

What the Female Leaders of Philippi Can Teach Us About Modern-Day Ministry

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul addresses two women by name, Euodia and Syntyche, and pleads with them to resolve their differences and to come together in agreement of mind and soul (Phil. 4:2). The Greek of this verse indicates an appeal, not only to agree mentally, but to have an agreement of heart and affection.

The attention Paul gives to this situation indicates that these women are leaders in the church in Philippi and their division has the potential to cause a division in the congregation. Paul then exhorts the entire congregation in Philippi to “help these women,” whom he says, “labored with me in the gospel” (Phil. 4:2-3).

Women Pastors in Philippi

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.

To “labor” in the gospel is an all-inclusive word referring to the effort put forth in preaching, teaching, pastoring and discipling. This is borne out by Jesus in Matthew 9:38 when He saw the multitudes as “sheep without a shepherd.” He exhorted the disciples to pray the Lord of the Harvest that He would “send laborers” into His harvest.

Remember that in Greek, “shepherd” and “pastor” are both translated from the same Greek word, *poimen*. The words of

Jesus in this passage thus show that the need for “shepherds” or “pastors” is fulfilled in the sending forth of “laborers.” This shows that the ministry of the women who *labored with Paul in Philippi*, included that of “pastoring” or “shepherding.”

Paul Begins with Women

The founding of the church in Philippi as recorded in Acts 16 demonstrates that Paul had no problem working and building with women. The church in Philippi, which was the first church in Europe, was begun with women and its first meeting place was in the home of a woman.

In his journeys, Paul always began his ministry in the local synagogues because, as a Pharisee and teacher of Judaism, he always had an opening there. The Jewish community in Philippi was obviously small since there was no synagogue. A quorum of 10 Jewish men, who were heads of households, was required for establishing a synagogue in any community.

In Philippi, there was only a place of prayer by the river where some women met for prayer each Sabbath. Luke says, “On the Sabbath we went out of the city to a riverside, where prayer was customarily offered. And we sat down and spoke to the women who had assembled” (Acts 16:13).

Notice Paul’s very personal and compassionate approach to the women who were meeting by the river for prayer. He did not “preach” to them, nor did he invite them to a meeting. He sat down, looked then in the eye and conversed with them. He got to know these women and allowed them to know him.

There is no indication that he inquired about their husbands or expressed concern about no men being present. Jewish tradition might require ten men to open a synagogue, but Paul was very comfortable beginning a Christian congregation with a group of praying women. No wonder the British, New Testament scholar, F. F. Bruce, said, “The most incredible feature in

the Paul of popular mythology is his alleged misogyny. He treated women as persons.”

A Woman Who Is Head of a Household

One woman who responded to Paul’s witness by the river was a successful businesswoman called Lydia. She was the head of a household, for Luke says that when she was baptized her entire household was baptized with her (Acts 16:15). Households in the ancient world included extended family, servants and slaves.

Lydia also invited Paul and his companions to stay in her home. She obviously oversaw a large estate for she had no problem accommodating these four visitors. Her home became Paul’s base of operations in Philippi and the meeting place for the first church in Europe.

Some think that Lydia may be one of the women Paul referred to in Philippians 4:2. This is based on the fact that Lydia, as it is used in Acts, is an adjective, literally meaning “the Lydian.” The name probably referred to her place of origin in the Roman province of Lydia, located in the region of present day western Turkey. According to this theory, those in Philippi would have referred to her, a foreigner, not just by her name, but as “the Lydian.”

Whether one of these women was Lydia, we cannot know for sure. Nonetheless, the fact that Paul singles out these two women—Euodia and Syntyche—by name shows that they are people of influence in the church at Philippi. He does not command, but appeals to them as colleagues and coworkers to do what is right.

Macedonian Culture Ripe for the Gospel

The prominence of women in the church at Philippi, a city of Macedonia, is compatible with what we know of ancient Macedonian culture. J. B. Lightfoot, the noted British scholar

and archaeologist, collected archaeological evidence showing that Macedonian women generally held an exceptionally honored and influential position in that culture. Inscriptions, for example, show that the mother's name is often recorded rather than the father's, and epitaphs by husbands on the tombs of their wives, contain terms markedly reverent as well as affectionate.

Perhaps this is the reason God intervened and supernaturally directed Paul in a vision to take the gospel to Macedonia, with their first stop being Philippi (Acts 16:9-10). Could it be that the egalitarian nature of Macedonian culture provided an opening for the gospel that did not exist in the other places they had tried to go? Bruce thinks so, and is certainly correct when he says, "The gospel doctrine of woman's dignity would find good soil in Macedonia."

Women Among the Bishops and Deacons in Philippi

Paul's letter to the Philippians is the only letter in which he addresses leaders in the introduction. He normally addresses his letters to the congregation without referencing a pastor, bishop or other leader. However, in his letter to the church in Philippi he sends greetings, first of all, "to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi," and then adds, with the bishops and deacons (Phil. 1:1, KJV).

Knowing the prominent role of the women who *labored with* Paul in the founding of this church, it is no stretch to assume that Lydia, Euodia, Syntyche and other women are included among the bishops and deacons to whom Paul sends greetings.

The word "bishop" is translated from the Greek word *episcopos* and literally means to "watch over." Some translations, such as the NIV and NRSV, prefer the word "overseer" rather than bishop. At this early date, it was a word designating a function of responsibility rather than a title of office and power.

Who in Philippi was more prepared to administer responsible oversight to the congregation than Lydia, a successful businesswoman and the head of a large household and estate? Do we really think that the women who “labored with” Paul in the founding this church were relegated to a corner of silence? Such a thought is preposterous.

Some will protest on the basis of I Timothy 2:11-12 that women cannot serve in roles of oversight. However, in my book, *Paul, Women and Church*, I have provided conclusive evidence that this admonition by Paul to Timothy is specific to the particular situation that Timothy is confronting in the church in Ephesus. It was never meant to be a universal edict for all churches everywhere.

With that aside, we can confidently assume that the women who “labored with” Paul are included among the bishops and deacons he addresses in the opening of this letter. {eoa}

This article is derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's latest book, Paul, Women and Church, available from Amazon and his website at . He is available to speak on this and other topics and can be contacted at dreddiehyatt@.