

Can Women Be Apostles?

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” declared Sir John Dalberg-Acton, who made this remark after extensive studies of both secular and religious history. When James and John went to Jesus and requested the two most prominent seats in His kingdom, Jesus rebuked them for their preoccupation with power and told them they were thinking like Gentiles, i.e., like people who did not know God. He then presented to them a new and radical model of leadership that would be characterized, He said, not by power, but by humble service (Mark 10:35-45). They must have been shocked when He told them they were to function as *diakonoi*, a Greek word that referred to a lowly servant who waited on tables and with no connotations of status, importance or power.

During the first century, while apostolic ministry was characterized by service, women freely functioned in leadership, including apostolic ministry. It was only after the church institutionalized and began to think of the apostolic in terms of office and power that women began to be excluded from leadership by men who believed their gender gave them the sole right to lead and rule.

This ungodly association of the apostolic with maleness and power is still used today as a justification for excluding women from leadership in the church. The popular *Spirit-Filled Life Bible*, for example, without a shred of evidence, explains the prohibition toward women in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 as referring to “the authoritative office of apostolic teacher in the church.” The truth is that 1 Timothy 2:11-12 was written to address a particular situation concerning Timothy and the church in Ephesus and was never meant to be a universal rule for all churches everywhere.

The Choosing of 12 Was Never Meant to be a Pattern for

Leadership in the Church

Nonetheless, the fact that Jesus chose 12 men as apostles has, throughout history, been used as the basis for excluding women from authoritative roles of leadership in the church. This line of reasoning, however, ends in absurdity if followed to its logical conclusion.

Consider the fact that the 12 whom Jesus chose were not only men; they were Jewish men. Should only Jewish men be leaders in the churches? Furthermore, these 12 Jewish men were instructed by Jesus to preach only to Jews. He instructed them, "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). If we follow this line of reasoning, we must conclude that all church leaders must be Jewish men and that they can preach only to Jewish people.

The truth is that the calling of the Twelve was never meant to be a pattern for the calling and recognition of church leaders. In His approximately three years of earthly ministry, as outlined in the Gospels, the ministry of Jesus was clearly directed to the Jewish people. His purpose was to call God's covenant people back into a relationship with Himself. To a Gentile woman who came seeking healing for her daughter, Jesus replied, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). Even though the woman's persistent faith resulted in the healing of her daughter, Jesus' reply to her clearly reveals the limited scope of His earthy ministry.

This all changes, however, with the death and resurrection of Jesus. When He comes out of the tomb, the restrictions are no longer there. His disciples are now told to take the good news of what He has done to "Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). A new era has obviously dawned. Jesus' first action after His resurrection sends a clear message that any limitations concerning His

female disciples have also been removed by His redemptive work.

Mary Magdalene Receives the First Apostolic Commission From the Risen Lord

During the 40 days between His resurrection and ascension, Jesus appeared to His disciples at various times and on one occasion appeared to over 500 of His followers. The Gospel writers, however, are very explicit in noting that it was Mary Magdalene to whom He appeared *first* after His resurrection. The importance the evangelists attach to this fact indicates that it was no accidental occurrence but that Jesus purposely appeared first to Mary Magdalene in order to make an important statement to His followers.

When Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, He gave her certain, specific instructions. Matthew 28:10 records His words to Mary, "Go and tell my brethren." In other words, He sent her on a specific mission defined by the words *go* and *tell*. The Greek word *apostolos*, from which we get the English word *apostle*, simply means "one who is sent" or "one sent on assignment." It has nothing to do with office, government or power.

Mary was a "sent one," and as such received the first apostolic commission from the risen Lord. Because the male disciples were required to hear the initial news of the resurrection from a woman, Mary has, throughout history, often been referred to as "the apostle to the apostles."

This commissioning of Mary by Jesus was revolutionary, since the Jewish male of this time normally began his day with a prayer that included thanks to God that he was not born a Gentile, a slave or a woman. Women were barred from studying Scripture, and a rabbi considered it beneath his dignity to speak to a woman in public. Neither Jewish nor Roman courts of law would allow the testimony of women. Jesus challenged this

deeply ingrained religious and cultural bias by appearing first to Mary and sending her forth as the first apostolic witness of His resurrection.

By appearing first to Mary, Jesus was cutting through all the disdain and prejudice of His male disciples toward His female disciples. He thereby declared His equal acceptance of women and affirmed the value of their ministry in His name. By appearing first to Mary and giving her the first apostolic commission after His resurrection, Jesus made a clear statement that women would be included in apostolic ministry in His church. This was revolutionary in the first century and is still so today, for there are many who still see the apostolic as being associated with maleness and power.

Paul Recognizes a Female Apostle Named Junia

Paul continues this revolution begun by Jesus. In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul sends personal greetings to 24 people in the latter part of the letter. These individuals are friends and co-workers who are dear to his heart.

Of the 24 mentioned by name, 10 are women. Many of these obviously functioned in roles of leadership in the churches. One woman named Junia is specifically referred to as an apostle. In Romans 16:7 Paul says, "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles who also were in Christ before me." Junia is a feminine name and was universally recognized as a female apostle for the first several centuries of the church's existence. The famous church father of the fifth century, John Chrysostom, exclaimed, "Oh, how great is the devotion of this woman, that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle."

Concerned by the presence of a female apostle, some have attempted to argue that the name should be translated *Junias*, which is male. There are insurmountable facts, however, that

militate against this argument. First of all, without exception, all ancient Greek manuscripts have the feminine form of Junia, not Junias. Secondly, the female name Junia was quite common in the first century, whereas the male name, Junias, is unknown. Junias, therefore, is a hypothetical name. Thirdly, as mentioned above, Junia was universally recognized as a female apostle for the first several centuries of the church's existence.

Why then have some modern translations, such as the NIV, rendered the name *Junias* instead of *Junia*? 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." Well-known New Testament scholar James G.D. Dunn says, "The assumption that the name must be male is a striking indictment of male presumption regarding the character and structure of earliest Christianity."

The idea of a female apostle is obviously too revolutionary for some modern exegetes. Nonetheless, the evidence is conclusive that Junia was a female apostle and recognized as such by Paul himself. Her example clearly demonstrates that women exercised apostolic leadership in the New Testament churches. But she is not alone, for a careful perusal of Scripture reveals other women who functioned in leadership roles in the New Testament.

Paul Included Women in the Leadership Gifts of Ephesians 4:11

That women can serve as apostles is also made clear from Paul's discussion of the leadership gifts (obviously not an exhaustive list) in Ephesians 4:7-12. The apostle heads this list of gifts followed by the prophet, the evangelist and the pastor and teacher (v. 11). He begins the discussion of these gifts by pointing to the risen Christ as the One who bestows these gifts.

In verse 8, he says, "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive and gave gifts to men." The Greek word translated *men* in this passage is the plural of *anthropos*, which is gender inclusive and refers to both men and women. If Paul had wanted to restrict these leadership gifts to men only, he could have used the gender specific *andras*, which is the plural Greek word for man as male. He purposely uses language that makes it clear that the risen Christ bestows these gifts on both men and women.

Apostolic Christianity Includes Women

Many other women in both the Old and New Testaments functioned in leadership roles. The list includes Deborah, Huldah and Miriam in the Old Testament. The list in the New Testament includes not only Mary Magdalene and Junia, but Phoebe, Priscilla and the women of Philippi who labored with Paul in the gospel (Phil. 4:3). Many commentators believe that Priscilla was actually the one with the leadership gift because Paul mentions her first, although it was customary to mention her husband, Aquila, first (Rom. 16:3-5).

It should be noted that all of these women are presented in Scripture in a positive light. Nowhere is there the slightest hint that they were somehow functioning outside their proper roles. 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. Even a limited number of women with Scripturally commended leadership roles affirms that God does indeed call women to spiritual leadership.

The evidence is overwhelming that women functioned in leadership roles, including apostolic ministry, in the New Testament era. Since the New Testament church is the model, any church that limits the leadership gifts and callings of

its female members cannot call itself apostolic or New Testament. It has veered from the norm of the New Testament. "But," some will ask, "what about Paul's call for female silence and submission in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35?"

What About 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35?

First of all, these passages should never be used, as they commonly are, as a canon within the canon concerning the status of women in the church. The many passages that show women functioning in leadership should be given equal status with these two passages.

Secondly, the evidence is overwhelming that in these two passages, Paul is addressing local, cultural situations that existed in Corinth and Ephesus. They are on the level of Paul's admonition for believers to greet one another with a holy kiss and for women to wear a head covering when praying and prophesying. These passages were never meant to be guidelines for establishing a church order and excluding women from leadership roles in the church.

Concluding Thoughts

There is no question in my mind that this unholy marriage of the apostolic with maleness and power has weakened the church and damaged her influence in the modern world. This can be remedied, and we can recover our voice and influence if we will do two things.

Number one, we must give up the prideful pursuits of power and return to the model of service that Jesus so clearly presented to His followers. Second, we must fully and equally embrace the gifts and callings of the female members of Christ's body. Only then will the church be a fully functioning body through which the Spirit of the Lord will freely flow.

*This article is derived from **Eddie Hyatt's** latest*

book, Pursuing Power: How the Historic Quest for Apostolic Authority and Control Has Divided and Damaged the Church, available from Amazon, Kobo and from his website.