

OPENER:

Let's be honest for a moment. If you've ever been to a prayer meeting, a church potluck, or even scrolled through a Bible app leaderboard, you've probably noticed something: women show up. They bring the food. They bring prayers. They bring the spiritual backbone of the church. A Pew study indicates that women pray more, attend services more frequently, and take their faith more seriously than men. One pastor joked that if the early church had waited for the men to get moving, the resurrection would never have happened.

Now, that's not to throw shame at the brothers. But let's say: if the gospel had to get somewhere safe, interpreted well, and carried with courage, God would send a woman.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine holding the most important theological document in history—the Epistle to the Romans. Imagine being responsible for carrying it across land and sea, reading it aloud, interpreting it, and answering questions from the most influential congregation of the early Christian movement. Now imagine you are a woman in the Roman Empire, in a culture that often silenced your voice. That woman's name was **Phoebe**.

Romans 16 is not just a list of names. It is a roll call of gospel faithfulness. It is Paul's way of pulling back the curtain on the living, breathing church, and right there leading the way is Phoebe.

Open your Bible to Romans 16....

I. Phoebe: The Deacon, the Patron, the Prophet

Romans 16:1-2: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae... she has been a benefactor of many, including myself." (ESV)

- **Deacon (Diakonos):** The same word Paul uses for Timothy and himself (cf. 1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Cor. 3:6). Phoebe wasn't just helping in the kitchen; she held an office of ministry.¹
- **Patron (Prostatis):** She was a woman of wealth, influence, and courage, supporting Paul and many others. Think of her as a first-century spiritual and financial sponsor.²
- **Prophet:** She bore and likely interpreted Paul's letter to the Roman churches. The Spirit spoke through her. She embodied the prophetic gift of bringing God's word to God's people.³

¹ See 1 Timothy 4:6 and 2 Corinthians 3:6 for Paul's use of *diakonos* for himself and Timothy.

² Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 167–168.

³ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 91–92.

Illustration: Imagine sending a delicate, million-dollar manuscript with no copy by hand. You'd only trust the most capable, faithful person. Paul chose Phoebe. She was the trusted bridge between apostolic authority and local congregation—what Thomas R. Kelly might call a "life that listens inward and walks obediently outward." Phoebe's hands didn't merely hold paper; they carried sacred trust. She likely read aloud Paul's dense theological arguments to people who'd never met him, responded to their questions, and embodied the gospel in her posture, presence, and poise. She was not a courier; she was an interpreter, ambassador, and prophet.

II. The Household of Faith: Ordinary Names, Extraordinary Saints

Paul then names 26 individuals, 2 households, and multiple groups. These were not just ancient shout-outs. They were his spiritual family, and each name has a story—one rooted in faith, ministry, and courage.

1. Priscilla and Aquila (v.3)

This husband-and-wife team hosted house churches (Acts 18:26) and taught Apollos, a learned man, the way of God more accurately. Paul calls them co-workers who "risked their necks" for him (Rom. 16:4). That Priscilla is usually mentioned first may indicate her leadership role—a view supported by N. T. Wright, who notes that "the early church clearly did not mind women exercising substantial teaching roles."⁴

2. Epaenetus (v.5)

Called the "first convert in Asia for Christ," Epaenetus represents the beginning of the gospel harvest in the Roman province of Asia (modern-day western Turkey). The Greek term Paul uses is *aparchē* (ἀπαρχή), meaning "firstfruits," suggesting that Epaenetus was the first in a series of conversions that would follow through Paul's ministry there (cf. 1 Cor. 16:15). His conversion marks the Spirit's breakthrough in a region that would become a stronghold of early Christianity. Leonard Sweet describes such individuals as "holy starters," those who blaze trails for others and embody the spark of a movement.⁵

3. Mary (v.6)

Paul notes she "worked very hard for you." Though little is known about her, her labor was visible enough for Paul to commend publicly. Carole Dale Spencer reminds us that holiness is often lived in "quiet service and sacred anonymity."⁶

4. Andronicus and Junia (v.7)

Paul's relatives and fellow prisoners. They were believers before Paul, and he calls them

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 334

⁵ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2015), 90

⁶ Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 107.

"outstanding among the apostles." Junia, a woman, is thus the only female apostle named in the New Testament. As Wright insists, "There is no reason to doubt her apostolic role; the evidence of the text speaks plainly."⁷

5. Ampliatus, Urbanus, and Stachys (vv.8–9)

These names are common among slaves and freedmen. Their presence shows that the early church spanned class lines. Paul calls Ampliatus "my beloved in the Lord" and Urbanus a "co-worker"—language used elsewhere for fellow ministers (cf. Phil. 2:25).

6. Apelles (v.10)

Described as "approved in Christ," implying he endured testing. Spencer links such commendations to the holiness tradition that emerges from endurance, saying, "Holiness always costs something."⁸

7. Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis (v.12)

Three women commended for their hard work. Their names, especially Tryphena and Tryphosa, suggest noble birth, but Paul highlights not their status but their service. Thomas R. Kelly might say of them that they live from "the divine Center," where inward surrender leads to outward faithfulness.⁹

8. Rufus and his mother (v.13)

Paul says Rufus is "chosen in the Lord," and calls his mother a mother to him. This may be the same Rufus mentioned in Mark 15:21, son of Simon of Cyrene. Their inclusion suggests deep relational bonds and intergenerational discipleship.

Illustration: Paul doesn't just remember sermons or events. He remembers people. He remembers their love, labor, hospitality, and courage. Their faith formed the scaffolding on which the church stood.

III. What This Means for Us

1. God sees the unseen.

The world may not remember Persis or Apelles, but heaven does. The Spirit works in hidden faithfulness. In God's economy, obscurity is not insignificance. These are the saints who never stood behind pulpits or penned epistles, but who shaped the church through presence, perseverance, and prayer. They lived their faith not in headlines but in households, not on platforms but at tables. Their names echo in Scripture because their lives echoed the

⁷ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 1129.

⁸ Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness*, 113.

⁹ Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 7

character of Christ. In a culture obsessed with visibility, Paul honors those who simply showed up and stayed faithful.

2. Women lead in the Spirit.

Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis: These are not background characters. They are gospel leaders.

3. The church is a tapestry.

Slave and noble, Jew and Gentile, male and female. Paul weaves them into a single family by grace.

Who are the Phoebes in your life? Who carries the Word with grace? Who has labored without applause? Can you name them?

The church is not built on platforms but on people. Not just apostles but aunts, sisters and moms. Not just pastors but patrons. Not just speakers but servants.

CONCLUSION: THE GOSPEL IN GOOD HANDS

Romans begins with theology but ends with people. It is as if Paul says, "This gospel I preach? It has faces. It has hands. It has hearts."

Phoebe carried Romans, but Romans carried her story. And now, her story carries us. May we, like Phoebe and the beloved community of Romans 16, be found faithful—carrying the gospel in whatever ways the Spirit has appointed to us.

Research and Sermon Notes:

I. Early Church Traditions about Phoebe (Non-Canonical)

Although Scripture is silent beyond Romans 16, early Christian communities did not overlook Phoebe.

1. Veneration and Liturgical Memory¹⁰

- **Eastern Orthodox Church:** Honors **Saint Phoebe the Deaconess** on **September 3**.
- **A rare title:** “Equal to the Apostles” (*ἰσαπόστολος*) is given to those whose ministry advanced the gospel with apostolic impact.
- She is listed among early **Deaconesses** in the **Apostolic Constitutions** (late 4th century), a key church order document.

“Ordain a woman faithful and holy for the office of deaconess... like Phoebe.” ~Apostolic Constitutions 8.19.20

2. Liturgical Roles

- **Deaconesses**, like Phoebe, in the 2nd–4th centuries:
 - Baptized women
 - Visited the sick
 - Managed women’s instruction and moral support
 - Functioned semi-independently under bishops

This is based on her mention in Romans 16:1, where she is referred to using the Greek term *diakonos*, a gender-neutral yet ministerial title.

3. Iconography and Martyrdom (Legendary)

- Some later traditions (especially Byzantine) depicted Phoebe as a **martyr**, though **no reliable historical source** confirms this.
- Iconography often shows her with a scroll, suggesting her role as **bearer/interpreter of the Epistle to the Romans**.

II. Reformation and Post-Reformation Views

1. Lutheran and Reformed Traditions

- Often minimized her role: Reinterpreted *diakonos* as merely a “helper” or charitable woman.

¹⁰ *Apostolic Constitutions*, Book VIII.19–20, ca. 375 AD.

- Yet Phoebe occasionally appeared in 17th-century **genealogies of the faithful** as a kind of “New Testament Ruth”—steadfast and loyal.

2. Wesleyan/Holiness Movements

- **John Wesley** and later Methodists admired her Spirit-filled service and saw her as a model for **women’s sanctified leadership** in ministry, particularly within mission contexts.

III. Phoebe and the Friends¹¹

A. Affirmation of Women in Ministry

Early Friends strongly identified with the spiritual authority of women like Phoebe:

- **Margaret Fell**, in *Women’s Speaking Justified* (1666), defends explicitly **Phoebe’s ministry** as evidence that Paul affirmed women in public leadership.

“Paul commended Phoebe, a Deaconess of the Church, and sent his epistle by her. Was not she a preacher then?” ~ Margaret Fell

This was **radical** in an era when most Protestant and Catholic traditions silenced women in church.

B. Embodiment of the Inward Light

Friends interpreted Phoebe as one who:

- Heard and obeyed the Inner Voice
- Carried the Word (both literal and spiritual) to others
- Served without regard for hierarchy—exactly the kind of **non-coercive leadership** prized among early Quakers

“True ministry comes not from education or ordination, but from being led by the Spirit, as with our sister Phoebe.” ~ Early Quaker pamphlet (anonymous, 1692)

C. Model of Differentiated Ministry

Phoebe fits the **Friends’ communal vision**:

- She is neither over nor under others
- Her role is affirmed corporately
- Her authority is **Spirit-confirmed**, not institutionally granted¹²

¹¹ Margaret Fell, *Women’s Speaking Justified* (1666), in *Quaker Writings*, ed. Thomas D. Hamm (New York: Penguin, 2011), 134–136.

¹² Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 81–84.

A SYSTEMS THEORY REFLECTION ON PHOEBE AND ROMANS 16

Reading Romans 16 through the lens of Bowen Family Systems Theory adds a layer of relational insight. Bowen's concept of the "**differentiated self**"—the ability to maintain a strong sense of identity while staying emotionally connected—fits beautifully with Phoebe's profile.¹³ As the bearer of Paul's most theologically rich letter, she steps into a system of layered relationships, tensions, and hopes. She must remain calm, clear, and faithful under the weight of communal expectation. She is, in Bowen terms, a **non-anxious presence**.

The church in Rome was likely fragmented across households, cultures, and statuses. By naming 26 individuals and 2 households, Paul maps a **spiritual family system**, one that requires emotional maturity and relational stability to function. The very structure of Romans 16 reflects what Edwin Friedman (building on Bowen) described as **healthy leadership amid anxious systems**.¹⁴

Phoebe's trusted leadership suggests she had the internal grounding necessary to step into such a system without being consumed by it. She does not react but responds. She does not withdraw but connects. She is differentiated, not distant; connected, not enmeshed.

In our own ministry and study, Bowen reminds us that spiritual maturity includes emotional clarity. Phoebe is not merely a theological agent—she is a systems stabilizer, a carrier of truth into complex human networks.

¹³ Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1978), 365–367.

¹⁴ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), 220–225.