

What Does the Bible Really Say About Women in Leadership?

In honor of March being Women's History Month, I am here presenting a sampling of women in the Bible who functioned in all kinds of leadership roles. My motive in presenting this is twofold: First of all, I pray that it will affirm those women who sense a call of God but are hampered by doctrinal questions about the validity of such a call. Secondly, I hope to influence others to rethink their theology that puts restraints on the ministry of women in the church. I am convinced that we will not see the great spiritual awakening for which many are praying apart from the full participation of the female members of Christ's body.

Deborah: Prophetess and Judge

Before the institution of the monarchy beginning with Saul, Israel was ruled by a series of judges. Perhaps the most celebrated of these judges was a woman named Deborah, who is referred to as both a prophetess and a judge. In other words, she exercised both spiritual and civil authority. She had such respect from the people that even the military commander, Barak, refused to go out to battle unless she accompanied him. She accompanied him to battle, and God gave them a great victory over the Canaanites.

Deborah had a husband named Lapiodoth, but he is mentioned only in passing. She was obviously the one called of God to be the out-front leader and deliverer of Israel at that time in history. There is not the slightest hint that her example was out of order or even exceptional.

The Assemblies of God is, therefore, correct when, in its official position paper on women, it says, "The instances of

women filling leadership roles in the Bible should be taken as divinely approved pattern, not as exceptions to divine decrees.”

Miriam: God-Sent Leader to Israel

In Micah 6:4b, God speaks through the prophet and says, “I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.” Of the three leaders God sent to bring Israel out of Egypt, one of them was a woman. Note that in this passage God says, “I sent.” The word “apostle” literally means “sent one,” which means that Miriam, along with Moses and Aaron, were the “apostles” sent by God to bring deliverance to Israel.

This is confirmed by the Septuagint, which uses the word *ekapisteila*, the verb form of *apostolos* with the prefix *ek*, meaning “out.” It literally means “sent out.” Miriam was “sent out” by God along with Moses and Aaron. Could it be that that God is still calling and “sending out” women today? Will the church be open to receiving these women?

Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles

Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene after His resurrection. The emphasis that the Gospel writers give to this fact make it clear that this was no chance or accidental appearance, but that Jesus appeared first to Mary in order to make a statement.

We must remember that in the first century, neither Roman nor Jewish courts of law would allow the testimony of a woman as evidence. Jesus confronts this cultural bias head-on by appearing first to Mary and sending her to bear testimony to the most significant event of human history. He could have just as easily appeared first to the men, but he required that they hear the news of His resurrection for the first time from the lips of a woman.

His words to Mary, *Go and tell . . .* identify her as a “sent

one" who receives the first apostolic commission from the risen Lord to go and proclaim the Good News of His resurrection. This is why, throughout history, Mary has often been referred to as "the apostle to the apostles."

My father was converted as a result of a young "Mary" (her actual name) responding to the voice of the Lord to "go and tell," who began conducting revival meetings in southeastern Oklahoma and northeastern Texas. I have no doubt that there are a host of Marys in the world today who are hearing the voice the Lord instructing them to "go and tell."

Phoebe: Minister and Church Leader

In Romans 16:1b, Paul refers to Phoebe as "a servant of the church in Cenchrea." The word "servant" in this passage is translated from the Greek word *diakonos*, which literally means "servant," but was used as a general designation for Christian leaders.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:5a, where Paul says, "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed?" "ministers" is a translation of *diakonos*. Where *diakonos* was used of men, the translators chose to translate it as "ministers," but where it was used of a woman, they chose to translate it as "servant." Phoebe was, therefore, a "minister" and leader in the church in Cenchrea.

Paul also said that Phoebe had been a "helper of many and of myself as well" (Rom. 16:1b). It is unfortunate that some translators have translated the Greek word *prostatis* as "helper," for it appears to be another case of translator bias. The word is feminine and literally means "to stand before."

Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon defines a *prostatis* as "a woman set over others; a female guardian, protectress, patroness, caring for the affairs of others and aiding them with her

resources.” In other words, a *prostatis* had all the characteristics that we would expect in a modern-day pastor.

This word *prostatis* identifies Phoebe as a leader from the church in Cenchrea who has Paul’s respect. Not only does he refer to her as a *diakonos* and a *prostatis*, but he instructs the church in Rome to receive her with respect and to assist her in whatever business she has with them (Hyatt, *Paul, Women and Church*, 28).

Does the church today show respect to the Phoebes who are in her midst?

Priscilla: Pastor and Co-Worker with Paul

When Paul mentions Priscilla and Aquilla, he always mentions them together, and they were obviously a husband-wife team. Paul had lived, worked and ministered with them while in Corinth and when he departed, they departed with him (Acts 18:1-3, 18). He always uses plural pronouns—“they” and “them”—when referring to them.

In Romans 16:3-5, Paul sends greetings to Priscilla and Aquilla “and the church that is in their house” (Rom. 16:5). Because Paul here goes against the normal cultural convention of always mentioning the man first, and mentions Priscilla first, many believe that Priscilla was the out-front one in the relationship—like Deborah—and the host and pastor of the church that met in their home. Paul obviously thinks very highly of them both saying that they had “risked their own necks for my life” (Rom. 16:4a).

Junia: An Apostle

In Romans 16:7, Paul greets Andronicus and Junia, who, he says, “are noteworthy among the apostles.” Junia is a feminine name and was recognized as a female apostle for the first several centuries of the church’s existence. The famous church father of the fourth century, John Chrysostom, declared of

Junia, “O how great is the devotion of this woman that she should even be counted worthy of the appellation of apostle.”

Some have tried to argue that the name should be “Junias,” which is a male name. The problem with this claim is that, first of all, every ancient Greek manuscript, without exception, has the feminine form of “Junia.” Secondly, the name Junias is unknown in the ancient world, while Junia is a common name. Junias, therefore, is a hypothetical name created by those who cannot accept that Paul would recognize a female apostle (Hyatt, *Paul, Women and Church*, 25).

Commenting on why some translations have used “Junias,” Dr. N. Clayton Croy, professor of New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, says, “It is hard to see any reason other than the translators’ bias against the possibility that a woman could be an apostle.” Faced with such overwhelming evidence, the NIV translators changed the word from “Junias” (1984 edition) to “Junia” in the 2011 edition.

Lydia and the Women Who Labored with Paul in Philippi

Paul began the church in Philippi with a group of praying women. His base of operations and the church’s meeting place was in the home of one of these women whose name was Lydia (Acts 16:13-15, 40). Jewish law required a quorum of 10 Jewish men, who were heads of households, for establishing a synagogue in any community. Paul, however, had no problem beginning a Christian congregation with a group of praying women. As far as we know, this was the first church in Europe.

These women obviously functioned in leadership alongside Paul. This is borne out by the fact that in 4:3b of his letter to the Philippian church, he exhorted, “help those women who labored with me in the gospel.” Gerald F. Hawthorne, in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, says that Paul, in this passage, uses a metaphor which means “to fight together side by side with,” clearly indicating that Paul sees these women, not as

peons under him, but as highly esteemed members of his team who have labored at his side in the cause of Christ.

This reminds me of the words of the noted, British New Testament scholar, F.F. Bruce, who said;

He [Paul] delighted in the company of his fellows, both men and women. The most incredible feature in the Paul of popular mythology is his alleged misogyny. He treated women as persons. The mainstream churches of Christendom, as they inch along towards a worthier recognition of the ministry of women, have some way to go yet before they come abreast of Paul (Hyatt, Paul, Women and Church, 31).

Paul's Spiritual Mother

Paul never mentions a spiritual father, but he does mention a spiritual mother. In Romans 16:13 he sends greetings to Rufus, "and his mother and mine." This is obviously not Paul's biological mother, but a woman who has been a spiritual mother to him. We know little about this woman, but at some point in Paul's spiritual journey, she had offered encouragement and counsel to Paul and been like a mother to him.

The identity of this woman can perhaps be identified by comparing Paul's words in this passage to Mark's Gospel, which also mentions an individual named Rufus. Since Paul's letter and Mark's Gospel were both written to the same Christian community in Rome, and within a few years of each other, it is likely that the Rufus mentioned by Paul and the Rufus mentioned by Mark are the same person.

In his Gospel, which was originally written to the church in Rome, Mark tells of Simon of Cyrene being compelled to carry the cross of Jesus. He notes that Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus and obviously expects his audience to make the connection when they hear the names of the two sons. The Rufus of Paul, therefore, is most likely the Rufus of Mark,

the son of Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of Jesus.

So, although Paul never mentions a spiritual father in his writings, he does make a point to send greetings to his spiritual mother. His spiritual mother was likely an African woman from Cyrene (Cyrene is located on the north coast of Africa), the mother of Rufus and the wife of Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of Jesus.

What About 1 Timothy 2:12?

Some will surely quote 1 Timothy 2:12 as a counter to all the above biblical passages. It reads, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to usurp authority over a man, but to be silent." First of all, the above passages about women must be given equal consideration with this passage. Many have made the error of making 1 Timothy 2:12 a canon within the canon when it comes to women and forcing every other passage to fit their interpretation of this one passage. That is not good hermeneutics.

Secondly, it is obvious from 1 Timothy 1:3 that Paul wrote this letter to Timothy to address the issue of false doctrine that was being spread in the church in Ephesus. His concern is not women in leadership per se, but the propagation of false doctrine by both men and women. First Timothy was not written as a manual of church order to be observed by all churches at all times, but to address the unique situation that existed in Ephesus at the time.

This is borne out by the fact that "authority" in 2:12 is a translation of the Greek word *authentein*, a word that is found only here in the entire New Testament. If Paul was addressing the normal exercise of authority in the church, we would expect him to use *exousia*, which he and other New Testament writers use over 100 times. That Paul uses this strange Greek word that neither he nor any other New Testament writer ever used is a clear sign that he is addressing a unique and local

situation in Ephesus and is not giving instructions for all churches everywhere.

Those who would restrict the role of women in the church cannot claim Paul as an ally or an authority for their stance.

An Amazing Word From God

Much of the church has refused to recognize the gifts of its female members and has, thereby, violated Paul's command in 1 Thessalonians 5:19, "Do not quench the Spirit." As a result of this disobedience, many gifts have lain dormant while millions have perished without Christ, and the church has languished in defeat.

In 2010, I awakened very early one morning and, not wanting to awaken Sue, went into an adjoining room where I sat on a sofa enjoying the solitude and quietly communing with the Lord. At some point, I sensed my heart become very still and quiet, and then I heard, "I want you to be more identified with Sue and what she is doing," a reference to her work for the full acceptance of the gifts and callings of women in the church.

There was a moment of quietness and I then heard the words, "This message has the power to begin a mass movement from Islam to Christianity, beginning with the women." {eoa}

This article is derived in part from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's book, Paul, Women and Church, available from Amazon in both paperback and Kindle. He and his wife, Dr. Susan Hyatt, have founded the International Christian Women's Hall of Fame in Grapevine, Texas, with the goal of "celebrating God's women of yesterday and creating world changer's today." The website is . Visit Dr. Eddie Hyatt's website at .

This article originally appeared at .