

**THE DOCTRINE & POLITY COMMITTEE
FOR THE CHURCH OF GOD**

**Romans 16
Women in Leadership?**

by
Terry L. Cross

Introduction

Among the four Scriptural passages that we are considering in relation to women in leadership within the church, Romans 16 presents something like a counter-balance to the Pauline passages that seem to restrict a woman's activity in the body of Christ. In this "farewell" chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, Paul offers greetings both to people he knows and some he does not. Among the twenty-eight (28) people addressed, no fewer than seven (7) are women. Of greatest importance for our consideration will be the following: Phoebe (16:1); Priscilla (16:3-4); and Junia (16:7).

While we have offered two different sides for interpreting texts in previous presentations, this text is different. Unlike previous texts, there is no "debate" over a statement made by Paul regarding the place of women in the church; instead, there is a difference of interpretation over the precise nature of leadership roles that these women played. Therefore, we will provide differing interpretations of what these women were doing in the church. Since these are not necessarily broken down by a Side A or Side B, we will simply offer the varying interpretations proposed by scholars.

What is not debated in the historical record of the first-century church is that women opened their homes for meetings of those coming to the Christian faith.¹ What becomes more debatable is the role that such women played in church leadership, particularly, the role of the women on whom we will focus our attention. We begin with Phoebe.

Phoebe

Romans 16:1

"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me" (Rom. 16:1-2 NIV).

It is probable that Phoebe was a Gentile Christian because her name was prominent in Greek mythology.² In this list of notable people and groups, Phoebe is introduced first to the churches at Rome with the phrase, "I recommend to you Phoebe, our sister." It is probable

¹ For a balanced discussion of this topic from a historical perspective, see Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), esp. 10-12 and 144-163.

² James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary, 38B, gen. ed. Bruce Metzger, David Hubbard, and Glenn Barker (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), 886; also Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary of the New Testament, ed. Gordon Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 913.

that she bore the letter to Rome and thus was acknowledged in this special way by Paul.³ Some think that as the bearer of the letter, she would have been called upon to explain any ambiguity on Paul's behalf. In order to show she is well suited to perform such an explanation, Paul notes her qualifications relating to the church at Cenchreae—a coastal town about eight (8) miles southeast from Corinth.⁴ Paul uses the familial term, “sister,” [τὴν ἀδελφὴν | *tēn adelphēn*] to describe his kinship with her in the Lord.⁵

The next phrase describing Phoebe is one that remains somewhat shrouded in the ancient past: “who is a deacon of the church [διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας | *diakonon tēs ekklēsias*] at Cenchrea.”⁶ The phrase “who is a deacon” is usually understood as a simple form of the word “to be” (namely, “is” in English). The translators of the NIV leave out “is” or “who is” entirely. The precise wording in Greek is a participle phrase with οὔσαν | *ousan*, which means “being” or “living” or “existing.” Robert Jewett suggests that the phrase should be translated as an explanation: “since she lives as a deacon of the church in Kenchreia.”⁷ In this way, it points to her “position or occupation in life.”⁸ However, other commentators usually glide past this point, preferring instead to focus on the meaning of “deacon.” What is this position? Is it an official office or simply a title for someone who “serves.”

It seems rather clear that in the New Testament, church offices were not yet fully formed. Frequently, titles referred to *functions* within a congregation rather than the more official *positions* that would develop by the third century AD.⁹ The word here is διάκονος | *diakonos*, which refers (usually) to a *male* person who ministers or serves. Phoebe is clearly a female, so why is Paul using a masculine gendered term to apply to Phoebe? At times in ancient Greek, a masculine noun can serve to point to a function or position that is owned or operated by a woman.¹⁰ Thus, such a usage may have meant nothing in particular. However, its usage for both men and women who operate in this mode is significant. Paul uses *diakonos* three times in Romans (twice in 13:4 and in 15:8) and numerous times elsewhere. While the term can mean “servant,” it also can be translated “minister.” Hence, Paul says, “For the one in authority is God’s servant [διάκονος | *diakonos*] for your good” (Rom. 13:4) or that “Christ has become a servant [διάκονον | *diakonon*] for the Jews on behalf of God’s truth” (Rom. 15:8). Paul can also call Apollos and himself “servants”: “What, after all, is Apollos? and what is Paul? Only servants [διάκονοι | *diakonoī*], through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task” (1 Cor. 3:5). Indeed, all Christians are to be equipped “for works of service/ministry” [εἰς διακονίας | *eis diakonias*] (Eph. 4:12).

³ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary of the Bible, ed. Eldon Jay Epp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 942; also, Moo, *Romans*, 913.

⁴ Jewett, *Romans*, 943; also, Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 1065. See as well, Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 238.

⁵ Richard N. Longenecker, *Romans*, 1064.

⁶ Lee Roy Martin pointed out to me that this phrase, “deacon of the church,” is unique in the New Testament. There are similar structures that parallel this, but none exactly like this (e.g., elders of the Church (Acts 20:17 and James 5:14); and Christ the head of the Church (Eph. 5:23).

⁷ Jewett, *Romans*, 944.

⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 944.

⁹ Moo, *Romans*, 914. Moo also notes (fn. 11) that the term διακόνισσα | *diakonissa* (“deaconess”) was not used until a later date, probably between 250-300 AD.

¹⁰ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 886.

So is Paul simply describing the fact that Phoebe is a “servant” or “helper” of the church at Cenchreae? While this word *diakonos* is applicable to every Christian,¹¹ most scholars view it as something more than service. **First**, he uses the noun *diakonos*, not the more general noun for ministry or service, *diakonia*. When matched with the participle *ousan*, this means that Paul is specifying that Phoebe “lives” as a deacon at the church in Cenchreae. This implies more than generalized service, but points to a “recognized ministry” or a “position of responsibility within the congregation.”¹² **Second**, if Paul meant to speak of Phoebe as “one who serves,” he would have expressed it with a verb *diakoneō*, not the noun *diakonos*.¹³ This points scholars toward seeing the action as a regular function or position. **Third**, there are deacons mentioned in the New Testament, so it is quite possible that this is simply the earliest reference to a deacon in the Bible. We see deacons in Philippians 1:1 and also in 1 Timothy 3. However, in all of the references, we are still dealing with a rather undeveloped function that is not clearly specified in these references.¹⁴ **Fourth**, the word “deacon” is usually associated with menial, low-level tasks of service, like waiting on tables. Recent research has emerged that demonstrates the term *diakonos* was not only associated with menial service or waiting on tables, but also to describe an ambassador’s function to deliver a royal message or other such dignified tasks.¹⁵ **Fifth**, whatever the specific nature of Phoebe’s work in the church, it was clear that she was a *leader* of some

¹¹ Moo, *Romans*, 913.

¹² Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 886-7. Also, Jewett, *Romans*, 944, on *ousan*. Cf. also Longenecker, *Romans*, 1064.

¹³ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 886. Dunn also notes that he would have used *diakonia* for service or ministry that is more general. The previous edition of the NIV (1984) has “servant” as a translation, but changed it for the 2011 NIV. Cf. Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 61.

¹⁴ Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 238. Keener notes that many today see deacons “serving” tables in Acts 6 and so assume that the role is one of service. However, the word “deacon” itself (as a title) is not used in Acts 6, so we may not have a clear reference to what later became deacons in the first-century church.

¹⁵ For over a century, scholars have understood the primary or basic meaning of this word to have arisen from a concept of service in which one “waits at table” for others. Acts 6 has provided the paradigmatic example for this type of *diakonia*: when Hellenistic Jews complained that their widows were overlooked in the “daily distribution of food” [ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ τῇ καθημερινῇ | *en tē diakonia tē kathēmerinē*] (Acts 6:1). This situation is described more fully in Acts 6:2: “So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables (διακονεῖν τραπέζαις | *diakonein trapezais*).’” Compared to the ministry of the Word, to serve tables is a mundane, menial task. However, since 1990 with the appearance of a thorough linguistic study of *diakon-* words from classical and Hellenistic Greek by John N. Collins, there has been significant debate and revision about the meaning of these important words in the New Testament [John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990)]. Collins suggests that *diakon-* words “must be removed from the semantic field of caring service....” [John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2002), 15]. From extra-biblical Greek sources, Collins found some evidence that placed *diakon-* words within the semantic range of meaning for “servant” or “service,” but most evidence supported their primary translation as an official representative or a “go-between” rather than “menial” servant [Collins, *Diakonia*, 77-95]. Hence, Collins argued that this word group signified activities more along the line of delivering messages or being an agent for someone. Instead of meaning “slavish service at table,” *diakon-* words were “freely applied to activities by people of eminence” and sometimes in connection with religion [John N. Collins, “Ordained and Other Ministries: Making a Difference,” *Ecclesiology* 3, no. 1 (2006), 11-32, here 23]. Most importantly for Collins, the term *diakonos* “always looks back to a person, persons, institution or physical dependency....” [John N. Collins, “Re-interpreting *diakonia* in Germany,” *Ecclesiology* 5 (2009): 69-81, here 79]. For more discussion of how this relates to the modern church, see Terry L. Cross, *Serving the People of God’s Presence: A Theology of Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, forthcoming 2020), esp. chapters 1 and 2.

sort.¹⁶ It seems possible that she could have opened her house to the church at Cenchreae or even supplied hospitality to visiting Christians at this important layover seaport.¹⁷

Romans 16:2

We move now to the next part of the passage, namely, Romans 16:2: “I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me” (Rom. 16:1-2 NIV). We see in this verse a further recommendation and request from Paul to the churches at Rome regarding Phoebe. She is to be “received in the Lord” or “accepted favorably”¹⁸ in a manner worthy of God’s people. In other words, “Phoebe should be welcomed with honors suitable to her position as a congregational leader...”¹⁹ The Romans were to “give her whatever help she may need” or “assist her in whatever matter she may have need of you.”²⁰

In the final clause of Romans 16:2 lay a subtle expression that has given rise to many theories: “for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.” What does this mean? The term προστάτις | *prostatis* is translated “benefactor” by the NIV and NRSV, but “helper” or a similar variant in the RSV, NIV (1984), and NJB. This term was a notable title for a woman who provided support—financial and otherwise—for any endeavor. In the Roman world, *patrons* were individuals who provided support for *collegia* or associations. Patrons who were men were called προστάτης | *prostatēs* [*patronus* in Latin] and patronesses who were women were called προστάτις | *prostatis* [*patrona* in Latin].²¹ Such individuals were usually wealthy and willing to gain honor in a community by sponsoring *clients* or associations for the common good.²² They could also be responsible for finances of an endeavor or represent clients in legal disputes.²³ Historical records demonstrate that women could be such patronesses, even of public clubs or private groups. A patron/patroness would build necessary facilities for the community or group they supported. In the case of private religious groups, the patron might build a statue devoted to the god involved or even a temple for the group to gather in worship. They might provide free meals to those in need or hold banquets for civic celebrations. In return for such lavish support, patrons/patronesses would be thanked with flattering inscriptions on these buildings and would be placed in a seat of honor at the official gatherings.²⁴ Robert Jewett surmises that Phoebe may have been a hostess of a house church in Cenchreae, since such

¹⁶ Jewett, *Romans*, 944. “Although earlier commentaries interpret the term *diakonos* as a subordinate role, it now appears more likely that she functioned as the leader of the congregation.”

¹⁷ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 887.

¹⁸ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 887.

¹⁹ Jewett, *Romans*, 945.

²⁰ This last phrase is Dunn’s proposed translation. See Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 888. The “matter” [πράγματι | *pragmati*] is not described here, but it frequently can refer to a lawsuit or some legal dispute. It can also be very general and mean an “undertaking” or a matter or “affair.” Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 888; also, Jewett, *Romans*, 945-6; also, Moo, *Romans*, 915, esp. fn. 18.

²¹ Payne, *Man and Woman in Christ*, 62-3; cf. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 888.

²² In classical Athens, a *prostatēs* was a “required citizen patron of a *metoikos*, a resident alien.” See Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*, 196.

²³ Jewett, *Romans*, 946-7.

²⁴ Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*, 198. The description in this paragraph of the role of such patronage comes from Osiek and MacDonald.

hosts or hostesses required a wealthy person with high social standing and with a residence large enough to hold a small gathering. Such a person might also preside over the meetings as well as lead in organizing the congregation.²⁵ Jewett states, “The fact that Paul mentions Phoebe as a patroness ‘to many, and also to me’ indicates the level of material resources that would support this kind of leadership role. In light of her high social standing, and Paul’s relatively subordinate social position as her client, it is mistaken to render προστάτις | *prostatis* as ‘helper’ or to infer some kind of subordinate role.”²⁶

Since we are endeavoring in this series to adjudicate from the New Testament the role of women as leaders in the body of Christ, it is important to pause at this word προστάτις | *prostatis* a moment longer. This noun is related to the verb προϊστημι | *prohistēmi*, which is used at various places in the New Testament to speak of leaders. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 Paul says “...to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you” (NIV). The phrase translated here “who care for you” is προϊσταμένους | *proistamenous*, which also can mean “who have charge over you.” It is a term for leadership—one who “stands in front of” others, literally. It is directly related to *prostatis*. In 1 Timothy 5:17, when Paul says, “The elders that rule well...” (KJV) or who “direct the affairs of the church” [προεστῶτες | *proestōtes*], he is using a term of leadership from the same root. In Romans 12:8, Paul uses the same word to express leadership: “he that ruleth, [προϊσταμένους | *proistamenos*] with diligence” (KJV) or “if it is to lead, do it diligently” (NIV). The overwhelming majority of usages for this word in the New Testament refers to *leadership*.²⁷ Therefore, whatever the specific meaning and function for προστάτις | *prostatis*, it probably holds some level of leadership in it. And the crucial point here seems to be that Paul himself benefited from Phoebe’s leadership (or patronage).

Priscilla and Aquila

Romans 16:3-4

“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house” (NIV).

Paul asks the Romans to “embrace” fellow-Christians sixteen times in this passage.²⁸ The first persons he asks to be greeted are his friends and co-workers [συνεργοί | *synergoi*]²⁹

²⁵ Jewett, *Romans*, 947.

²⁶ Jewett, *Romans*, 947.

²⁷ Payne, *Men and Women in Christ*, 62, fn. 6.

²⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 952; also, Moo, *Romans*, 919. For a thorough accounting of the list of names throughout this chapter, see Jewett, 952-954. He notes there are 15 personal friends and coworkers residing now in Rome as well as the leaders of five house or tenement churches in Rome (those in the house of Prisca and Aquila, among the slaves of Aristobulus, among the slaves of Narcissus, the brothers with Asyncritus, and the saints who are with Philologos.

²⁹ This word means “fellow laborers” or “co-workers.” It is used by Paul numerous times to denote those who worked with him in ministry. See Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 892; Moo, *Romans*, 920; and Jewett, *Romans*, 957. Jewett says this is “technical language for missionary colleagues” (957). The fact that Paul’s list of greetings begins with a woman (Phoebe) and continues with a woman (Prisca) is quite amazing in the ancient world. “It appears that Paul is aware of the prejudice against women’s contributions in his society, and therefore works

from Corinth and Ephesus, Prisca³⁰ and Aquila. They had fled Rome during the ban of Jews when Claudius was emperor in AD 49 (Acts 18:2). We know that Aquila was a Jew from Pontus, but it is unclear if Prisca was Jewish (Acts 18:1). Apparently, they had come back to Rome and had a church gathering in their house (Rom. 16:4).³¹ There are six references to this couple in the New Testament, four of which list Prisca first (Acts 18:18, 26; 2 Tim. 4:19; and Rom. 16:3).³² This reversal of name placement (that is, the woman first and the man second) may imply that Prisca held a higher status in the Roman context³³ or that she “was for some other reason considered more important.”³⁴ When Paul left Corinth (where they met and worked together), Prisca and Aquila went with him to Ephesus, where they stayed and worked with the church there (Acts 18:18-21).

It was in Ephesus that the couple heard Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria who was a “learned man” (KJV) or an “eloquent man” (ESV)[ἀνήρ λόγιος | *anēr logios*] who was “powerful in the Scriptures” (KJV) [δυνατός | *dynatos*] (Acts 18:24). The problem was that he only understood the baptism of John and so Prisca and Aquila took him and “explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26 ESV). Here we see that Prisca is again named first in the narrative by Luke. Could this imply that she took the lead in teaching Apollos? Whatever the case, it is clear that this woman was involved in teaching this man. Some interpreters suggest that this teaching [ἐξέθεντο | *exethento*] is not the same as the more traditional form of teaching [διδασκεῖν | *didaskein*] that Paul specifically admonishes women not to do (1 Tim. 2:12). Is there a difference in these two words, one denoting an informal, more private explanation [*exethento*] and the other denoting a public, more official teaching [*didaskein*]? This can be easily cleared up by noting that Luke uses the same term here as in Acts 28:23 where Paul preaches or teaches the Jews in Rome: “When they had appointed a day for him, they came to his lodging in greater number. From morning till evening he expounded [ἐξετίθετο | *exetitheto*] to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets” (ESV). It appears Paul was involved in teaching the Jews from the Law and Prophets about Christ when he expounded or explained to them the way of Christ; it was the same word used in Acts 18:26 where Prisca and Aquila explained or taught Apollos the way of God.³⁵

Junia

Romans 16:7

all the harder to make sure that the praiseworthy among them receive their due.” Craig Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 240.

³⁰ Priscilla is the “diminutive” name for Prisca. It is the same person.

³¹ The ban on Jews in Rome expired when Claudius died in 54 AD.

³² Jewett, *Romans*, 955, fn. 29.

³³ Jewett, *Romans*, 955; also Longenecker, *Romans*, 1067. Some suggest that she was from a wealthy family and therefore her social status would elevate her above her husband.

³⁴ Longenecker, *Romans*, 1067.

³⁵ Linda L. Belleville, “Women in Ministry: An Egalitarian Perspective,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, ed. Stanley Gundry, in *Counterpoints: Exploring Theology*, ed. James Beck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 59. In contrast to this point, Craig L. Blomberg states, “Even if their home was a house church, nothing in the text suggests this was some kind of formal, public instruction, though we cannot exclude the possibility.” See Craig L. Blomberg, “Women in Ministry: A Complementarian Perspective,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 147.

“Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was” (NIV)

Who is this team of apostles? More particularly, who is the second one listed, Junia? Since the 1300s AD, manuscripts and translations have considered this to be a man named Junias³⁶ or Junius (e.g., NIV 1984, RSV, NASB, TEV, and NJB), as opposed to a woman named Junia (NIV 2011, NRSV, REB). The difficulty in discerning the difference comes in the form we have in this verse, namely the direct object (accusative case) of the verb “Greet...Junia” [ἀσπάσασθε ... Ἰουνίαν | *aspasasthe...Iounian*]. If the name were a man’s name, it would appear like this: Ἰουνιᾶν | *Iounian*; if the name were a woman’s name, it would appear like this: Ἰουνίαν | *Iounian*. If one looks closely at the difference, one will see that the only difference is in the accent—the female name has an acute accent placed above the letter “i” and the male name has a circumflex accent above the letter “a.” Without the accents, they are written exactly the same in Greek! From historical evidence, we know that early (and even some later) Greek manuscripts were written without any accents. Indeed, not until the sixth century AD did accent marks begin to surface on Greek manuscripts,³⁷ and from these manuscripts we find the feminine form Ἰουνίαν | *Iounian* accented.³⁸

So, what can we determine about Junia’s gender? First, the early church almost universally understood Junia as a woman.³⁹ Second, the reading of the Middle Ages and later where *Iounian* was understood to be a man can be attributed to the difficulty of that era understanding a woman to be an apostle.⁴⁰ Third—and perhaps most decisive, we find the female Latin name *Junia* occurring more than 250 times in Greek and Latin inscriptions in Rome itself, but *not one time* was the male name *Junias* found anywhere.⁴¹

What can we determine about the meaning of the phrase, who “are outstanding among the apostles” (Rom. 16:7 NIV)? Does this mean “they are well known to the apostles” (ESV) or are “esteemed by the apostles” (NIV variant reading)? Or does it mean “they are prominent among the apostles” (NRSV)? The reason this is important is because if they are *among* the apostles, then we have an example of a woman who is an apostle in the New Testament. However, if they are only *esteemed by* or *well known to* the apostles, then their ministry is simply being acknowledged *by* the apostles. The argumentation becomes a little complex at this point, since it is based on grammatical aspects of the Greek language. However, it is a crucial difference and therefore is necessary for us to consider.

Those who argue that Andronicus and Junia were *not* apostles suggest that the grammatical construction of “outstanding among” [ἐπίσημοι ἐν | *episēmoi en*] with a dative

³⁶ Junias is considered to be a contracted form of the name Junianus. Longenecker, *Romans*, 1060.

³⁷ Longenecker, *Romans*, 1060.

³⁸ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. A companion volume to UBSGNT⁴ (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/German Bible Society, 1994), 475.

³⁹ The exception is Epiphanius (AD 315 – 403), who thought Junia was a man. However, he also thought Prisca (Priscilla) was a man who worked with Aquila, so his determination of gender is not very reliable. See Moo, *Romans*, 922, fn. 31.

⁴⁰ As Craig Keener notes on this discussion, “The only reason someone would deny that Junia is a woman here, against the otherwise plain reading of the text, is the assumption that Paul cannot describe a woman as an apostle.” See Keener, “Women in Ministry: Another Egalitarian Perspective,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 213.

⁴¹ Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 475; also, Jewett, *Romans*, 961. Jewett provides the analyses and searches by various individuals in fn. 104 and 105 on p. 961. For a summary of this textual discussion that is clear and readable, see Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman in Christ*, 65-67.

case (as here with τοῖς ἀποστόλοις | *tois apostolois*) is used only “for impersonal objects”—things, not people.⁴² If the object were to be personal, then, they suggest, the pattern would require a genitive construction here [τῶν ἀποστολῶν | *tōn apostolōn*]. However, numerous grammarians disagree with this assertion. The adjective for “outstanding” or “remarkable” here [ἐπίσημος | *episēmos*], “lifts up a person or thing as distinguished or marked in comparison with other representatives of the same class, in this instance with the other apostles.”⁴³

What does Paul mean here by “apostle”? Titles like these in the New Testament always remain somewhat shrouded in the mist of the first century, but we can infer by Paul’s usage elsewhere that Paul can speak of “The Twelve” as apostles as well as Paul himself. Further, he can speak of apostles beyond the Twelve as having been appointed by the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:7).⁴⁴ Since they were “in Christ” before Paul was, it is quite probable that they had seen the risen Christ.⁴⁵ According to this view, Andronicus and Junia were apostles of a “higher status.”⁴⁶ They had functioned as apostles for two decades before Paul wrote this letter to the Romans.⁴⁷

However, other interpreters suggest that the term apostles here is used by Paul to “denote a ‘messenger’ or ‘emissary’ and sometimes to denote a ‘commissioned missionary.’”⁴⁸ Thus Douglas Moo concludes that apostle here simply means “traveling missionary.”⁴⁹ It is true that Paul uses apostle to speak of itinerant preachers or an emissary of the church.⁵⁰ Yet the fact that Andronicus and Junia were “outstanding” apostles and were “in Christ before” Paul seems to point to their status of apostle as something more than regular missionaries (whom Paul calls “fellow workers” in this text).

The final question, then, is whether or not Andronicus and Junia held a leadership position in the church. In other words, does “apostle” here refer to a leadership function? We do know that “apostle” is usually the first in a list of functions and gifts operating in the body of Christ. Also, in Ephesians 2:20, Paul speaks of the household of God “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (ESV). While we cannot be certain of the authority of apostles in the various settings of house churches scattered throughout the Roman world in the first century, it seems clear that for Paul the role of apostle was special in terms of leadership of the church. To name a woman among this group of apostles is significant information from our search into biblical material regarding women in leadership.

Conclusion

What can we ascertain from this selection of names and descriptions in Romans 16? First, scholars seem to agree that these individuals were in leadership in the church. Precisely

⁴² Daniel B. Wallace and Michael H. Burer, “Was Junia Really an Apostle?” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 6, no. 2 (2001): 4-11. Cf. for a response, Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*, 304, fn. 19.

⁴³ Jewett, *Romans*, 963. Jewett offers numerous examples from Greek to substantiate this claim.

⁴⁴ It should be noted that Paul “repeatedly defines an apostle as one who encounters the risen Christ (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8; Gal. 1:1, 15-17).” Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman in Christ*, 66.

⁴⁵ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 894-95; Jewett, *Romans*, 964.

⁴⁶ Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 895.

⁴⁷ Jewett, *Romans*, 964.

⁴⁸ Moo, *Romans*, 924.

⁴⁹ Moo, *Romans*, 924.

⁵⁰ Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*, 226.

what they did and how they functioned in relation to others in the body of Christ is not entirely clear. At the very least, we can determine that these women were held in high esteem by Paul and were commended to the church in Rome as exemplary models of women in leadership roles. Studies of 1 Timothy 2:8-12, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, and 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, may be more difficult to interpret, but this passage holds general agreement among scholars in terms of women functioning as leaders. That in itself should assist our discussion today concerning women in church leadership.