

Review: *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, by Aimee Byrd

(Part 2)

By Mike Myers

This is my final review of Aimee Byrd's published books. I will begin by addressing her treatment of Phoebe and Junia from Romans 16. After comparing her work to the Scriptures, I will close by analyzing her claims about the focus of *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.

Phoebe

"I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant (diakonos) of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper (prostatitis) of many and of myself also."
(Romans 16:1-2, NKJV)

By exegeting this text, we can learn five things with certainty about this excellent woman. First, Paul **commended** Phoebe to the church. Though a faithful and notable Christian, she was a stranger to the Romans. Paul's commendation authenticated her character and identity. Additionally, if she did in fact deliver the epistle itself to the church (as many believe), this would attest to the letter's authenticity as well.¹ Second, Phoebe enjoyed **communion** with Paul and all Christians as a sister. The word "our" broadens the scope of her fellowship to all believers. Robert Haldane emphasizes the significance of familial terms among Christians, how they "express the new and spiritual relationship which subsists among believers, who by a new nature have become the sons of God and brethren in Christ" (*Romans*, 633). Mrs. Byrd rightly echoes this when she says, "As siblings in Christ, we share a status of value with one another that will carry over into the new heavens and new earth" (146, see also 216).²

Third, Phoebe was a **servant** (*diakonos*) of the church. There is no debate regarding the practical implication of this term. Phoebe obviously had given of herself and her possessions to care for the saints. The disagreement revolves around whether this means Phoebe held formal ecclesiastical office. Mrs. Byrd first discussed Phoebe in 2016 in *No Little Women*: "Was Phoebe a deaconess? Many believe so, while many others would say that that isn't the case. This text alone does not answer the question one way or another." (see NLW, 109-110). Four years later she is much more decisive, quoting from the updated 2011 NIV's version that uses the word "deacon" instead of servant (146). In the section entitled, "Peel and Reveal: Coed Collaborers," Mrs. Byrd cites heavily from [Lynn Cohick](#). The latter wrote "a careful examination of the *diakonia* word group suggests a sense of representation or agency. That is, in calling Phoebe a deacon, Paul was identifying her as his agent or intermediary carrying his gospel message, or most specifically, his letter to the Romans" (146).

There is difference of opinion on this point, even within the Reformed tradition. For example, John Calvin, Matthew Henry, John Brown of Edinburgh, Charles Hodge, and Robert Haldane all attribute to Phoebe some form of ecclesiastical office. Matthew Poole, William Hendriksen, and John Murray differ, arguing that *diakonos* describes the fact and quality of her

¹ It appears from 2 Corinthians that letters of commendation were common in the early church and also abused by false apostles (2 Cor. 3:1, 10:12, 18). In that epistle, Paul appeals to the genuine fruit of godliness as sufficient commendation for his apostolic ministry (2 Cor. 4:2, 5:12, 6:4, 12:11).

² All unmarked page numbers in parentheses are from *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.

service without designating formal appointment. It is important to note that each of the authors who acknowledge an early church office or designation of deaconess, without exception, restricts that function exclusively to the women. In other words, if Phoebe formally held the title 'deaconess' she naturally had responsibility toward members of her own sex.

This differs significantly from Mrs. Byrd's goal of argumentation. By stringing together citations from Lynn Cohick, Michael Bird's *Bourgeois Babes, Bossy Wives, and Bobby Haircuts*, and Phillip Payne, she clearly pushes for more (146-150). For example, she quotes Bird without criticism,

"Now if Paul was opposed to women teaching men anytime and anywhere, why would he send a woman like Phoebe to deliver this vitally important letter and to be his personal representative in Rome? Why not Timothy, Titus, or some other dude? Why Phoebe?" (147-148).

She concludes, "Phoebe was a competent woman of influence, an ally to Paul, who he was confident could represent his teaching" (148). **Where from the text** of Romans 16:1-2 can we, by good and necessary consequence (WCF 1.6), conclude Phoebe was intended to teach the church at Rome? The answer is **nowhere**. Further, the very existence of a church presupposes the presence of elders. Though not definitive, Paul likely included elders and/or ministers among the names in Romans 16:3-16.

Fourth, Phoebe was *worthy* of a warm and generous reception by the saints in Rome. The Apostle John actually urged the opposite in one case (2 Jn. 10-11) and rebuked Diotrephes for his refusal to receive the brethren (3 Jn. 9-10). Paul enjoined the warm-hearted and open-handed hospitality becoming of Christians (Rom. 12:13). Fifth, and finally, Paul gratefully acknowledged her *patronage*. The Apostle knew how to be abased (Phil. 4:12). For Jesus' sake, he endured weariness, toil, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, cold, and nakedness, among other things (2 Cor. 11:27-28). Paul suffered much, but not in Phoebe's house. Reminiscent of the widow of Zarephath for Elijah and the Shunammite woman for Elisha, Phoebe exercised her gifts for the Kingdom by refreshing the ordained servants of the Kingdom.

Throughout her treatment of this saint, Mrs. Byrd attempts to repurpose Phoebe's godly example and Paul's grateful acknowledgement to develop an argument long used by egalitarians and liberals (148-149). She later cites Romans 16:1-2 in defense of her claim that "Women were even leaders of house churches" (190).³ She revisits Phoebe again in chapter 8, where she claims that "Paul authorizes a woman to communicate and make common" the letter to the Romans, and that "Paul makes sure Phoebe is known as the prominent one bearing the epistle on his behalf. It wasn't just because it needed to be delivered from point A to point B" (205). I ask again, **where is this from the text?**

John Murray provided a far better conclusion:

"The particular commendation of Phoebe is that she had been a helper of many and of Paul himself...no doubt mentioned as the outstanding feature of Phoebe's service to the church and indicates that on account of which she was called a servant of the church. But this virtue is also mentioned to enforce the exhortation that she is to be given assistance in every matter in which she may have need...Under what circumstances she was a helper of Paul we do not know...In any case

³ Mrs. Byrd does the same with Lydia. "But when Paul arrived in Philippi...he found a small group of praying, God-fearing Gentile women. Paul didn't inquire about where all the manly men were for him to equip." Later she quotes Marg Mowczko, "if Lydia didn't lead the fledging church in Philippi, who did? Another member of her household? Lydia is the only Philippian convert who is named in Acts, and we know that the Philippian church met in her home. So, she is the most likely person to have led and cared for the first congregation at Philippi" (191).

Phoebe is one of the women memorialized in the New Testament by their devoted service to the gospel whose honour is not to be tarnished by elevation to positions and functions inconsistent with the station they occupy in the economy of human relationships” (*Romans*, Vol 2, 226-227).

I direct the reader’s attention to how Professor Murray handles the text of Scripture. He goes as far as the text allows, and no further. We now turn to consider Junia.

Junia

“Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.”
(*Romans 16:7, NKJV*)

Mrs. Byrd begins her discussion about “A Mysterious Sister” on page 223. She writes,

“I’m not going to spend too much time here, as we are now entering the realm of what Richard Bauckham calls ‘historical imagination.’ But the apostles were major baton passers, and some parts of Scripture just about dare us to imagine (responsibly imagine, of course). The greetings Paul sends in Romans 16 provoke imagination.”

After some introductory comments, Mrs. Byrd writes,

“One of the more notorious sisters in Christ to whom some historical imaginers tried to give a sex change is Junia...Some translators, relying on the assumption that Paul could never refer to a woman as an apostle, changed the feminine ‘Junia’ to the masculine ‘Junias’...there are no records of the name Junias, the ancient manuscripts say Junia, and most of the patristic writers understood Junia to be a woman, most scholars today agree that Paul is referring to a woman named Junia” (223).

In support of her claims, she footnotes an [article](#) (downloadable pdf) written by Kenneth Bailey that she retrieved from this [website](#). If you visit the page, you will find this purpose prominently featured at the top:

“God’s Word to Women, Inc. teaches the Biblical truth that men and women are equal (in terms of substance and value, privilege and responsibility, function and authority) in all areas of life, ministry, and marriage.”

In the interests of space, I refer the reader to this [video](#) by Dr. James White where he discusses the legitimate textual questions about the name Junia. Regarding Mrs. Byrd’s reference to patristics, and her overall utilization of “historical imagination” I quote Robert Haldane:

“The Fathers, as they are called, were pious men, but often lamentably deficient in judgment, and generally bad reasoners...Origen infers that [Andronicus and Junia] were a number of the seventy disciples. This is a conclusion without premises. Such conjectural reasoning imposes on many, as it has the appearance of giving us additional information, and containing nothing contrary to the Scriptures. But it affords a most mischievous precedent for perverting the word of God, and in no instance can it be of any service” (*Romans*, 637).

The plain reading of the text, apart from any other agenda, would warrant us to conclude the following. First, Andronicus and Junia were kinsmen with Paul, whether by nationality or biological family. Second, if Junia were in fact a woman, she would likely have been

Andronicus' wife (cf Rom. 16:3, 12). Third, they had served Christ faithfully and suffered in prison with Paul. Fourth, they were either well known to the twelve Apostles, or well known as apostles in the looser sense of the word, i.e., those being sent out to do the work of the church (Barnabas, Acts 14:14; Titus, 2 Cor. 8:23; Epaphroditus, Phil. 2:25, see *Recovering*, 224). Fifth, they had bowed the knee to King Jesus before Paul did, for which Paul gives them honor.

About fifteen years ago, I remember watching a fascinating series produced by [Answers in Genesis](#). In one part, the instructor explained how creative evolutionists can be. He displayed a very well-drawn, detailed picture of a “pre-historic” scene, complete with landscape and several animals and reptiles. In actuality, the entire compelling image was based upon some teeth and a few fossils a team of archeologists had discovered. The evidence did not actually support the graphics, but their narrative needed it. With a few strokes of artistic license, a completely new idea appeared.

Phoebe and Junia are neither teeth nor prehistoric fragments; they were two saints loved by the Apostle Paul and have their names immortalized on the pages of Holy Scripture. From the preceding paragraphs, I think it is evident what kind of picture “historical imagination” can produce for the lives of Phoebe and Junia. Also clear is how careful exegesis presents something very different. John Calvin is very helpful here, “To be ignorant of things which it is neither possible nor lawful to know, is to be learned: an eagerness to know them is a species of madness” (*Institutes*, 3.23.8). Faithful exegesis is not a quest of imagination; it is a discipline of exposition that requires humility and devoted conformity to the written Word.

Discipleship or Deconstruction?

Discipleship stands at the heart of the Church's mission. It consists of the twofold command given by the resurrected Christ to His Apostles just before His ascension into glory. “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen” (Matt. 28:18-20). To be baptized is to be identified with Christ; to be taught His commands leads to conformity with Christ. The key question one must ask before, during, or after reading any book on discipleship is precisely this: will/does/did this help me grow in conformity unto Jesus Christ in faithfulness to the Word of God by His Spirit? You, dear reader, must ask that question about *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.

Mrs. Byrd has [described](#) this book as “more of a theological look at discipleship for laymen and laywomen (not marriage or church office) in the church.” However, a book that depends upon a feminist symbol, departs from a faithful doctrine of canonicity, appropriates methods of critical theory, draws uncritically from critical scholarship, and exegetes by way of “historical imagination” can hardly be a helpful “look at discipleship...in the church.” While she is correct in her opposition to any kind of eternal subordination of the Son, her frequent misrepresentation of source material (see previous reviews) calls into question how accurately she has presented positions of people involved with that debate as well.

Regardless of any stated purpose, my conclusion is that this book's effect has less to do with discipleship, and more to do with deconstruction. [Deconstruction](#) means “to take apart the existing order to replace it with a new order that's built from the ground up.” Here is a compilation of statements from Mrs. Byrd that I believe supports my conclusion.

Quoting Carolyn Custis James, Mrs. Byrd writes, “And yet ‘patriarchy is not the Bible's message. Rather, it is the cultural backdrop against which the gospel message of Jesus stands out in sharpest relief’” (56).

At the beginning of some strained typological comparisons on pages 79-80, she says, “Here we see a mother figure [Deborah] actively working in the public sphere. She contrasts herself with Sisera’s mother, who is described as waiting at home for her son to return victoriously, envisioning him returning with many women trophies as spoils of battle. Sisera’s mother is kept in the domestic sphere, promoting the sexual abuse of Israelite women.”

“The church needs to reform and renew how we look at discipleship, as well as the contribution of women to discipleship” (161). By this point I think the reader can safely conclude that Mrs. Byrd does not have motherly nurture of children or older women teaching younger women in mind (Titus 2:3-5).

“The tropes [created by CBMW] signify that biblical men are the leaders and initiators, the sex with virility, and the decision makers. Biblical women are submissive, quiet, tenders of the home, and overall, affirmers for these masculine leaders. As [feminist] Virginia Woolf put it, ‘Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man twice its natural size’” (170). Note to the reader: here is how Noah Webster defines virility: “Manhood; the state of the male sex, which has arrived to the maturity and strength of a man, and to the power of procreation.”

“There’s no qualifier in these verses [Col. 3:16, Heb. 5:12, Rom. 12:6-8, 1 Cor. 12:31, 1 Cor. 14:1], saying that men are not to learn from women or that women are only to teach their own sex and children. Any divinely ordained differences that men and women have do not prohibit women from teaching. It would be disobedience to withhold women from teaching” (174). 1 Timothy 2:11-14 says, “Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.” If there is anywhere in this book this passage demands interaction, it is here. However, Mrs. Byrd does not mention it a single time.

“Many churches thus limit, in ways they do not limit for laymen, the capacity for laywomen to learn deeply and to teach. The consensus is that men are the necessary teachers in the church. While some give the nod for women to teach other women and children, they are sending the message that this is ancillary work to be done. Are the laywomen disciples in your church serving in the same capacity as the laymen?” (188).

“God’s people hand down the longest-lasting relationships God gives us: siblingship. This is a different dynamic than the gender tropes of biblical manhood and womanhood that keep us trapped in the yellow wallpaper...Is your church handing down the living faith of the dead, holding fast to our confession of hope (Heb. 10:23) together as a covenant family, or inadvertently handing down traditional stereotypes that Christ’s kingdom has already turned on their heads” (229-230).

In February 2020, three months before this book was published, I emailed two members of Mrs. Byrd’s former session. Among other things, I objected to the title, arguing that it was at best unwise in light of our cultural environment. Upon reflection, and based on all my preceding reviews, I believe a more apt title would have been *Deconstructing Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. I will conclude my review project with one final, summary analysis in which I will discuss reasons for Mrs. Byrd’s significant theological shift from *Housewife Theologian* to the present.