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Text Messages: The Ministry of Women and Romans 16

Steve Croft's survey of Romans 16 finds convincing evidence for the ministry of women in the early church and provides a model for the commendation of women's ministry in the contemporary context.

Romans 16:1-16 is an extraordinary testimony to the ministry of women in the earliest Pauline churches. It seems an appropriate subject of an article for this edition of *Anvil* for three reasons. The first is that it is written by a man yet is a warm commendation of the ministry of a number of women. Paul seems therefore to be a good model for the only (and honoured) male contributor to this volume. In the second place, Romans 16 is something of a neglected (even ignored) text in the debate about the biblical foundation for women's ministry and it is worth shining a light on the text more clearly.¹ Finally, it seems to me that ongoing reflection about ministry and women must not only continue to reflect on experience – both the experience of ordained women and that of the church – but also have at its centre an ongoing reflection on Scripture. There remain those who are not yet convinced of the validity of women's orders both inside and beyond the Church of England. Part of the ongoing task of reflection must therefore be continuing to commend the ministry of women from the perspective of the Scriptures and the practice of the earliest churches. This is important both in order to press the debate harder and further with those who are hesitant or not yet convinced (particularly among evangelicals) and to continue to build confidence in the whole church (and especially among women) that their ministry has a firm and appropriate biblical foundation.

The article falls into three parts. In the first we take a close look at this remarkable text and what it is saying about women and ministry. In the second, I ask the question: what if this text (and others like it) were made the foundation of our understanding of women's ministry in the New Testament? In the final part I offer some reflections on the model Paul offers to men as having a role in commending the ministry of women in contemporary churches.

1 Charles Cranfield commented in 1979 that the evidence of this passage on women is 'something to which the Church as a whole has not yet paid sufficient attention' (C. Cranfield, *Romans*, International Critical Commentary Volume II, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1979, p 789. This is borne out by recent discussions of the subject. The recent study, William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, IVP, 2001, pays

only passing notice to the passage. The brief chapter surveying the debate in Gordon Kuhrt, *An Introduction to Christian Ministry*, CHP, London 2000 makes no reference to Romans 16 or similar greetings. See, however, the brief and helpful discussion of the passage in R. T. France, *A Slippery Slope: the ordination of Women and homosexual practice*, Grove Biblical Series B16, 2000, pp 10-12.

Romans 16:1-16

The passage divides neatly into a commendation of Phoebe, assumed to be the bearer of the letter (vv 1-2) and a series of greetings to members of the congregation in Rome (vv 3-16).² The greetings cannot be assumed to be simply a casual reference without motive: surely an instruction to Phoebe to pass on Paul's regards to individuals verbally would have been the way to accomplish this. A formal greeting from Paul inscribed within the text of the letter should, rather, be seen as a kind of internal commendation of an individual within the Roman congregations. The majority of people in the list are singled out for some kind of praise or other comment. As the letter is read out in its original context, each person is, as it were, lifted up within the receiving congregation and their ministry is commended to the whole community. That commendation (and the habit of graciously commending others) is continued as the series of greetings continued to be embedded in the text as the letter itself was circulated for wider use. An important theological point is being made by what seem at first sight to be casual references.

No less than ten women are specifically named and commended in this list. Others, no doubt, were included in the general greetings to the families of Aristobulus (v 10) and Narcissus (v 11). All but the last two are specifically commended for some virtue or quality related to ministry. At least two of these women are ascribed titles normally associated with a recognised office and ministry in the early church. The full list is reproduced below with the relevant passage (in the NRSV):

Phoebe	I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon (<i>diakonos</i>) of the church at Cenchreae, 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 (<i>prostatis</i>) of many and of myself included (vv 1-2)
Prisca	Greet Prisca and Aquila who work with me in Christ Jesus and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. (vv 3-4)
Mary	Greet Mary who has worked very hard among you (v 6)
Junia	Greet Andronicus and Junia my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles (<i>apostolois</i>), and they were in Christ before I was.
Tryphaena Tryphosa	Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa (v 12a)
Persis	Greet the beloved Persis who has worked hard in the Lord (v 12b).
The mother of Rufus	Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother, a mother to me also (v 13)
Julia	Greet Philologus, Julia (v 15a)
The sister of Nereus	(Greet) Nereus and his sister (v 15b)

2 There has been some debate about whether the passage should be attached to Ephesians rather than Romans but the

arguments have not been persuasive to the main commentators nor is the Pauline authorship of the passage in question.

Phoebe

Several of these references demand closer inspection. Phoebe is described clearly and unambiguously not only as a sister but as a deacon. Although the term is used from time to time in Paul as a general term for Christian service, it is almost certainly used here, as in Philippians 1:1, in a more 'technical' sense as a person exercising a recognised Christian ministry on behalf of the churches.³ But what kind of ministry would be exercised by a deacon? Here there has been (and still is) a great debate, stimulated by the careful lexicographical work of John N. Collins.⁴ The general movement within this debate is towards seeing the deacon not only as engaged in general acts of Christian service but also as a recognised ambassador on behalf of a particular community and therefore carrying a responsibility for teaching, preaching and the delivery of a message. This meaning would exactly fit that of Phoebe being entrusted with the delivery of such a vital letter from Paul (and that of the seven in Acts being immediately singled out for their role as evangelists). Phoebe's second title in 16:2 is that of 'benefactor' (Greek: *prostatis*). There has been considerable debate about this term also, which carries a technical meaning in some ancient sources.⁵ It is clear, however, that some kind of leadership role and responsibility is envisaged, whether this was by virtue of Phoebe's existing wealth or social standing or because of authority invested in her by the church in Cenchreae. The word is closely related to *proistamēnos* in Romans 12:8 in the context of the use of different gifts in the body: 'the leader in diligence' (NRSV). In Romans 12, the text is one which is made to bear considerable weight in some evangelical Christian writing on leadership.⁶ If so, this must be leadership which is exercised by women as much as by men. Fitzmeyer concludes, '...Phoebe was perhaps a superior or at least a leader of the Christian community at Cenchreae'.⁷

Prisca and Mary

The leadership role and responsibilities of women in partnership is also emphasised by the reference to Prisca and Aquila where Prisca, the woman, is given order of precedence (the order of the names varies elsewhere in Paul and in Acts). Again, Paul's words and the references to Prisca elsewhere do not give us a picture of a subservient, passive or silent Christian or ministerial life. Instead we receive the impression of a wife and husband partnership with at least equality of ministry characterised by courage, self-sacrifice, wide recognition, teaching and correction of recognised leaders, the ability to lead a house based congregation and prominence and influence across a range of churches.⁸ Mary 'has worked very hard among you'.

3 See my own *Ministry in Three Dimensions, Ordination and Leadership in the Local Church*, DLT 1999, pp. 48ff; Cranfield comments that it is 'virtually certain' that Phoebe is being formally described as a deacon (*Romans*, p 781).

4 John N. Collins, *Diakonia, Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, OUP, 1990. The book is, unfortunately, out of print and hard to obtain. It is concisely summarised in his recent and shorter *Deacons and the Church*, Gracewing, 2002 and in the House of Bishops report, *For Such A Time As This – A Renewed Diaconate in the Church of England*, pp 32f.

5 See the commentaries of Cranfield and Fitzmeyer and also Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, SNTS Monograph Series 59, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp 114ff.

6 See, for example, Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*, Zondervan, 2002, p 27f.

7 Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *Romans, The Anchor Bible Commentary*, Volume 33, Geoffrey Chapman, 1992.

8 Acts 18:2, 18, 26; 1 Cor. 16:19 and 2 Tim. 4:19.

Again an active minister, this time with a Hebrew name. The term is used on several occasions by Paul to describe his own and others' ministry on behalf of the churches.⁹

Junia

Andronicus and Junia are best understood as a second married couple. There has been much debate in the textual tradition and in the commentators about whether Junia is a man (depending on how the Greek text is accented). The NIV (1979) opted for the masculine translation.¹⁰ NRSV (1989) and subsequent translations adopt the feminine. Almost all of the contemporary commentators agree with the extensive patristic witness that Junia is a woman and an apostle. Chrysostom writes: 'Think how great the devotion of this woman Junia must have been that she must have been worthy to be called an apostle!'.¹¹ There is some debate, as we might expect, about how to translate the Romans text. It is possible (just) to render it as 'highly esteemed by the apostles'. This is not, however, the most natural translation nor the one favoured by the commentators.¹² There is more discussion, of course, about the exact meaning of the term apostle here. Clearly neither Andronicus nor Junia is being numbered among the twelve. However, they were Christians before Paul and his relatives (therefore Jews). It is quite possible therefore that Andronicus and Junia were companions of Jesus and witnesses of the resurrection. It is certain that they were among those recognised and sent out by the churches as missionaries to preach and teach. Again, from our earliest sources, the term *apostolos* is a term describing a recognised Christian minister. In his recent comprehensive study, *Gospel Women*, Richard Bauckham has an absolutely fascinating chapter entitled 'Joanna the Apostle' in which he identifies (I think with credibility) the Junia of this passage with Joanna of Luke 8:3 and 24:10.¹³

The remaining women

Tryphoena, Tryphosa and Persis are all given the same commendation as Mary: each has worked hard (the same Greek word is used). The mother of Rufus is linked by commentators (tentatively) with the family of Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21) – another link between the early Christian community in Palestine and the church in Rome. Paul's use of the term 'mother' as a metaphor for ministry must not be reduced to the notions of his friend's mum cooking him supper or doing his laundry. The image of a mother elsewhere in Paul is one of evangelism and Christian nurture rather than of domestic care.¹⁴ Julia and the sister of Nereus, like a number of the men, are present in the list, which is itself significant, but without further comment.

Romans 16 in the context of the Pauline epistles

How does Romans 16:1-16 compare with the impressions given in similar passages in the Pauline Epistles? Many of the epistles have no greetings at all. Where they

9 1 Cor. 4:12; 16:16.

10 NIV makes a similar editorial decision in preferring the translation 'wives' to 'deaconesses' for *gunaikas* in 1 Tim. 3:11.

11 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 31 as quoted in G. Bray (ed), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VI, Romans*, IVP, 1998, p 373.

12 For example, by John Stott, *The Message of Romans*, IVP, 1994, p 396; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, IVP, 1998, p 168.

13 Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, Eerdmans, 2002, pp 109-202. Bauckham's monograph contains the most recent (and exhaustive) discussion of questions of accent, text and translation of Romans 16:7.

14 1 Cor. 3:2; Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 2:7.

occur, the other lists are much briefer, confirming the view that Paul does not mention so many people by name in Romans simply to say 'Hello!'. He would have known far more individuals in the other churches. However we do receive a similar impression of women and men in ministry together. Prisca is mentioned in 1 Corinthians; Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians; Nympha in Colossians; Prisca and Claudia in 2 Timothy; Apphia in Philemon.¹⁵ The picture is in harmony with the picture in Acts of women exercising a prominent ministry in the early Pauline churches.¹⁶ I would argue that Romans 16:1-16 should therefore be understood as a deliberate attempt to emphasise and affirm the ministry of women within the context of the Roman congregations. It is not, in consequence, unreasonable to deduce that this ministry was itself being questioned and, perhaps, not universally received.

Romans 16:1-16 as a foundational text?

Discussion about the ministry of women today based on the pattern in the New Testament churches has tended to begin with the small number of (seemingly) negative passages from the epistles and either ignores or barely alludes to the considerable evidence from Romans 16 and elsewhere for the roles and responsibilities exercised by women from the earliest days. Moreover, the extensive recent scholarly study of these texts has not yet found its way into the wider debate in the church.

I want to argue here that there is a very good case for reversing this order and actually taking as the foundation for our understanding of women the evidence from Romans 16, Acts, and the greetings in the other epistles that show women exercised an active, articulate and recognised ministry within the Hellenistic, Pauline churches from their foundation. Undoubtedly this ministry included public speaking, teaching and recognised leadership roles alongside men and on their own. The lists and references include married women, unmarried women and widows. In Romans 16, women are given the titles *diakonos*, *prostatis* and *apostolos*. It is, of course, true that women are not given the title *presbyteros* in Romans 16, as Stott points out.¹⁷ But the development of this term is itself complex. It is never used in the Pauline corpus outside the pastoral epistles. There is a major debate, therefore, about whether Luke is reading back the term into his description of the Pauline churches in Acts.¹⁸ The most recent and thorough discussion of the term takes the view that women would be included among those described in the Miletus speech as *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi* in the earliest days even though these opportunities for ministry were much more restricted in subsequent generations.¹⁹ It is hard indeed to imagine women of the status of Lydia, Prisca and Junia being left behind when the *presbyteroi* travelled to Miletus.

15 1 Cor. 16:19; Phil. 4:2; Col. 4:15; 2 Tim. 4:19ff; Philem. 2.

16 So, Prisca again; Damaris (Acts 17:34), the daughters of Philip who had the gift of prophecy (21:10) and, pre-eminently, Lydia (16:11-15, 40). Women are present at the appointing of Matthias (1:14) and on the day of Pentecost in fulfilment of Joel's prophecy (2:18).

17 Stott, *Romans*, p 397.

18 Acts 14:23 and 20:17. See James Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Epworth Press, 1996 p 193; R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity*, T&T Clark, 1994; and Croft, *Ministry*, pp 86ff.

19 Campbell, *Elders*, p 256.

This high view of the ministry of women in Pauline practice is borne out, as we might expect, by a very high view of women in Pauline theology. This is expressed, for example, in Galatians 3:28 ('there is no longer male and female')²⁰ and in the guidelines for men and women exercising public ministry (1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is a complex passage but assumes that both men and women will exercise a public ministry of leading prayer and prophecy).²¹

In other debates where there are different views expressed within the New Testament it is not unusual for Romans to be given priority. These texts in Romans 16 are generally recognised as earlier than the small number of passages which attempt to moderate or reduce the ministry of women. Furthermore, I would argue that it is impossible to understand the (later) New Testament attempt to silence women and restrict their ministry unless there is an earlier tradition in which women are given much greater permission to exercise exactly the role which is being taken away from them.

But if Romans 16 is taken as foundational evidence for the early practice in the Pauline churches, what are we to make of the passages which seek to restrict the role of women? Here it is important to realise that there are just two (very similar) texts directly related to ministry (other texts sometimes brought into the debate are more properly concerned with family life). 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is, again, a complex and much debated passage, fully discussed by Richard Hays. The passage openly contradicts the assumptions of 11:2ff about women speaking in public; breaks into the flow of the passage and, in some manuscripts, is positioned at the end of the chapter (reflected by the brackets in NRSV). Hays, with others, therefore regards it as a later interpolation reflecting a similar tradition to that of 1 Timothy but not original to the Paul of 1 Corinthians.²² 1 Timothy is generally held to represent a later tradition from the early Pauline epistles whether this diversity is because of a different author or Paul writing at a later date. Again, the passage is a complex one to interpret at a number of levels.

There seems no reasonable doubt, therefore, that there are two different streams or traditions on the ministry of women in leadership, preaching and teaching within the New Testament and that they are in dialogue with one another. It is clear to me on the basis of Romans 16:1-16 and similar texts that the stream which favours and commends the ministry of women in a wide range of recognised leadership roles is both the earlier stream and the majority voice. The passages which attempt to reverse this development within the New Testament itself are actually restricted to two rather late texts, possibly by one of Paul's later interpreters.

20 See Andrew D. Clarke, 'Jew and Greek, Slave and Free, Male and Female: Paul's Theology of Ethnic, Social and Gender Inclusiveness in Romans 16' in Peter Oakes (ed), *Rome in the Bible and the Earliest Church*, Paternoster, 2002.

21 For a view of women and ministry in Paul which is still positive but gives rather more space to the tensions in Paul's thinking see

James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, Eerdmans, 1998, pp 586-593.

22 Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, T&T Clark, 1996 pp. 54f. Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, takes a different view and argues that the passage simply reflects tensions in Paul's thought relating in part to the distinction between single and married women. I am more convinced in this case by the arguments of Hays.

Commending the ministry of women in the contemporary church

It is, of course, always more complicated than it seems to move from the practice or teaching of the Early Church to models of ministry today. The *presbyteroi* of Acts or Timothy are not the priests of the Church of England today. However, it is important to acknowledge that there have been very significant developments in our understanding of the New Testament texts about the ministry of women over the last decade even as women priests have become established and have exercised a significant ministry in a variety of roles. The direction of this development is clearly towards seeing a diversity of traditions, certainly, within the New Testament. However, the oldest, majority and, therefore, more authoritative view seems to be that (expressed in the final chapter of Romans) of commending the ministry of a range of women in different circumstances in a range of different ways. It is very instructive now simply to compare the NIV translation of Romans 16, widely used by evangelicals in the early 1990s and the NRSV. The NIV unmistakably minimises the role taken by women in its choice of translation.

Furthermore, given growing and developing scholarly consensus on the New Testament material, it is somewhat difficult to understand the continuing resistance to the ministry of women as presbyters on biblical grounds, particularly by evangelicals. Conversely, there is every reason to support a growing confidence both among women in ordained ministry and in the church as a whole that the contemporary church is acting in accordance with patterns of ministry in the earliest churches.

However, as a final point, it is also well worth considering the model set by Paul in Romans 16 for men in the contemporary church and, particularly, for men who themselves occupy recognised positions of authority. The prevalence given to women in ministry in the chapter leads me to the view that Paul is addressing a context (the church in Rome) which was, in part, equivocal about the ministry of women. This was, perhaps, as it was to be elsewhere, a matter of some controversy. Paul's response on this question at this time was not a position of studied neutrality but of diligent and enthusiastic commendation of particular women in ministry. For any Christian minister, it is far easier to be commended by others than to commend oneself. It remains the case for women ministers in the contemporary church (because there are still some who will not recognise their ministry) that the commendation of their male colleagues will be a significant help in their ministry.

Over the last decade it has been my great privilege to work alongside many outstanding women priests and to share in the preparation for ordained ministry of scores of gifted, committed women who have responded to God's call to ministry in this way. I have valued enormously the teaching, preaching and leadership of other women whom I have not known as well. Speaking on behalf of myself and others, like Paul in Romans, I have found the ministry of these women to be diverse (as was that of the women in Rome); exercised at every different life stage; sometimes carried out in mutuality with men and sometimes individually or with other women; hard-working; courageous; costly; life-giving and bringing blessing

to many. Like the Roman church, if we may say so, the Church of England today should be encouraged to continue to welcome and receive the ministry of women 'as is fitting for the saints', to 'help (them) in whatever way they may require' and, perhaps above all, to give thanks.

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