



## Women in Leadership in the Church Crossfire; a church without walls Englewood, Colorado

Nearly 2000 years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Church still struggles with questions about the role of women in ministry and leadership. Throughout scripture we find women in ministry and leadership roles. These women are not large in number, but, almost miraculously, they emerge amidst male dominated cultures to function in strong and very prominent spiritual and civil leadership. Some men have said that these female leaders only emerged because of a lack of male leaders. This reasoning seems very far fetched and condescending at its foundation. The church in America today has a strong majority (about 63% according to George Barna) of its adherents being female.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of our perspective and Biblical position on women in leadership and ministry in the Church. This overview is not exhaustive in content, but serves to stimulate thought and declare to women in our church that leadership doors are open. We hope it encourages those with questions to further research the scriptures and commentary on the subject to further illuminate truth in this area.

### Examples of Women in Leadership

**Phoebe-Rom. 16:1** *“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchra. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me.”*

- Paul was endorsing and affirming the validity of Phoebe as a woman leader. This was a letter, not of recommendation like we see today in seeking employment, but a letter of strong endorsement stating that they were to receive her and give her anything she needed. Such letters were written to prevent false teachers and false prophets from creeping into the churches by self acclamation and falsely using the names of others in authority. It is the same kind of endorsement Paul wrote with regard to Titus when sent to Corinth. In the business world this is akin to a CEO sending a letter to a branch office telling them to open the door and give all assistance to the person they are sending.
- The word translated ‘servant’ is the Greek word ‘*diakonos*’. Almost everywhere else in the New Testament this word is used to describe a minister or deacon of the gospel when used in conjunction with men. When used in accompaniment with male leaders it has been translated to mean ‘minister’. A more accurate rendering would be ‘servant-leader’. It can also be translated to mean ‘presiding officer’. Any of these words would be correct translations, but they have different

connotations in a gender biased environment. A pastor can be called a ‘servant’. A prophet can be called a ‘servant’. A deacon can be called a ‘servant’. The word is masculine but is sometimes translated as ‘deaconess’.

- The word translated “a great help” is the Greek word *‘prostatis’*. To say that Phoebe was ‘a great help’ or a ‘helper’ is a diminishment of the normal use of the word *‘prostatis’*. Josephus, the great Jewish historian who wrote extensively during Paul’s time, used the word *‘prostatis’* 20 times in describing Caesar the leader of the Roman empire. His writing would not be interpreted to mean that Caesar was a ‘helper’. *‘Prostatis’* has the connotation of authority and someone strong helping someone weaker.
- The conclusion can only be that Phoebe was a church leader of some considerable stature with a ministry worthy of Paul’s endorsement and worthy of Paul’s personal testimony of help to his ministry. She must have been a woman of great personal strength, courage and independence to be sent to far away lands with an apostolic mission to other churches.

**Priscilla**-Acts 18:24-26 *“When a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquilla heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.”*

1 Cor. 16:19 *“The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.”*

Rom. 16:3 *“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow 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 at their house.”*

- In 5 of the 7 references to Priscilla and Aquila, Priscilla’s name appears first. This is contrary to the Roman custom of naming the man first when referring to a couple. Naming a woman first was so rarely done that it strongly suggests that Priscilla was the more prominent member of this ministry couple.
- Paul’s writings actually used the name “Prisca” rather than the diminutive form ‘Priscilla’. Paul trained Priscilla in ministry and probably recognized her strength in ministry.
- When Apollos, a powerful and eloquent preacher, came to their house it is most probable that Priscilla took the lead in instructing him in a fuller understanding of the gospel. It is clearly stated that Apollos, while a great preacher, only knew of the baptism of John, not the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Apollos became the pastor/leader of the church in Corinth after Paul left.

- John Chrysostom, an early church father wrote in the 4<sup>th</sup> century that it was clear from the way that Priscilla is mentioned in Paul's writing that Priscilla was probably the more powerful teacher and the more prominent person in the couple. And, in reference to her teaching Apollos, he said she "*made him a teacher brought to completion.*" He also said in reference to Priscilla and Phoebe that "*These were noble women, hindered in no way by their sex....and this is as might be expected, for in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female.*" Chrysostom was no admirer of women, so this clear acknowledgement of Priscilla's leadership role was highly unusual for him in his writings of women.
- It is highly likely that Priscilla and Aquila pastored/led the church that met in their house. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century church Christians met almost exclusively in homes. They were prominent as a husband-wife leadership team that traveled extensively to encourage churches and spread the gospel.

**Junia**-Rom. 16:7 "*Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.*"

- The NIV quoted above translates the name 'Junias' which is a masculine form. The King James translation uses "Junia" and the original Greek have this feminine form 'Junia'.
- Paul singled out Junia for her apostolic courage and imprisonment for the gospel. She had to be of some note and leadership to be mentioned by Paul.
- John Chrysostom also noted that Junia must have been of some great notoriety as an apostle and to be mentioned by Paul was of particular note.
- Junia was a noteworthy leader who certainly spread the gospel by various forms of teaching and apostolic ministry.

**Deborah**-(Judges 4 and 5)-Judges 4:4 "*Deborah a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at the time. She held court under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.*"

- Deborah served as prophet and judge (the highest position of leadership) much the same way that Samuel did years later. Her leadership ushered Israel into an era of peace and prosperity.
- In Judges 5:7 she describes herself as 'mother in Israel'. The word used for this description can also be translated as 'female chief'.
- She was married to Lappidoth, but there is nothing noted about him in scripture other than his marriage relationship to Deborah.
- Barak, the leader of the Israelite army stated that he would not go into battle without her. Barak was a man of great stature and faith. He is listed in Hebrews Chapter 11 among the great men of faith. For Barak to defer to Deborah only accentuates the strength and leadership of Deborah at that time of history.

Other Notable Women in Civil and Spiritual Leadership:

- Miriam-a prophet (Ex. 15:20)
- Huldah-a prophet (2 Kings 22:14)
- Anna-a prophet (Luke 2:36)

- Esther-civil leader (Esther 1-10)
- Chloe-leader of a church (1 Cor. 1:11)
- Stephana-worker in the church; original language is feminine but some translators made it masculine (Stephanus) (1 Cor. 16:15)
- Euodea and Syntyche -workers of sufficient prominence that Paul singled them out to come to agreement on something. (Phil 4:2-3)
- Mary, Persis, Tryphena, Tryphosa-laborers in the church (1 Cor. 16)
- Philips daughters-prophesied (Acts 21:8,9)
- Nympha-church in her house (Col. 4:15)

Paul spoke of 39 people as colleagues in ministry, including 10 women. The people mentioned in his greetings were clearly of significance to Paul and to the local church. Many scholars believe they were leaders such as elders or pastors. He made no distinction between men and women as he spoke of these co-workers in the cause of the gospel. F.F. Bruce, a Bible commentator, states this:

*“Paul seems to make no distinction between men and women among his fellow workers. Men receive praise, and women receive praise for the collaboration with him in the Gospel ministry, without suggestion that there is a subtle distinction between the one and the other in respect of status or function.”*

#### New Covenant Context for Women to Speak and Lead

**Jesus Openly Associated with Women in His Ministry and Included Them in His Traveling Group:** Throughout Jesus’ 3 years of ministry he ministered to women and was in constant association with women and men in the same environment. This at a time when women in the Roman, Greek and Jewish culture were mere possessions, predominately for sexual gratification, taking care of the household, and producing children.

When Jesus talked with Mary and Martha encouraging Martha to leave the household serving and focus on the spiritual, it was a grand departure of all that was culturally expected of women. For any man to suggest women should focus on spiritual rather than domestic things was counter culture.

When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), he was breaking all kinds of cultural mores; (1) she was Samaritan, the lowest of low in the Jewish class of people, (2) she was divorced up to 5 times, a crime worthy of death in many places, (3) she was living with a man and not married to him, the sin of fornication and worthy of being stoned to death in Jewish society. Even so, Jesus spoke and ministered to her to the great surprise of his male disciples. She acted as the first evangelist taking His message to her village resulting in many of the Samaritans from that town believing in him because of the woman’s testimony.

It was a woman, Mary Magdalene, who first saw Jesus outside the empty tomb. Jesus told her to go tell the brothers. She was the messenger of the resurrection. (John 20) Several women traveled with Jesus and the other disciples.

**Birth of the Church Included Men and Women:** After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to 500 people over 40 days before his ascension into heaven. During this time he said that His Father would send a gift, the Holy Spirit, who would empower them to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. Not long after, on the day of Pentecost, 120 men and women were gathered together. The Holy Spirit came and filled them resulting in a supernatural outburst of preaching, teaching, celebration and spiritual manifestations. People who were observing this thought that these people were drunk in the middle of the day because they were acting so strangely, speaking in different languages unknown to them naturally, and generally violating the cultural mores of the day. Peter got up and quoted the prophet Joel saying that the Holy Spirit was being poured out on all people and *‘sons and daughters would prophesy’* and *‘even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.’* (Acts 2:14-18) This was the declaration upon the birth of the Church of Jesus Christ that men and women would carry the gospel. Peter declared this to be the fulfillment of prophesy spoken hundreds of years before.

### **Paul’s Doctrinal Statement to the Galatians**

One of the strongest, if not the strongest, doctrinal books of the new covenant is Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia. It was a church torn between legalism of the old versus freedom of the new, between the bondage of outward appearance versus freedom of the inward work of the Spirit. Paul said this in Gal. 3:26-29:

*“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”*

Paul is saying that regardless of your genetics, your gender, your position in life we are all one in unity in Jesus. The Lord does not see us, call us, anoint us, provide for us, heal us, or give gifts to us based upon those external things. This scripture clearly positioned believers, irrespective of their circumstance in life to be ‘sons of God’ with all the inheritance that comes from God.

### Cultural Background for Paul’s Letters to the Early Church

In Genesis 1:26-31 we find the creation of man and woman. God gave them authority to co-rule over the creation. This was God’s divine plan of relationship between man and woman, to co-rule the earth in mutual admiration and submission. Then in Genesis 3 man and woman sinned by eating of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. When God confronted Adam and Eve after the fall, Adam blamed Eve for the fall. Sin separated man and woman from their intimate relationship with God and resulted in mankind coming under the curse of sin and death. Part of this curse was the rule of husband over wife (Gen. 3:16). Thus began a curse-based and blame-based perspective of women within the human race.

If we fast forward to Greek and Roman culture 300-500 B.C. we find noted philosophers who charted the cultural pathway for civilizations and human perspectives on women and life. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and others are noted for so called great philosophical ideas that formed modern civilization; however, they were also extremely demeaning of women.

Aristotle wrote that females were ‘a monstrosity’, ‘a deformity that occurs in the ordinary course of nature’. He said that the male ‘is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject.’ The men of Greece cut off women from any role in society. They rarely had access to education and their role was best defined by Demosthenes about 300 B.C. He said “*Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, and wives to bear us legitimate children.*”

In Roman culture at the time of the early church women were either mere possessions or prostitutes. When men were born they were given 3 names, a personal name, the clan name and the family name. Women were only given the clan and family name. For example, Gaius Julius Caesar’s daughter would be called by the feminine form of her family name, i.e. Julia. Roman law allowed a husband to kill his wife for either adultery or drunkenness. Cisero, a century before Christ, raised concerns about the unseemly idea of freedom for slaves, dogs, horses, asses and women.

Both Roman and Greek culture had a heavy emphasis on prostitution as a spiritual and economic benefit to society. At the time of Paul’s letters to the church in Corinth, this city was known as the ‘city of sin’. Corinth was so filled with promiscuity that the word ‘*korinthiazesthai*’ meant ‘to live like a Corinthian’. Corinth was famous for drunkenness, sex trade, and complete immorality.

The temple of Aphrodite in Corinth had over 1000 male and female temple prostitutes dedicated to the goddess. There were also women that dedicated themselves to Aphrodite, but were not temple prostitutes. These women were better educated, skilled in applying cosmetics and adornment, and could easily discuss literature and philosophy with their male clients. Beyond these prostitutes were thousands of ‘secular’ prostitutes that helped drive the economy. There was also a female cult who worshiped Dionysus and whose followers were known as ‘mad ones’.

In Ephesus, the temple of Diana had hundreds of prostitutes called ‘melissai’ or bees. Paul’s letters to Timothy, the new pastor of the Ephesian church, were written against this backdrop of a culture that included a female cult worshipping Diana. They believed in the superiority of women over men, rather than equals. (Perhaps one may not blame them given the views of the Roman, Greek and Jewish culture about women.)

It is against this cultural backdrop that Paul and the early church preached the good news of freedom from sin, salvation by grace through our faith, and declared a new emerging role of women to spread the gospel alongside men. However, it is not surprising that

many behavioral issues were addressed in his letters to these churches; issues involving both men and women.

### Explanations of Specific Scriptures Regarding Women

**1 Cor. 14:34-35** *“As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”*

Taken at face value, this scripture seems very black and white, i.e. women cannot talk out loud in any church setting. However, over the centuries certain elements of the church have come up with all kinds of compromises such as;

- allowing women to teach children or other Sunday school classes
- singing in choirs
- pray out loud
- make announcements
- speak at women’s events

Yet, these same elements of the church retain barriers for women against teaching men, pastoring, speaking from the pulpit, prophesying, leading worship, etc. It seems that men in leadership in the church were willing to accommodate (and use) the women who comprise a strong majority of the church without allowing them into visible leadership positions.

The reality and intent of this scripture written by Paul must be studied in the context of the cultural backdrop of Corinth and the new converts comprising this church. Some questions emerge (1) what law is Paul talking about? (2) why are the women to go home and talk to their husbands, (3) why does Paul give guidelines in 1 Cor. 11 for women praying and prophesying if they are not allowed to speak?

One explanation for Paul’s writing comes from Bible scholars. It is the ‘noisy women theory’. Women from unsophisticated backgrounds may have been a part of the local church. Most had never been allowed into group meetings and did not understand the corporate worship setting. It is probable they were interrupting the speaker, asking questions and generally being disruptive. In this case Paul’s rule of silence would be like a “No Talking in the Library” rule today.

However, what about the reference to the “Law”? There was no Old Testament law prohibiting women from speaking.

A more likely, and reasonable, explanation is the ‘inserted comment theory’. This theory proposes that the quotation in verses 34 and 35 was not authored by Paul but was a specific quote Paul used from the letter authored by the church leaders in Corinth and sent to Paul for his advice. There is a small symbol inserted in the original Greek after verse 35. While quotation marks did not exist in the Greek language, this small symbol

indicated the aforementioned words are quoted. For example in 1 Cor. 7:1 Paul specifically quotes the issue raised by the letter written to him about men touching women. He refuted this idea by saying that sex is good in the context of a marriage. His response was a refute of the assumption proposed by the authors.

Similarly we view verses 36 and 37 as Paul's response to the question raised in verses 34 and 35 re: women talking. Paul said "*Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.*" The local church may have adopted a 'law' of the culture regarding women speaking. Paul, then, is actually dismissing their argument as ridiculous and arrogant.

This explanation is most plausible and explains much about the strange sequence of verses that seem counter to the new covenant, to Joel's prophesy on the day of Pentecost, and to Paul's doctrinal writing to the Galatians 3 where he clearly said there was no 'male or female' in Christ. It also is more consistent with 1 Cor. 11:5 where Paul provides guidance about women praying and prophesying. If Paul was adamant that all women must keep silent why did he provide guidance about how they should pray and prophesy in a public setting? If women can prophesy, which is verbally declaring something directly from God, why would Paul not allow them to teach?

**1 Tim. 2:11-15** *A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety.*"

Paul wrote this letter directly to Timothy rather than to the church as a whole. Timothy was the pastor of this rather large church in Ephesus. This scripture seems to be fairly clear as it is translated and independent of any context or other doctrinal writings that may serve as a backdrop in Ephesus for Paul saying such a thing. However, we must note that plural nouns were used in verses 9 and 10 and suddenly he switches to a singular noun 'a woman'. He switches back to plural noun 'women' at the end of verse 15.

Many Bible scholars believe that Paul is referring to one woman in the church in Ephesus. Paul was very concerned in his letter about false teachers and false doctrine. The Gnostics were perverting the gospel within the church. Ephesus was the center of a cult worshiping Diana. That cult had female priests who declared women to be superior to men and even praised Eve as the 'mother goddess'. They even proclaimed woman as the author or creator of men. The Greek word '*authentain*' is translated in the NIV as 'to have authority over' and in the KJV as 'to usurp'. This is the only place in the New Testament where this word is used, thus suggesting a very narrow meaning.

It is highly probable that Paul's intent was to silence a female false teacher connected to this cult in Ephesus. This is especially plausible given Paul's affirmative comments in 2 Tim. 1:5 where he commended Eunice, Timothy's mother, and Lois, Timothy's grandmother for teaching and training Timothy so well in the faith. It is also consistent with Paul's word in 1 Tim. 5:2 in speaking of women who are '*presbytera*', rather than '*presbytidas*'; the former being the feminine form of an elder position in the church, while the latter is feminine for an older woman.

**Conclusion-We believe strongly that God is not anti-woman. We see that Jesus was not anti-woman. And, we conclude that Paul, who received direct revelation on grace and faith righteousness was not 'anti-woman' nor was he invoking doctrine against any female leadership role in the church. Therefore, our church provides opportunity for women to exercise their spiritual gifts, talents, and skills in any area of ministry within our church.**

#### Recommended Books and References on this Subject

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Cunningham, Loren and David Joel Hamilton. 2000. Why Not Women? A Fresh Look at Scripture on Women in Missions, Ministry and Leadership. YWAM Publishing.

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