

“Phoebe’s Story”

Most, if not all of us, have never heard the name Hilda of Whitby. Born in 614, she was a relative of several English kings who committed her life completely to God at the age of thirty-three. She wanted to live quietly in a French convent, where her sister Hereswith lived. Before she could sail, Bishop Aidan, the head of the church in her area, told her he believed she should be an abbess and take responsibility for spiritually nurturing the nuns and monks. She became the head of the most famous religious house in northeast England, the Abbey of Whitby, where she supervised all the operations of the convent and monastery, from business to worship. God gave her unique gifts in administration and leadership that the church needed. During the thirty-plus years she served as abbess, Hilda trained leaders who became five of the most important bishops in the English church. She loved the Bible and believed that each person should be able to read and understand it for themselves. Any person who came to one of her houses received an education so they could “rightly divide the Word of truth.”

Venerable Bede, the first English church historian, wrote of Hilda that “Those under her direction were required to make a thorough study of the scriptures and occupy themselves in good works.” Hilda modeled the life of Christ to her people. Although she experienced great pain from illness during the six years prior to her death, she never ceased giving thanks to God, nor did she stop teaching the nuns and monks in her care. At the age of sixty-six, Hilda died after “an earthly life devoted to the work of heaven.” (Douglas Weaver. A Cloud of Witnesses. Macon: Smyth and Helwys Publishing. 1993. p. 45-46).

Again, most, if not all of us, were unacquainted with the story of Hilda of Whitby; this morning, I’d like to offer the story of another relatively unknown character whose faithful example can be held up as a model.

We know that 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, though 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 our Scripture. It was roughly 600 miles, as the crow flies, from her home-town 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.

Martin Luther never took a penny from his many books and many of his students boarded with him, along with six children born to him and his wife Catherine, and their four adopted children. These, along with the servants, sometimes totaled as many as twenty-five living in Luther’s household. Since his ministerial income was not sufficient to support a marriage, he had economic problems. In 1526, he learned wood-working so that if necessary he might support his family. But, he was

committed to the study of God's Word, and trusted that God would provide. However, he did take care of the garden, and Katie, his wife, looked after the orchard, the fish pond, and the barnyard. She also harvested fruit and fish, and slaughtered pigs to provide food for the table. Thus, at least in Luther's case, Katie was the immediate means by which God provided.

All of us do well to remember that God often provides for others through our own sense of responsibility. (Ibid., p. 71) God provided for Paul, the church at Rome, and us through the responsibility and resourcefulness of Phoebe.

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 offered as a role model contrasting against the predominant practices of women around Corinth.

One Sunday morning in 1865, a black man entered a fashionable church in Richmond, Virginia. When Communion was served, he walked down the aisle and knelt at the altar. A rustle of resentment swept the congregation. How dare he! After all, believers in that church used the *common* cup. Suddenly a distinguished layman stood up, stepped forward to the altar, and knelt beside the black man. With Robert E. Lee setting the example, the rest of the congregation soon followed his lead. (*Today in the Word*, September, 1991, p. 15.) Like Robert E. Lee, Phoebe's behavior must have been noticed as different from the norm in her society.

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.

The sixteenth chapter of Romans reads much like the comments at a televised awards show. While holding the Emmy, Oscar, or Grammy, the artist says, "I'd like to thank . . ." and then recalls a litany of persons who were influential in that effort. It is interesting to note that of the twenty-six people whom Paul singles out for his personal greeting in chapter 16, six were women. Frequently, the Apostle Paul is degraded as a male chauvinist and not fair to women. I think it also shows us the tremendous influence that women had in the early church. In male-oriented first century Palestine, it is telling that Paul could not describe the church without mentioning the significant role of women. Frankly, some of his words about women regularly get taken out of context; Paul was not writing his letters to 21st Century American Churches. Instead he was writing to specific churches and individuals about specific concerns in their specific contexts.

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I wasn't there, so I can't say that one writer's opinion is right and another's is wrong. But by 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. Phoebe was a servant.

A young boy named James had a desire to be the most famous manufacturer and salesman of cheese in the world. He planned on becoming rich and famous by making and selling cheese and began with a little buggy pulled by a pony named Paddy. After making his cheese, he would load his wagon, and he and Paddy would drive down the streets of Chicago to sell the cheese. As the months passed, the young boy began to despair, because he was not making any money, in spite of his long hours and hard work.

One day he pulled his pony to a stop and began to talk to him. He said, "Paddy, there is something wrong. We are not doing it right. I am afraid we have things turned around and our priorities are not where they ought to be. Maybe we ought to serve God and place him first in our lives." The boy drove home and made a covenant that for the rest of his life he would first serve God and then would work as God directed.

Many years after this, the young boy, now a man, stood as Sunday School Superintendent at the North Shore Baptist Church in Chicago and said, "I would rather be a layman in the North Shore Baptist Church than to head the greatest corporation in America. My first job is serving Jesus."

So, every time you take a bite of Philadelphia Cream cheese, sip a cup of Maxwell House, mix a quart of Kool-Aid, slice up a DiGiorno Pizza, cook a pot of Macaroni & Cheese, spread some Grey Poupon, stir a bowl of Cream of Wheat, slurp down some Jell-O, eat the cream out of the middle of an Oreo cookie, or serve some Stove Top Stuffing, remember a boy, his pony named Paddy, and the promise little James L. Kraft made to serve God and work as God directed. (Michael Green. Illustrations for Biblical Preaching. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing. 1989. p. 331)

Our Bible is filled with stories of unheralded heroes of the faith, those whose commitment, sacrifice, and example propelled the advancement of the Redeemer's Kingdom. While with ease, we can recall the names of New Testament *giants* like Paul, Peter, James and John, thousands of others lived their faith to the end; most are not even recorded in holy Scripture, but the names *are* recorded in

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the Lamb's Book of Life. *All* of us have a story; I hope and pray that *your* story includes an acceptance of Christ as your Savior and that your story includes a life lived as one of his disciples.