying: we are the church, sitting here together, given to each other. You, male or female, are the church! Each one of us is a serving member.

3. Andronicus and Junia

fellowprisoners and kinsmen, male and female

For centuries the Bible translations showed *Junias*. It was presumed that both were men. They were also considered to be apostles. Not of the 12, but belonging to the large group of eye- and ear-witnesses. Grammatical investigations have proved that it is more likely to be a feminine name. And in ancient Christian literature she also appears as Junia...a female person (Chrysostomus)! It is even possible that it concerns a Greek translation of the Jewish name Joanna. Junia could then be the same person as Joanna, who together with Susanna and Mary of Magdala were followers of Jesus and supported Him and His disciples out of their own means (Luke 8:1-3). Andronicus and Junia could have been a married couple like Priscilla and Aquila, but it is not certain. It could also have been a combination of married apostle-couples, as the apostles were known to travel with their believing spouses (1 Cor 9:5).

⁵ *Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? Together they stood shoulder to shoulder, in service of the gospel. Anyhow, this couple also meant a lot to Paul. There was a great feeling of solidarity.*

They had both apparently been in prison with Paul. Nothing further is known about that, however. Paul, however, *does not recall that they were fellow-prisoners with him, but calls them fellow-prisoners here and now*. He does not mean people that are locked in a cell, but those who have lost their freedom and are now serving the Lord who has captured them. That is how we can look at it. Christ has conquered this pair. He employs them in His service and makes use of their talents and qualities. He has laid hold on their lives. To be a slave of Christ gives true freedom.

outstanding among the apostles

Paul says literally: *Andronicus and Junia are outstanding among the apostles (and apostolois)*...which does not have to imply that they themselves are apostles. Even if Paul *did* mean that, he could have meant it as a travelling married apostle-couple. Whatever way we look at it, this couple was known as being outstanding among the apostles. Yes, Andronicus and Junia had such a good name among them that they held this pair in higher esteem than their immediate colleagues! They were in Christ even before Paul (Rom 16:7). Concerning Junia, we must rectify her position by acknowledging that women completely belonged, and shared in the honour and respect. Shoulder to shoulder they, too, are employed in the service of the gospel.

unity with Christ

Paul says: *they were in Christ before me*. Andronicus and Junia even beat Paul to it, they were converted before him. When he was still snared by his old ways and proving himself to be a religious Jew, they had already found Christ. They were Christians, male and female, of the first hour. More importantly, this couple also shows unity with Christ. That is what it's all about! You can have endless discussions on women in office, and overlook the fact that unity with Christ is first and foremost. You could even end up being so divided on the matter that you lose the unity with Christ. Our discussions should not be at the cost of being united! Christ wants unity, as is shown by Paul's summons to greet these women and men in their mutual connections.

The Lord Jesus gathers men and women and employs them both. Paul follows the line of his Lord completely. Male and female, each in his/her own way, gets involved in the spreading and edifying of the Christian faith. There is no one who can work unification, also between the sexes, like Christ. In the beginning there was harmony, but rivalry took its place. Christ rectifies the unity in the diversity of male and female. He employs both in his service. True enough, there may be a core of elders who give leadership, but surrounding them we see a balanced congregation of men and women who are engaged as diakonoi (servants). *Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others* (diakonein) 1 Peter 4:10.

*As long as we do not stand opposite one another, but shoulder to shoulder, as men and women. **Because Someone is carrying you.***

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(translation Renee Mulder, 5 Dec 2012)