

THE WOMEN IN ROMANS 16 – Beth Johnson

Main Points with Discussion Questions

Main Points

- Beth begins this video with a surprising statistic: of the 28 people Paul mentions in Romans 16, **10 are women. Very nearly a third.** That is remarkable in first-century Rome, a notoriously androcentric and frequently misogynistic society.
- She adds: it is **not** remarkable for the apostle Paul. In his surviving letters, we learn about more than a dozen more women than these, several of whom are important church leaders. **Chloe**, for example (1 Cor 1:11), is a major source of Paul’s knowledge of what is going on in the Corinthian churches. **Euodia and Syntyche** (Phil 4:2) are leaders in Philippi.... There is a very straightforward reason for all these women being so visible in Paul’s churches: the words [uttered at first century baptisms] are preserved in Galatians 3:28, *“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.”* The most fundamental identity markers in the ancient world were religion, servile status, and gender, and Paul says they are all done away with in baptism.... Paul thinks this radically reoriented identity of baptized believers is not just religious or symbolic but emphatically concrete and social.
- Throughout Paul’s churches we find Jews and Greeks, slaves and freepersons, and men and women, and there do not seem to be any limitations on their roles in the church.
- But what about those New Testament passages that clearly limit women’s roles (for example, the women and slaves in Ephesians, Colossians, and the Pastoral Epistles)? Beth reminds us that those letters are written in Paul’s name by people a generation after his death, at a time when the church’s neighbors criticize the church severely for its social radicalism. The same is true of 1 Cor 14:33b-36, which is an interpolation (words not original to 1 Cor 14 but clearly inspired by 1 Tim 2:8-15 which forbids women to teach or have authority over men). Paul clearly thinks women should teach—and preach and pray in public worship.

Questions for discussion

- What surprised you about Beth’s introduction to Romans 16? What do you make of the fact that nearly a third of the names mentioned in the final chapter of Romans are feminine? What might account for this?
- How would you characterize the Apostle Paul’s view of women? Did Beth’s presentation change your point of view? If so, how?
- Galatians 3:28 asserts that for those who are baptized, *“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.”* What if Paul were speaking to Christians today with words such as: *“There is no longer Caucasian and non-Caucasian, there is no longer incarcerated and free, there is no longer heterosexual and LGBTQIA; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* What would

that mean in the life of your congregation, our communities, our nation? How can faith in Christ supersede these major distinctions?

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE WOMEN IN THIS TEXT

PHOEBE – Paul’s missionary patroness - Romans 16:1-2

- *I recommend to you, Phoebe...* – the name Phoebe comes from Greek mythology. Because her name is not a Jewish one, most commentators assume that Phoebe was a Gentile convert.
- *our sister* – indicates membership in the Christian community as well as a personal relationship with Paul
- *a deacon of the church at Cenchreae* – a local leader of the church entrusted with preaching and tending to the spiritual growth of members. The word “deacon” is frequently translated “minister” (see 2 Cor. 11:15, 23). Paul uses it to describe himself and Timothy in 1 Cor. 3:5. In other words, what Paul and Timothy do in Corinth, Phoebe does in 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 of many and of myself as well* – Phoebe should be welcomed with not only hospitality, but with the honor and loyalty due her as a spiritual leader. Her faith has been demonstrated by her contributions to the Christian missionary movement generally and to Paul’s efforts specifically. Her patronage indicates that Phoebe was a person of high social status.
- Phoebe has a very special relationship to the letter to the Romans. She is its carrier. As the bearer of this letter, she would have read and interpreted it to the Roman church. This means that Phoebe is the first person (not just female) ever to preach from Romans.
- In the first-century world where between 5-10% of the people are literate—and far more men than women—we gain another piece of information about Phoebe. Her father educated her at a time when most women were taught only to manage a household.

PRISCA (aka Priscilla) – Romans 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16; Acts 18; and 2 Timothy 4

- *Greet Prisca and Aquila* - Prisca and Aquila are a married couple. In almost every case, Prisca’s name is mentioned before her husband’s, which suggests she has the higher social status.
- *who work with me in Christ Jesus* – a “co-worker in Christ” is someone who shares in the proclamation of the gospel in a missionary context. Prisca and Aquila are commended as full colleagues and partners of Paul’s. We know they worked closely with Paul in Ephesus and Corinth.
- *and who risked their necks for my life* – “to risk one’s neck” was another way to say “to risk execution” (most likely decapitation). Paul ran into trouble in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-31), where Prisca and Aquila intervened on his behalf.

- *to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house (vv. 3-5a).* Paul is the recipient of Prisca and Aquila’s loyalty and bravery, and he expands his commendation by saying that “all the churches of the Gentiles” are in their debt. Paul does not describe Prisca and Aquila as apostles—that is, people who establish churches as he does—but they are compelling preachers and teachers. Everywhere we find them—in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome—Prisca and Aquila host house churches, which means they are people of means as well as respected preachers, teachers and leaders. Prisca and Aquila can be viewed as the patron saints of theological educators, because Luke says in Acts that when they heard the brilliant north African Apollos preaching in Ephesus, they took him aside and corrected his theology of baptism.

Questions for discussion

- What about Phoebe stands out to you most? What adjectives would you use to describe her?
- When we say that someone is a patron or benefactor, we think of a financial contributor. In what ways did Phoebe contribute to the early Christian movement?
- Beth presents Phoebe as a Christian minister, preacher and leader. Is this a new thought for you? Why do you think that some Bible translations render “deacon” as “servant” (King James Version), “dear Christian woman” (Living Bible), “deaconess” (Revised Standard Version), “one who serves with elders and overseers” (New International Version) when it comes to Phoebe? What is at stake in the way this word is translated?
- Prisca is married to Aquila. Together they established house churches in Ephesus, Corinth and Rome, took risky stands on Paul’s behalf, and corrected Apollos’ understanding of Christian baptism. How might Prisca’s example challenge the notion that a good Christian wife should stay quietly at home?
- If you named your daughter Prisca or Priscilla, what would you tell her about her biblical namesake?

BACK TO THE TEXT

MARY (aka Miriam) – fellow laborer in the Lord – Romans 16:6

- We know very little about Mary except that she has a Jewish name, and she is a hard worker. That description of her as a “hard worker” does not mean that she washes the dishes after Wednesday night supper, since everywhere else Paul uses the word “hard worker” he talks about preachers, teachers, and leaders of the church. The word translated “labor” refers to the labor of the gospel; the hard work of ministry.

JUNIA (not the masculine Junias or Junianus) – prominent apostle - Romans 16:7

- *Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives/compatriots who were in prison with me; they are prominent/outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.* We learned previously in this series about Junia. It is enough to note that she is a prominent apostle, and that Paul stakes his reputation among the Romans on his knowing and being related to her.

TRYPHAENA and TRYPHOSA – laborers in the Lord – Romans 16:12

- Tryphaena and Tryphosa have slave names that suggest they are members of the same household - perhaps even sisters. Tryphaena and Tryphosa are laborers in the Lord, leaders of a house church in Rome. Paul met them some time when they were all in a different city around the Mediterranean.

RUFUS' MOTHER – dear friend who likely opened her home to Paul – Romans 16:12-13

- *Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also.* Rufus has a slave name, which suggests that his mother, too, is a slave. Paul says she has been a mother to him as well, which probably means she extended hospitality to him at some time or another. How does a slave extend hospitality to a wandering preacher, we might wonder? She must have had high status in her household and some measure of capacity to act on her own.
- First-century households were much larger and more complex than ours are, including not just the master's family and his slaves (and even former slaves) but also his clients and retainers, business partners and associates. First-century slavery was also a more complex and nuanced institution than what we know of slavery in America. One became enslaved not because of race or ethnicity, but because one was defeated in war or indebted or was abandoned as an infant. Yet in Roman society, even slaves had various levels of status. A Roman slave, if he or she had enough status, could engage in business and exercise a measure of control over his/her own life. Whatever was the case in Rufus's household, his mother and he are noted Christians who have been close to the Pauline mission in the past and have enough status to be able to offer Paul hospitality.

ASSORTED BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN THE LORD – Romans 16:14-15

- *Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and **sisters** who are with them. Greet Philologus, **Julia**, Nereus and his **sister**, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.* When Paul greets these named people and "all the saints who are with them," he is identifying them as patrons of a house church. From this we can see how vitally important house churches were to a growing Christian movement.

WHY DID PAUL IDENTIFY SO MANY FOLKS BY NAME?

- Paul was planning a missionary journey to Spain that would launch from Rome. The Roman base of operations was so critical to him that he wrote to a church he did not establish, pulled out all the stops by connecting himself to all the influential Christian leaders in Rome he knew, in order to gain the support he would need to go to Spain. That nearly a third of these influential leaders are women is striking.

Questions for discussion

- Phoebe and Prisca are women of means, while Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Rufus' mother are likely slaves. Mary is a Jewish name, but others are not. What does this tell us about the make-up of the early church in Rome?

- Paul says that Rufus' mother is like a mother to him. What qualities is Paul pointing to? Who has been like a mother to you? What did that add to your life?
- What is your most important insight from this study of the women in Romans 16?