

Take Women Out of the Box

It's time the American church stopped arguing about female roles and started empowering women for ministry.

The debate over whether God equips and calls women to serve in positions of **spiritual leadership** is not over. In 2008, some of the same Christians who were delighted to see Sarah Palin run beside John McCain were also reluctant to welcome women to the pulpit on Sunday morning. And when *Gospel Today* magazine published an issue with women preachers on the cover, more than 100 Christian bookstores removed the magazine from their counters.

Clearly some Christians believe a woman can lead a country but not a church. But what does Scripture say? Does God's Word make a distinction between a woman's spiritual and secular leadership?

Consider **Deborah**, whose service as a **judge** and **prophet** influenced *all* of Israel. Her leadership and spiritual insight were so significant that the men of Israel refused to go into battle without her (Judg. 4:6-9). She is quoted in Scripture as saying, "Villagers in Israel would not fight; they held back until I, Deborah, arose, a mother in Israel" (5:7, TNIV). On a regular basis, as "*a prophet ... [who] was leading Israel at that time,*" she "held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided" (4:4-5, emphasis added).

Prophets, as a group, held high positions of leadership over God's people. Whereas priests pleaded with God on behalf of the people, prophets were used by God to guide the entire nation, particularly its leaders—the priests and kings. Thus prophets such as Deborah and Huldah brought leadership, exhortation and correction to the highest levels of Israelite

leaders: the kings, priests and other prophets.

God called Huldah as a prophet during the reign of King Josiah. When the Book of the Law was discovered (2 Chron. 34:14-33; 2 Kings 22), Josiah and his committee went directly to Huldah for advice rather than to either Zephaniah or Jeremiah—both male prophets during this time. Huldah called Israel to obey the Torah and led the nation to its most significant reform in nearly 100 years.

Unlike people today, those living in Old Testament times did not make a distinction between spiritual and secular leadership. For this reason, leaders such as Miriam, Ruth, Esther, Rahab, Jael and the women who were keepers of Jerusalem's city gates influenced *all* of Israel. In spite of the patriarchal culture of the time, women led Israel's army; judged disputes; exhorted and advised Israel's prophets, priests and kings; declared the ways of God to the people; and brought major social and spiritual reforms.

Scriptural examples clearly show that God equips and calls women to leadership, despite the cultural expectations of ancient or modern people.

In the New Testament, Christ's completed work on Calvary leveled the divisions and hierarchy among the people of God, as noted by the apostle Paul's statement in Galatians 3:27-29: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (NRSV).

Those who are clothed in Christ are no longer identified or limited by their ethnicity, class or gender. If God is our parent, and it is from Him that we receive our ultimate inheritance, then our sisters and brothers receive equally the

same inheritance from God's Spirit.

What do we receive from God? We inherit salvation—the forgiveness of sins. We also receive sanctification—the Spirit's power to oppose sin, prejudice and oppression. After we become members of Christ's body, the Spirit works to build unity and mutuality between those whom Christ has redeemed. He also gives each of us spiritual gifts for service (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:7-10; Eph. 4:11-12), which are not distributed according to gender, class or ethnicity.

Because the ground at the cross is level, the Spirit's gifts do not come in gender-specific or ethnic-specific occupations. Thus, we find slaves, gentiles and women all serving as evangelists, apostles and teachers alongside Paul, spreading the gospel, building and leading house churches. This is the pattern spelled out in 1 Corinthians 12:28: "God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers" (TNIV). Here are a few examples:

Female apostle. Junia is a woman who was imprisoned along with Paul for working to spread the gospel. She was not only an apostle but also "prominent among the apostles" (Rom. 16:7, NRSV). It wasn't until the Middle Ages, when prejudice against women became prominent, that anyone doubted Junia was a woman.

Female prophets. As in the Old Testament, prophets in the New Testament provided correction and encouragement to the church. The spiritual well-being of the church was strengthened by prophets (Acts 21:10-11; Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:28; 1 Cor. 14:1,24,29-32; Eph. 2:20; Eph. 4:11-13). Thus, Luke identifies leaders who were also prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1), and Paul suggests that prophets and apostles make known the mysteries of Christ (Eph 3:4-5).

Women such as Anna (Luke 2:36), Philip's four prophesying daughters (Acts 21:9), the women who prophesied at Pentecost—the birth of the church (Acts 2:4-21)—and the women

in Corinth (1 Cor. 11:4-5; 14:31) offered leadership to God's kingdom as prophets.

Female teachers. Both Luke and Paul acknowledged a female teacher—Priscilla—who instructed one of the most gifted evangelists in the New Testament, Apollos. Well schooled in Scripture, Apollos lacked information, which Priscilla and her husband provided. Apollos received Priscilla's instruction without reservation (Acts 18:26). Far from condemning her for having taught a man, Luke and Paul recognized Priscilla's prominence in teaching Apollos.

Moreover, Paul instructs the whole church at Colossae to "teach one another" (Col. 3:16), just as he tells the church at Corinth that he would rather each offer a few words of intelligible instruction than many words in a strange tongue (1).

Female evangelists and house-church leaders. There is no shortage of women evangelists or house-church leaders in Scripture. The church flourished because they welcomed the gifts mentioned in Ephesians 4:11-12: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (NRSV).

Lydia was an evangelist, as well as a house-church and business leader (Acts 16:13-14,40). She launched the first church in Philippi, which was also the first church in Europe.

Paul loved this church. It was the only church that regularly contributed to Paul's support and the only one from which Paul accepted help. Paul's letter to the Philippians is perhaps the most tender and personal letter among his epistles.

Lydia was not the only female house-church leader or church planter. There was also Apphia, who oversaw the church in Colossae (Philem. 1-2). There was the "elect lady" mentioned in 2 John 1:1; Nympha (Col. 4:15); Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11); and

Priscilla (Acts 18:26; Rom. 16:3). Priscilla's authority in the early church is highlighted by Paul, who calls her his "co-worker" (Rom. 16:3), a term Paul uses to identify male leaders such as Mark, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Clement, Aquila, Apollos and Luke. Moreover, her name is listed before her husband Aquila's in four of the six times they are mentioned, suggesting that Priscilla was the more distinguished of the two.

Like house-church leaders, evangelists advanced the gospel. Paul said that women such as Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis "worked hard in the Lord" (Rom. 16:12), a phrase Paul used to describe his own missionary efforts. Similarly, Euodia and Syntyche "struggled beside" Paul (Phil. 4:3) in the work of the gospel, and thus Paul affirms Euodia and Syntyche as leaders in the church at Philippi.

Other female evangelists include Jesus' female disciples (Luke 24:9-10), the Samaritan woman who told the people of Sychar about Jesus the Messiah (John 4:39), and Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus told to "Go ... to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (John 20:17, NIV).

Female deacons. Leadership was service and service was leadership in the early church, and those who served were also called deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13). Female deacons ministered mostly to women, as it would have been scandalous for men in the ancient world to anoint women with oil, baptize women or visit ill women in their homes. Thus, female deacons anointed and baptized other women; they also taught women and children and visited the homes of female believers who were ill in order to bring them Communion.

Phoebe was a deacon who served the church of Cenchrea. She also delivered Paul's letters to the church in Rome. Paul refers to Phoebe as *prostotes*, or *benefactor* (Rom. 16:2), which literally means one who is in authority or one who

presides over (as in Communion). Paul uses the verb form of *prostates* in 1 Thessalonians 5:12, where it means “exercising leadership.”

The term *deacon* can be used to describe either a male or a female. (*Deaconess* did not come into use in the church until the third century.) Paul outlines for Timothy the qualifications for male and female deacons in Ephesus (1 Tim. 3:8-13), as well as sending him instructions on how to manage women in this church who were abusive or who were teaching heresy (2:11-15). As he did with the women in Corinth, whose freedom in Christ led to disruptive chatter (1 Cor. 14:34), Paul limited the authority of women at Ephesus when their freedom led to heresy and abuse.

Paul affirmed the authority and service of women when they promoted the gospel rather than heresy (Acts 18:26; Rom. 16:1-5,7,12-13,15); when their leadership was neither heretical nor abusive as it was in Ephesus (1 Tim. 2:11-12); and when they prayed and prophesied in public in ways that were not disruptive, either by their clothing or through their chatter (1 Cor. 11:4-5).

But in order to manage heresy, disruption and false teaching Paul did limit the expression of some women’s freedom in Christ (1 Tim. 2:11-15; 1 Cor. 14:34). Yet, in the absence of these problems, both women and men from all tribes and socioeconomic groups were given freedom to exercise their spiritual gifts as equal members of Christ’s body, in which there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.

The Evidence of Scripture

A brief survey of Scripture suggests God delights in using both women and men as spiritual leaders. And there is no dichotomy between secular and spiritual leadership.

Furthermore, among God’s people, leadership and sacrificial

service are inseparable. Perhaps this is one reason the apostle Paul addressed most of his letters to whole churches rather than to individuals. In correcting error, in offering encouragement or sending praise, Paul rarely wrote directly to leaders. Likewise, he almost never singled out individuals as leaders.

What does that tell us about authority and gender in the early church? It suggests that everyone is called to lead—because everyone is called to serve and use his or her God-given gifts to build up the church (Eph. 4:12).

Although Paul sometimes referred to himself as an apostle, most often he called himself a servant or slave to Christ. He recognized that leadership and authority are rooted in service. In contrast to the gentiles, whose leaders held their authority over others, the followers of Jesus were to be ready to sacrifice their lives in service to others.

Paul equated his authority as a leader with his commission to build up and encourage the church, a commission we all share (Acts 7:49; 20:32; Rom. 15:2; 1 Cor. 14:12). Though people in the world seem eager to grasp positions of authority and leadership, Scripture makes it clear that hard work and self-sacrifice are integral to one's calling as a leader.

Biblically, one's reach as a leader stretches only as far as one's willingness to stoop and serve others. Whoever is most prepared to put aside his or her personal wishes and ambition in order to build others up is most ready for leadership, regardless of gender.

Women have been called to **gospel service** and **leadership** from the beginning, and their God-given abilities have and will draw many to Christ. This is a biblical and historic reality. Women's prominence as spiritual leaders is hard to ignore and impossible to suppress because their power does not have human origins but is from God.

Mimi Haddad *is the president of Christians for Biblical Equality. She has contributed to seven books, including Global Voices on Biblical Equality.*