

Passage in Scripture/Issue Related to Women in Leadership Paper for Dr. Gill

PTH 903 God's Women Then and Now

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The Apostle Paul's View of Women Leaders—Romans 16:1-15

Introduction

This paper will examine how Paul's life intersected with women leaders in the Early Church who were intentionally recorded in Scripture and whose lives touched and shaped early Christianity. These leading women demonstrated initiative, influence, and competence. Further examination of the Scriptures, reveals their significance and roles. These women modeled bold leadership within a highly patriarchal culture. Remarkably, Paul respected these women and embraced their essential contribution to the Church. Romans 16:1-15 will serve as the scriptural foundation, with special consideration of three particular women: Phoebe, Priscilla, and Junia.

Women Leaders in the Bible

The question of women serving as Christian leaders is not a contemporary issue. God owned this idea from the beginning and sees women in ministerial leadership as perfectly normal. Biblical leadership is determined, both in the Old and New Testament, by the calling and spiritual gifting of God, and the recognition of these gifts and calling by his people (Exod. 3:10; 4:12; Judg. 6:14, 34; 1 Sam. 16:13; 18:6-7; Acts 6:3; Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Pet. 4:10).¹

Biblical history reflects the patriarchal culture, yet Scripture often challenges patriarchal ways. Miriam, a prophet, led the women in celebration and worship following Israel's deliverance from Egypt. Five hundred years later, God said, "I sent before you Moses, Aaron,

¹Valerie Griffiths, "Women as Leaders" in *The IVP Women's Commentary*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 642.

and Miriam” (Mic. 6:4; Exod. 15:20-21). Miriam was considered one of three celebrated national leaders.

Deborah became a judge when Israel lived in great moral decline due to a lack of strong national leadership. God appointed Deborah to the highest public office in the land. Even Barak knew that the Lord had chosen to speak through Deborah and discerned that she should accompany him to battle.²

Huldah served as a prophetess during the time of Josiah. When the book of the law was found in the temple (621 BC), Josiah, the king, consulted with Huldah, who gave a strong message from God to the nation (2 Kings 22:11-20). Other prophets, including Jeremiah, were available but God chose to use Huldah for this crucial assignment. Esther, through the encouragement and endorsement of Mordecai, rose to a high profile position in order to save the nation. Esther emerged with extraordinary authority (Esther 4:14; 8:7-8; 9:29). Clearly, God called and used these women as national leaders over both men and women.

Jesus himself challenged the culture of His day which minimized the role and value of women. He rejected the idea of inequitable relationships among His followers by what He taught. He modeled servanthood (Matt. 20:25-28; Luke 22:25-17) and treated women with respect, including them as His closest friends and followers. In a culture that did not validate the voice of women in important societal issues, Jesus instructed the women to proclaim, to say out loud, to voice the news of His resurrection publicly, to both men and women (Luke 24:5-11). These actions mobilized the Early Church so that both women and men worshipped and served together. The New Testament incorporates the stories of prominent women in the church, who

²“Deborah: Prophet, Mother and Judge,” The Torah Studies, <http://rinahshal.tripod.com/id146.html> (accessed November 21, 2009).

worked alongside Paul as colleagues (Acts 1:14; 16:40; Rom. 16:1-16; Phil. 4:3; Col. 4:15; Philem. 1-2).³

Romans 16:1-15

This pericope contains Paul's commendation of Phoebe and greetings to significant individuals in the Roman church, a congregation he did not establish. Although Paul had never been to Rome, he knew several believers in the Roman church. This passage indicates that women played a prominent role in the Roman church, not only as members but also as workers. Ten of the twenty-seven Christians Paul greets in this passage are women (more than one third). Six of them (Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis) are specifically commended as women who "worked hard in the Lord" (Rom 16:12). The presence of these women fits in with what we know of the Early Church in general and indicates an open atmosphere in which women participated alongside men.⁴

To further illustrate this point, Euodia, Syntyche, and Priscilla, who are listed in this greeting, are technically identified by Paul as his *synergoi* or "fellow-workers" (Phil. 4:3; Rom. 16:3). Paul uses this language not only to describe these three women, but also to describe various men with whom he co-labored. This terminology is Paul's most frequent designation for his many associates. According to Wolf-Henning Ollrog, a co-worker is "one who works together with Paul as an agent of God in the common work of missionary preaching."⁵ Ollrog points out that Paul also considered himself a co-worker. This perspective leads to the

³Griffiths, 643.

⁴Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 209.

⁵Wolf-Henning Ollrog, *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter: Untersuchungen zu Theorie und Praxis der paulinischen Mission*. WMANT 50 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1979), 67, quoted in Florence M. Gillman, *Women Who Knew Paul* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 43.

theological conclusion that Paul viewed these women as sharing the function of church leadership roles alongside him. His view of ministry does not indicate a hierarchical, institutional tone.

Based on Paul's greeting (Rom. 16:1), it becomes apparent that Paul recognized that certain women were gifted with a leadership calling. Paul recognized the calling of God on these women and commissioned them to ministry. A closer study of the ministry of Phoebe, Priscilla and Junia is instructive.

Phoebe

But I commend to you Phoebe, our sister, who is minister of the assembly which is in Cenchrea; that ye may receive her in the Lord worthily of saints, and that ye may assist her in whatever matter she has need of you; for she also has been a helper of many, and of myself. (Rom. 16:1-2, Darby Translation)

What does the Bible reveal about Phoebe? At first glance, Paul's greeting indicates that Phoebe delivered the letter to the church in Rome. She served as "Paul's forerunner." As a woman entrusted with great responsibility, Paul requested that the church extend to her a hearty reception. He wholly respected and endorsed her: "I commend (stand beside, express solidarity with, recommend, give approval, show, demonstrate, display as an ideal, to you, our sister Phoebe.)"⁶

Upon closer examination, Paul called Phoebe a "minister" or a "deacon" (TNIV). In fact, Phoebe is the first recorded "deacon" in Christianity.⁷ The evidence declares of Phoebe that she possessed a significantly high level of ministry responsibility and leadership. Although several translations render this word feminine, the word used here for "deacon" or "minister" is actually

⁶Deborah M. Gill and Barbara Cavaness, *God's Women Then and Now* (Springfield, MO: Grace and Truth Publications, 2004), 111.

⁷James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 9-16*, vol. 38 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 887.

masculine and is exactly the same one Paul uses to describe himself and Apollos (1 Cor. 3:5), Tychicus (Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7), and Timothy (1 Tim. 4:6). Paul even speaks of Christ as becoming a “servant” (minister-deacon) to the Jews on behalf of God’s truth (Rom. 15:8). A deacon is a minister “of a new covenant in the spirit . . .” (2 Cor. 3:6). Paul was made a “deacon” of the gospel according to the gift of God’s grace (Eph. 3:7). Timothy, as a “deacon of Christ Jesus,” is to be “nourished on the words of the faith and of the good doctrine which [he] followed” (1 Tim 4:6). Paul views deacons as people who assume responsibility for sharing the gospel and serve as minister of the word of God. While the functions of a deacon could include ministering to physical needs, these needs are never separated from spiritual needs. Consider Acts 6-7 where Stephen cares for the food distribution and also preaches the word.

Don Williams, in his book, *The Apostle Paul and Women in the Church*, emphasizes Paul’s egalitarian view of Phoebe. He suggests that because Phoebe’s title “deacon” is in the masculine, there are no linguistic or theological grounds to distinguish between her and other male “ministers.”⁸ Although some would like to restrict Phoebe’s role to that of “deaconess,” which refers to a person who ministers to women only, the text does not support that notion. In fact, the order of “deaconess” was not invented until three hundred years later. The role of a deaconess did not exist during the days of the Early Church.⁹

Phoebe responded to God’s call on her life to be set apart for His purposes in ministry leadership to the local church. Her ministry had such extensive value that it reached beyond her own congregation, with Paul anticipating her ministry in Rome. Phoebe’s permanent and recognized ministry seemed to be a formal role; one can see an early stage of what eventually

⁸Don Williams, *The Apostle Paul and Women in the Church* (Van Nuys, CA: BIM, 1977), 42-43.

⁹Gill and Cavaness, 112.

emerged as an ecclesiastical office. She performed ministry functions equally held by Paul and others. No sexual qualifications are indicated.¹⁰ Most likely, she was a woman of means who offered her influence and resources to others. Her work benefited both local believers and Christians who traveled through the Corinthian port, including Paul himself. Presumably the local church actually met in her house, which must have been substantial enough to facilitate church services and large groups of believers.¹¹

Peter Stuhlmacher reinforces Phoebe's significant leadership profile. In his commentary on Romans, he stresses that she was a benefactress financially, someone who exercised care socially, and a confidant in such a way that it gave her authority in the church and made the members of the church responsible to her. Romans 16 repeatedly addresses the reality that women played a role in the leadership matrix of the Early Church, which was not merely subordinate, but rather essential.¹²

Priscilla

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 in their house. . . ." (Rom. 16:3-5)

Paul names Priscilla and Aquila as his "co-workers in Christ Jesus." Like Paul, Priscilla and Aquila were tentmakers, and quite possibly, they were two of Paul's closest friends.¹³ Paul's friendship with Priscilla and Aquila started when they extended hospitality and encouragement to

¹⁰Williams, 43.

¹¹French L. Arrington and Roger Stronstad, eds., *Full Life Bible Commentary to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 792.

¹²Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1994), 246.

¹³Everett F. Harrison. "Romans," in *The Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary: New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Richard Polcyn and Verlyn D. Verbrugge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 598.

Paul in Corinth. Later, Priscilla and Aquila ministered with Paul in Ephesus and led a house church in their home in Rome.

Contrary to cultural norms, four of the six times Scripture refers to the couple, Priscilla's name precedes her husband's (Acts 18:1-3, 18, 24; Rom. 16:3-4; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19). In ancient times, the first person mentioned in a pair held the greater honor. However, both Paul and Luke break tradition and, except for two times, reference the couple placing Priscilla's name first. Many Bible scholars believe that Priscilla's ministry and leadership greatly impressed Paul and Luke. She is believed to have played a more prominent spiritual role.

Furthermore, Paul uses the same Greek term to refer to himself and his own ministry as he does to refer to the work of his many colleagues. Paul instructs the church to be subject to his co-workers. Clearly, Paul viewed Priscilla as an equal partner in ministry to himself and included her in the leadership spotlight of the Early Church.¹⁴ In fact, "Origen, was so impressed by her that in his commentary of 1 Corinthians, he said that Priscilla's example legitimated women's teaching ministry."¹⁵

When Paul left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus to minister at this new church plant, they came to know Apollos, a young emerging leader (Acts 18:18-28). Although lacking a full understanding of the teaching of Pentecost, Apollos spoke in the synagogue with great confidence and conviction. As a promising disciple, Priscilla and Aquila reached out to instruct and take him to a new level of learning and effectiveness in Christ. Priscilla, most commonly displayed as the foremost teacher of the couple, would have deeply influenced Apollos. Stanley Grenz states that "the text of Acts will not allow us to transform this narrative into anything other

¹⁴Kroeger and Evans, 644.

¹⁵Gill and Cavaness, 114.

than a clear indication of authoritative teaching by a woman in the church.”¹⁶ Eventually Apollos became a strategic part of Paul’s work in church growth and leadership. Paul later refers to Apollos’ ministry as equivalent to his own: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth . . . he who plants and he who waters are equal” (1 Cor. 3:6, 8, RSV). Priscilla and Aquila served as a seminary faculty for this set apart and talented church leader. God used Priscilla, a woman, to play an instructional role in the training of a key leader. This story exhibits the reality that God calls and gifts women to be teachers.¹⁷

Junia

“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 Jesus before I was” (Rom. 16:7). Jews by birth, Andronicus and Junia, became believers prior to Paul’s conversion. The church held them in high esteem; they belonged to the circle of apostles who were called to their missionary office before the time of Paul’s ministry.¹⁸ As a husband and wife team, Paul greatly valued their active participation in ministry.¹⁹

Junia is considered a woman foremost among the apostles. Some commentators attempt to masculinize her name to read Junias. However, evidence does not exist to support the use of the masculine name of Junias during this era. On the other hand, the feminine name of Junia was a commonly used name for women in those days and provides a more natural reading.

¹⁶Stanley J. Grenz, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 82-83.

¹⁷Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: A Guide for the Study of Female Roles in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 201-202.

¹⁸Stuhlmacher, 249.

¹⁹Gillman, 69.

Eldon Epp uses textual criticism and exegesis to unpack this verse with compelling evidence of the feminine “Junia” vs. the masculine “Junias.” Epp suggests that Junia was consistently understood whenever discussed by ancient Christian writers of late antiquity. The reading of Greek New Testaments from Erasmus in 1516 to Erwin Nestle’s edition of 1927 did not provide an alternate reading. All the earlier translations interpret the name in a feminine form with no indication that a masculine name was being transcribed. Furthermore, the feminine Junia is how Romans 16:7 has been read in English translations of the New Testament from Tyndale in 1526 until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Epp concludes that all extra biblical literature, including primary sources, point to Junia being a woman apostle. In that case, Junia served as the first woman apostle empowered by the Holy Spirit and endorsed by Paul himself.²⁰

During the fifth century, Church Father John Chrysostom affirmed that Junia was a female apostle and, what is more, a distinguished apostle. According to Epp, Chrysostom made his mark on this issue with the following statement:

Even to be an apostle is great, but also to be prominent among them—consider how wonderful a song of honor that is. For they were prominent because of their works, because of their successes. Glory be! How great the wisdom on this woman that she was deemed the apostle’s title.²¹

Conclusion

The use of women as leaders, in spite of the patriarchal tendencies of the Bible, should inspire people in the twenty-first century to think critically about current cultural hazards. Often women possess gifts of leadership, but never have the opportunity to develop them due to a lack of acknowledgment of the role of women in the church leadership matrix.

²⁰Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005), 24.

²¹*Ibid.*, 79.

God created women and men equally in the image of God and called them to increase and have dominion over creation together (Gen. 1:26-28). Furthermore, on the Day of Pentecost, Joel's prophecy celebrated the ministry calling of both women and men (Acts 2:17-18). Paul respected, embraced, and endorsed women called to vocational ministry leadership roles. Today, God wants women to use their unique gifts and intentionally develop them so they can experience the joy of fulfilling their calling.²² When women take their place in ministry, the kingdom of God will experience an explosion of kingdom fruitfulness.

As women allow the pages of Scripture to speak loud and clear, they will be encouraged to pursue their personal call to ministry. Scripture clearly supports a woman's genuine call to ministerial leadership; therefore, women should celebrate the adventure of being a woman in ministry, co-laboring with fellow workers because the work abounds and God's all-sufficient power extends to everyone's vision. People often extend more support and encouragement than initially imagined. Together, as ministers of the gospel, women and men can change the world!

²²Griffiths, 643.

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