

Romans 16:1-2  
January 10, 2010

Deacon Ordination Service for Ann Michael and Corinna Payne

Hampton Baptist  
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Dear Ann and Corinna,

Many years ago, the Apostle Paul established churches in areas of Asia Minor. He visited populated regions on three missionary journeys and started churches in places like Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, and Thessalonica. After he had left those churches, he would occasionally write letters to the churches in those areas and help them with church squabbles, polity, and theology. Paul not only *started* the churches; he also served as a church *consultant*.

But Paul also wrote a letter to the church in Rome, yet this was not a church that he started. By reading the history of the early Church as recorded in the Book of Acts, we know that Paul had intended to visit the church in Rome on his way to Spain, but these plans were interrupted by his arrest in Jerusalem. He finally made it to Rome, the capitol city, but he journeyed there in chains. Therefore, it is doubtful that he ever *visited* the church there, although many of its members may have visited *him* while he was imprisoned. Paul later was martyred in Rome.

It is believed that the letter Paul wrote to the Roman Church was hand-delivered by a lady named Phoebe, the person mentioned in the Scripture read earlier. It was roughly 600 miles, as the crow flies, from her hometown of Cenchreae to Rome. Cenchreae was the port city of Corinth in the country of Greece; Rome, of course, is on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea in the country of Italy.

How she journeyed from Cenchreae to Rome is a mystery. We also do not know if she traveled to Rome for the exclusive purpose of delivering Paul's letter. Some scholars have surmised that she had other business in Rome, and Paul asked her to deliver the letter while on her trip. Regardless of the unknown variables, we can presume that Phoebe was a highly responsible and resourceful person.

Given the status of women in the first century, I have a deep respect for Phoebe for undertaking such a task of delivering the letter. A trip of that distance must have taken days, as well as considerable planning and expense. Also, there was an inherent danger involved with a woman traveling; with little regard given to women in that society, men could easily take advantage of women and often did. Her courage to face adversity in a male-dominated society was commendable.

Her hometown of Cenchreae was a port town for the major urban center of Corinth. This area was known for its raucous behavior. The metropolis was a hub for sailors when on furlough; thus, prostitution was rampant. Out of this environment, where women were regarded as objects, emerged Phoebe, this highly responsible follower of Christ. Given the lifestyle of many women in her hometown, Phoebe was probably granted more religious opportunities because of her willingness and abilities. She was likely offered as a role model contrasting against the predominant practices of women around Corinth.

We know from the passage that Paul gave her an affirming word of commendation to the church at Rome, and referred to her as a Deacon of the church at Cenchreae. The Greek word used for "deacon" here is "diakonos," which is the same word used by Paul to speak of himself and Apollos (I Corinthians 3:5), Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21) and Timothy (I Timothy 4:6). Paul utilized the masculine form of the word; there is no such word as "deaconess" in the Greek language. Therefore, there should be no linguistic or theological grounds from which to distinguish between her and other male "ministers."

Some versions of the Bible utilize the word "servant" instead of the word "deacon." There is a wide range of opinion regarding the interpretation of the word. Some say that women held no official office in the early church while others say that women functioned equally as men. Some say that only *men* were preachers and deacons, while others say that women *and* men were both preachers and deacons. I wasn't there, so I can't say that one writer's opinion is right and another's is wrong. But by

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my study of the passage, I can truthfully state that I believe that Phoebe was a Deacon, as in a church officer. By inserting the phrase "of the church at Cenchreae," I think that Paul was giving validation to her office. Here was a responsible and resourceful woman who was using her gifts for the Kingdom of God through her church at Cenchreae.

So Phoebe was to be received and honored in the Lord and given hospitality and practical help for her ministry. Paul assumed that they would have no problem welcoming her as a "minister"; in other words, Phoebe was not an isolated phenomenon. But by being a stranger in a new setting, Paul wanted the church at Rome to embrace her and oblige her with the same kindnesses that would be extended to him. Paul was obviously expecting her to be involved in the ministry at Rome during her stay.

Paul also wrote that she had been a great benefactor for many including himself. He commended her for the ways in which she had served others. And isn't that the primary role of a Deacon?

The first Deacons, as described in Acts 6, were set aside to serve the congregation, especially those who needed it most, namely the widows. The primary responsibility of a Deacon is not one of recognition, nor popularity, and the fundamental duties should not be administrative nor maintenance. The primary responsibility of a Deacon is to serve. Phoebe was recognized for her servant skills, not only by her church at Cenchreae but also by the greatest missionary of the Christian era. Paul trusted her and applauded her to people whom he had never met.

Corinna and Ann, I have said all of this to you, because you and Phoebe share some of the same characteristics. You, like Phoebe, are certainly resourceful. Like Phoebe, you are responsible. Both of you have good reputations. Like Phoebe, you are self-assured. The bottom line is, that like Phoebe, you have already served well.

As your pastor, I will not call you deaconesses, because I do not believe that to be a scriptural term. Instead, I will call you Deacon, for that is the office for which you are being set apart. I strongly believe what Paul also wrote in Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer Jew nor Greek; there is no longer slave nor free; there is no longer male nor female; for we are all one in Christ Jesus."

Paul commended Phoebe to the church in Rome and encouraged them to embrace her and assist her in the ministry. And to the Hampton Baptist Church, I am recommending both of you as individuals who will serve well as a Deacon. I look forward to serving with you through our Deacon Ministry. May God continue to bless you and your families.

Love,

Charles