

# A New Testament Woman; or, What Phœbe Did.

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IN the sixteenth chapter of Romans, first and second verses, is found the following: "I commend unto you Phœbe, our sister, who is a servant (or deaconess) of the church that is at Cencreæ; that ye receive her in the Lord as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you; for she hath been a succorer of many, and of mine own self also."

It is not surprising that this passage in Paul's epistle to the Romans should be of peculiar interest. Paul's reputation as an opponent of the public work of women is well known. For many centuries he has been considered as the chief opposer of any activity, official or otherwise, of women in the churches. They were to keep silence, he said. They were not to teach or to talk or to preach. They were to ask no questions except in the privacy of their homes. Paul merely shared the popular opinion of his time when he exclaimed with all his customary logic, "Man is the glory of God, but woman is the glory of the man!" Either proposition, standing by itself, meets our hearty approval. "Man is the glory of God!" Woman is, we are told, "the glory of man." But combining them with that adversative particle, we feel that Paul's doctrine of the divine humanity with reference to woman is not quite sound according to the present standard. Because we have come to feel that woman may be also the glory of God, we call Paul prejudiced. We even refuse to take him as authority upon social questions, and skip the passages in the epistles where he writes upon this subject.

But here in this sixteenth chapter of Romans we notice a digression from the general doctrines of Paul in this direction. "I commend unto you Phœbe, our sister, who is a servant (or deaconess) of the

Paul Digres-  
sions.

church which is at Cencrea." I use the word deaconess or deacon because the Greek term is the same as that translated deacon elsewhere, and the committee on the new version has courageously put "or deaconess" into the bargain.

By Paul's own statement, then, Phœbe was deaconess of Paul's church at Cencrea. Cencrea was one of the ports of Corinth in northern Greece. This epistle to the Romans was written at Corinth and sent to Rome by Phœbe. It was nearly a thousand miles by sea from Cencrea, and this was one of the most important and one of the ablest of all Paul's letters. Yet he sent it over to Rome by this woman official of the church, and said: "I commend unto you Phœbe. Receive her in the Lord as becometh saints, and assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you; for she has been a succorer of many and of myself also."

A Succorer of  
Many.

I have thought, therefore, that it might be interesting to ask ourselves the question, What did Phœbe do? supplementing it with some references to the Phœbes of today. What was it that so overcame this prejudice of Paul's that he gave her a hearty testimonial and sent her over on important business to the church at Rome? It is evident that, notwithstanding all the obstacles which custom had placed about her, she had been actively at work. It is doubtful whether she even asked if popular opinion would permit her service to the church.

She saw that help was needed and she went eagerly to work. She was, we may imagine, a worker full of enthusiasm for the faith, active and eager to lend a hand in the direction in which she thought her service was most needed. Knowing the prejudice of her time, she doubtless acted in advance of custom rather than in defiance of it. Any bold or defiant attitude would have displeased Paul, for he must have been very sensitive in this direction. She was wise enough to know that if she quietly made herself useful and necessary to the church, custom would stand back and Paul would come forward to recognize her. We may suppose that she felt a deep interest in sustaining this church at Cencrea. She knew, without doubt, the great aspirations of Paul for those churches.

In Advance of  
Custom.

Something like a dream of a church universal had entered the mind of this apostle to the Gentiles. His speech at Mars Hill was a prophecy of a parliament of religions. And his earnest, reproving question, "Is God not the God of Gentiles also?" has taken nearly two thousand years for its affirmative answer by Christendom, in America. Yes. Paul recognized that all the world he knew had some perception of the Infinite. But he knew that this perception must have its effect upon the moral life or it would be a mockery indeed. And there was much wickedness all about. We see by the letters of Paul, as well as by history, how corrupt and lawless were many of the customs both in Greece and Rome. Much service was needed. And here was a woman in Cencrea who could not sit silent and inactive and see all this. She, too, must work for a universal church. She, too, must bring religion into the life of humanity. Realizing that it was her duty

to help, she entered into this beautiful service, we doubt not, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do.

"She has been a succorer of many," said Paul. In what ways she aided them we need not definitely inquire. It may have been by kind encouragement or sympathy; it may have been by pecuniary assistance, or active social or executive plans for the struggling church. Whatever it was, Phœbe possessed the secret. "She has been a succorer of many, and of myself also," said Paul. To Phœbe, therefore, has been accorded the honor of aiding and sustaining this heroic man, whom we have dreamed was strong enough to endure alone the perils by land and sea, poverty, pain, temptation for the cause he loved.

Cordial Re-  
ception.

And when Paul had intrusted her with this letter to the Romans, how cordial must have been her reception by the church at Rome, bearing, as she did, not only this epistle, but this hearty recognition of her services by their beloved leader. Yet, with what a smile of perplexity and incredulity must the grave elders of the church have looked upon this woman-deacon whom Paul requested them to assist in whatsoever business she had in hand. This business transacted by the aid of the society at Rome, Phœbe went home, full of suggestions and plans, we may imagine, for her cherished Grecian church.

We must remember that it required no small effort and skill to sustain societies in these various places. Paul often preached without compensation, as we know, working at his trade to support himself and receiving contributions from interested friends. There was constant need of money and effort. What did Phœbe do in such a case? Did she sit quietly and helplessly down because she was a woman, with a church needing service and Paul needing money?

If she was not able to assist financially, I am sure she went out to urge the people to action and to insist upon united effort, and to show each and every one that he, or she, should have a personal responsibility in the matter. I can imagine that she even arose in church meeting, after the final adjournment, but right in the presence of Paul, and told the people the blessedness of giving and serving. "Nothing good," she would say, "can be sustained without effort. Let us work together, women and men, for our cause and our children's cause here in Cenchrea." Such was undoubtedly this woman whom Paul was constrained to honor. In spite of all restrictions and social obstacles, in the face of unyielding custom and prejudice, she could yet arise to work earnestly for her church, transact its business, extend its influence and be recognized as one of its most efficient servants.

Sex in Saint-  
hood.

Yet, notwithstanding this public work of a woman, and Paul's plain encouragement of it, the letter of his law was the rule of the churches for many centuries, and it forbade the sisters from uttering their moral or religious word in the sanctuaries, or doing public service of any sort for their own and their brother's cause. But here and there arose the Phœbes, who asked no favors of custom, but insisted on giving the service they could, in every way they could; giving it with such zeal and spirit that people forgot that there was sex in sainthood, and whispered that perhaps they also were called of God.

"It's easy enough," said Angy Plummer in that charming story of the Elder's Wife; "It's easy enough to know how it is, Sis Kinney is a kind of daughter of God, something as Jesus Christ was His Son. It's just the way Jesus used to go round among folks, as near as I can make out. And I, for one, don't believe that God just sent Him once for all, and ain't never sent anybody else near us all this time. I reckon He's sending down sons and daughters to us oftener than we think."

"Angy Plummer," exclaimed her mother, "I call that down right blasphemy." "Well, call it what you're a mind to," said Angy, "it's what I believe."

And so as the years went on there came a growing recognition of the "daughters of God." The world gradually accepted the thought expressed by our new translators in that tender letter of John: "Beloved, now are we the sons of God," was the good old way; "Beloved, now are we the children of God," is the better new one. The recognition grew greater in word as well as spirit, the call was more earnest for the active co-operation of the Phœbes in all the non-official work of the churches, and the Phœbes everywhere responded to the call.

Recognition  
of the Daughters  
of God.

But not until the inauguration of a radically new movement in religion were the official barriers in some degree removed. Not until the emphasis was put upon that divine love of God, which would save all creatures, upon that mother heart of Deity which would enfold all its children; not until the emphasis was put upon the spirit rather than the letter of Bible literature, upon the free rather than the restricted revelations of God, upon the Holy Spirit in the human soul without regard to sex or time or place, not until all this was proclaimed and emphasized did the Phœbes ask or receive official recognition in the ministry.

And it was better so. Under the old dispensation they would have been strangely out of place; under the new it is most fitting that they should be called and chosen. Our modern Pauls are now gladly ordaining them, and the brethren are receiving them in the Lord, as becomes the saints. Now may they also be the glory of God and partakers of the spirit; now may the words of Joel be at last fulfilled: "And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy."

Still there are limitations and restrictions in words. Reforms in words always move more slowly than reforms in ideas. It is wonderful how we fear innovations in language. Even in appellations of the All-Spirit that John reverently named Love, including in that moment of his inspiration the All-Human in the All-Divine Heart, even here we are often sternly limited to certain gender. Dr. Bartol, of Boston, says reprovingly, "Many hold that the simple name of Father is enough. They seem unconscious that there is in their moral idea of Deity any desideratum or lack. But does this figure, drawn from a single human relation, cover the whole ground? Is there no motherhood in God?"

But, thank heaven, it is no longer heresy, as it was in Boston less than a century ago, to say, with Theodore Parker, "God is our infinite Mother. She will hold us in her arms of blessedness and beauty forever and ever."

But what matter the name so we cling to the idea, the ideal of strength and tenderness for the All-Spirit and for the children of the All-Spirit? What matter so we remember that it is not man or woman in the Lord, nor man or woman in the Spirit, neither in the ministry of the Spirit? It is divine; it is human unity.

Woman's In-  
fluence Needed

I have referred to the official ministry for the Phœbes as an assured fact in our growing civilization, but this is only a small part of the work which they are called upon to do. It is found that many, very many, in our churches are as capable of efficient work as this woman helper of Cenchrea, and as truly ministers and apostles as any that were ever ordained to the formal ministry. It is found that there is needed not only woman's large moral and spiritual influence, but her large tact and management in many directions. In philanthropic work woman has always been active. "In the broad fields of human helpfulness," says Mr. Hale, "her empire is like that of the Queen of Palmyra, one that knows no natural limits, but is broad as the genius that can devise and the power that can win." But this church of the new dispensation includes all philanthropy in religion. It includes everything that reforms and purifies and strengthens home and society. To the Phœbes, then, should it be dear as life, because it sustains and ennobles life; sacred as home, because it beautifies and sanctifies the home.

At the Pulpit.

Here are we today in the era of a great reformation. It is a reformation not local, not limited to a section or a sect. It reaches over the civilized world and into the various activities of life. It is a reformation which, while it breaks many idols, is to bring about a pure and more enlightened worship; it is to give freedom to reason and faith; it is to proclaim a constant revelation of God; it is to make, by its doctrine of the divine humanity, a sanctuary of every home and of every heart. It is to show that the ideal of eternity must enter into the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth as well; that theology must have for its highest thought the symbol of both fatherhood and motherhood; that incarnated divinity must include in every sense woman as well as man. Not until we have this co-operation of men and women in all the sacred services and offices of the church and of life will the real unity in religion be realized. Woman must stand at the pulpit and behind the altar of God before we shall hear all sides of sacred and secret moral questions. If we have women at the confessional under the new order, we shall have women to receive the confession. We shall have no dividing of the virtues.

Upon all the sacred events of life, in birth, in marriage, in death, we shall have woman's divine benediction; we shall have co-operation along all the lines of life and society; we shall have a full realization of that unity, human and divine, which this parliament of religions has so grandly indorsed.