

Women in the early church

Preface by Joseph Tkach

In the following paper, the doctrinal team surveys biblical evidence on the role of women in the apostolic church. We will see that in the New Testament, various women are named as having key roles within the work of the church, but few are given titles, just as few men are given titles. All this evidence is (as we expected from the start) inconclusive for our ultimate goal, which is to decide whether the Bible prohibits or allows women to be ordained as elders in the church.

Let me say a few words about why our study has spent so much time on what seems to be inconclusive research. Although various members (on both sides of the question) would like for us to “cut to the chase” and deal with the controversial texts first, we believe it would be a disservice to the church and to the question itself for us to do that. It would place the entire membership of the church in the position of having to react to the conclusion without having walked through the steps by which that conclusion was reached.

For example, if we had started with a text such as 1 Timothy 2:12 (which many people *do* see as conclusive), we would still need to confront a whole host of questions: What about Genesis, and what about Deborah, and what about women in the ministry of Jesus? We would still need to deal with all the auxiliary questions anyway, so we thought it best to survey the entire Bible before we focus on specific passages. The question concerns not merely one verse, but the whole message of the Bible.

Further, we cannot conclude whether various bits of evidence are relevant until we have actually studied them. We are sharing this learning process with you so that you can study along with us. This will help people see that the various questions *are* being considered.

The evidence that seems irrelevant to one person is sometimes considered important by another. You may have no questions about Phoebe, for example, but our paper needs to deal with her because other people *do* raise questions about her.

Finally, let me say that we do not yet know the ultimate outcome of our study. It is possible that the doctrinal team will not achieve unanimity on this

issue. Perhaps we will publish a majority opinion as well as a minority opinion—I do not know, because we aren't there yet. I hope that you are studying along with us.

Joseph Tkach

Women were important in the leadership of the early church, but the Bible does not give us as many specifics as we might like. In many cases we have to read between the lines to see the role that they had. This paper will survey the evidence in Acts and the epistles. Some of the more controversial passages (1 Cor. 11, 14, and 1 Tim. 2) will be dealt with in later papers.

Acts

Although Acts is traditionally called “the Acts of the Apostles,” it ignores most of the apostles, focusing instead on Peter and Paul. In keeping with that focus, we catch only brief glimpses of the roles of women in the church, just as we catch only glimpses of John and others.

The first mention of women comes in Acts 1:14, which states that the original nucleus of the church included the apostles, “along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” “The women” may refer to wives of the apostles, or to the women who followed Jesus (see Luke 8:2-3, for examples).

The next mention comes in Acts 2. The disciples were meeting on the day of Pentecost, and “all of them¹ were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues” (v. 4).

Peter explained to the crowd that this happened in fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people, your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams, even on my servants, both men and women, will I pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy” (vv. 17-18).

In this early church meeting, God was causing women to speak in tongues and prophesy in a place where men and women had gathered to pray and worship.

¹ We have no compelling reason to conclude that the women were absent at this Pentecost meeting. Acts 1:14 says that men and women “joined constantly in prayer.”

Nevertheless, women are not portrayed as public speakers in the remainder of Acts. Jewish and Greco-Roman society had few if any precedents for women to speak in public settings. The attitudes of Jewish men toward women can be seen in the fact that they did not permit women to testify in court. It is therefore not likely that men would view female preachers as credible sources for new religious ideas. Because of those attitudes, women had to support the gospel in other ways.

In one place, Luke describes the growth of the church in terms of “the number of men” (4:4); in another place he mentions both “men and women” (5:14).²

Some of the women were widows who depended on support from the church. When Greek-speaking widows were neglected in the daily distributions, seven men with Greek names were chosen to resolve the problem (6:1-6). Luke tells us that the apostles asked specifically for men (v. 3), but we do not see any theological reason to prohibit women from being in charge of a widow-assistance program. We conclude that the apostles asked for men due to sociological reasons.

We next hear of women when Luke tells us that Saul “dragged off men and women and put them in prison” (8:3; 9:2; 22:4). In a society that often ignored women and probably did not have prisons for women, it is striking that Luke tells us three times that Saul persecuted women as well as men. Saul apparently viewed Christian women as a serious threat to Jewish orthodoxy, probably because they were spreading the gospel to other women.

In Samaria, “both men and women” believed and were baptized (8:12). In Joppa, God used Peter to raise a hard-working disciple named Tabitha back to life (9:36-41). In Jerusalem, the disciples gathered for prayer at the home of Mary the mother of John Mark (12:12). Mary was apparently a widow who owned her own property and was wealthy enough to have a servant girl (v. 13).

After Paul preached in Pisidian Antioch, “the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region” (13:50). Here the women were influential as enemies of the gospel.

² This might be explained by the fact that Luke was not there and had to rely on sources. The source for the earlier number may have been a count of men, and Luke did not speculate on what the total number of people might be. But when he wrote Acts 5:14, he was describing growth in his own words, and so he mentioned women.

In Philippi, women came to the “place of prayer” outside the city (16:13). A wealthy woman named Lydia became a believer and “invited us to her home” (v. 15). Paul and his companions stayed there for some time, accepting her hospitality.³

After Paul cast a demon out of a slave girl, he was beaten, thrown into jail, rescued by an earthquake, and befriended by the jailer. Shortly before Paul and Silas left the city, “they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them” (v. 40). The group of disciples had grown to include men, and the new church met at Lydia’s house. Since Lydia had a successful business and owned the meeting location, it is probably safe to say that she was influential in the church, but Luke does not give her a formal title.

In Thessalonica, Paul preached in the synagogue, persuading some of the Jews and “a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women” (17:4, 12). (Ancient writers say that women were socially more prominent in Macedonia than in other parts of Greece.⁴) In Athens, a woman named Damaris became a believer (v. 34).

In Corinth, Paul met Aquila and Priscilla, Jews who had been forced to leave Rome. They were tentmakers, and Paul worked with them for a while (18:3). They traveled to Ephesus with Paul (v. 19). After Apollos came to Ephesus, “Priscilla and Aquila . . . invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately” (v. 26).

When both husband and wife are named in Greek writings, the man is usually named first. Most Protestant scholars conclude that Luke, by naming Priscilla first, is indicating that she was the more prominent of the two.⁵ This

³ In ancient terminology, Lydia was a patron, with the traveling evangelists as her clients. It was common for wealthy people to support traveling teachers with room, board and salary.

⁴ Craig Keener writes, “It is possible that Philippi allowed more prominence to women because of traditional customs in that region” (*Paul, Women, and Wives* [Hendrickson, 1992], 243). Gordon Fee writes, “Macedonia was well-known as an exception to the norm; from way back women held significant positions in public life” (*Listening to the Spirit in the Text* [Eerdmans, 2000], 73, citing W. W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilization* [World, 1952], 98-99).

⁵ They are named three times in Acts and three times in Paul’s letters. Priscilla is named first four of those times. Conservative James Hurley writes, “Commentators have, I suspect correctly, inferred that she was the more prominent” (*Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* [Zondervan,

suggests that Priscilla was an excellent teacher, well versed in Christian doctrine, but it does not say whether a woman may have a public teaching role.

Luke mentions that four daughters of Philip prophesied (21:9), presumably on a regular basis, but we do not know where or how they prophesied.

Romans

Most of Romans is a doctrinal exposition, but Paul does give us clues about the believers in Rome when he greets many of them by name in the final chapter. The first person mentioned is Phoebe, whom Paul introduces and commends, probably because she carried the letter to Rome. Paul calls her “a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchrea” (16:1).

Since *diakonos* can mean either deacon or servant, some translations have chosen “deacon” (e.g., NRSV), while others have chosen “servant” (NIV) or “minister” (NAB). If a man had been called “a *diakonos* of the church,” most translators would have used the word “deacon,”⁶ but some translators do not believe that the early church had female deacons and therefore choose “servant.”

When Paul gives a function followed by “of the church in Cenchrea,” it appears that he is giving Phoebe a title.⁷ However, even if she is a deacon, we do not know what range of responsibilities she had.

As the person who carried the letter to Rome, Phoebe may have been asked to read the letter aloud to the assembled believers, and she may have been expected to convey verbal greetings from Paul and answer questions about what Paul may have meant by any phrases the audience found confusing.⁸

1981], 119). But John Piper and Wayne Grudem do not agree (*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* [Crossway, 1991], 69).

⁶ “If the name in the text were Timothy or Judas, ninety-nine per cent of the scholars would presume that *diakonos* meant ‘deacon’ and a few footnotes would remark that it could mean ‘servant’” (Hurley, 124).

⁷ Origen (3rd century) and Chrysostom (4th century) both understood Phoebe to be a deacon (Belleville, “Women in Ministry,” in James Beck and Craig Blomberg, editors, *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [Zondervan, 2001], 101).

⁸ Craig Keener writes, “Since she bears Paul’s letter, she may be called upon to explain anything ambiguous in the letter when the Romans read it, and Paul wishes them to understand that she is indeed qualified to explain his writing” (“Women in Ministry,” in Beck and Blomberg, 238).

Paul asks the Roman Christians to “give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a *prostatis* to many people, including me” (v. 2). What is a *prostatis*? Some translations render it “helper,” but the word usually meant “benefactor” or a patron, a wealthy person who supported other people—a common arrangement in the first-century Roman Empire.⁹

Phoebe was apparently a wealthy woman who helped take care of some of the poorer believers in Cenchrea. She had some business in Rome, and Paul asked her to carry his letter to the believers there, and in turn he asks the believers to help her accomplish whatever she came to do. She was a trusted person, well respected in the church at Cenchrea.

Paul then greets Priscilla and Aquila and calls them “my fellow workers [*synergoi*] in Christ Jesus” (v. 3). He is not referring to their tentmaking work, but to their work in the gospel (he uses the same Greek word for Timothy in v. 21). They had moved back to Rome, and a church met in their home (v. 5).

Paul sends his greeting to “Mary, who worked very hard for you” (v. 6). He does not say when, where, or what the work was, but apparently it was something notable.

Paul greets “Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me” (v. 7). They were Jews, probably imprisoned for preaching the gospel along with Paul. That much is often accepted, but Paul’s next statement is hotly debated: “They are outstanding among the apostles.” Some take it to mean that they are outstanding in the eyes of the apostles; others say that they are outstanding apostles.¹⁰

⁹ “Phoebe is commended here as a patroness” (Thomas Schreiner, 197). “In the culture of the day, a *prostatis* was a ‘benefactor’ (NRSV, revised NAB)—or as we would say today a ‘sponsor’” (Linda Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church* [Baker, 1999], 53). Some people have claimed that *prostatis* meant “to be a leader,” but it is unlikely that Paul would say that Phoebe had been his leader.

¹⁰ Hurley points out that “It is unlike Paul to make something like acquaintance with the apostles a matter of praise. It is therefore more likely that he intended to say that they were outstanding as apostles” (121). However, Wayne Grudem has recently argued that the Greek construction can legitimately mean “well known to the apostles” (*Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* [Multnomah, 2004], 224-25). The precise meaning does not affect our study.

Further, there has been some controversy as to whether Junia(s) was male or female. Some scholars, believing that apostles could not be female, suggested that Junias was a shortened form of the masculine name Junianus. However, there is no evidence that Junianus was ever shortened in that way, whereas there is abundant evidence that Junia was a woman's name.¹¹

It is possible that Andronicus and Junia, Jews who came to Christ before Paul did (v. 7b), were known by the original apostles and commended by them. But it is also possible that they were apostles in their own right—apostles in the sense that they were official representatives sent from one church to another (see 2 Cor. 8:23 for an example of that use of the word).

Church history knows nothing of what Andronicus did, so it is doubtful that he could be considered an outstanding apostle in the sense that the Twelve were. The more general sense of “apostle”—messenger—is the more defensible meaning for both Andronicus and Junia.¹² We conclude that Junia was a notable woman who probably represented a church in some official capacity along with her husband, but the evidence does not permit us to say that she was an apostle in the way that Paul and the Twelve were.

Paul also greets Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis, “women who work hard in the Lord” (v. 12). Paul does not say what their work was, but “in the Lord” implies that they were religious workers of some kind. He also greets Julia, the sister of Nereus, and the mother of Rufus (vv. 13, 15). Paul has mentioned 10 women—a high percentage for literature of that era.

Other letters

Paul mentions a report from people “from Chloe's household” (1 Cor. 1:11), but he does not indicate whether Chloe herself is a believer.

¹¹ Linda Belleville writes that the masculine name “does not exist in any extant Greek or Latin document of the Greco-Roman period. On the other hand, the feminine name Junia is quite common and well attested in both Greek and Latin inscriptions. Over 250 examples to date have been documented in Rome alone” (“Women in Ministry,” 85).

¹² Hurley points out that if “apostle” designated the most important office in the church, it would be odd to put these two people in the middle of the list of greetings (122). Fee writes, “The term in this case, as it almost surely does in 1 Corinthians 12:28 as well, refers to a ‘function,’ not an ‘office’” (74).

For sexual relations within marriage, Paul teaches that a wife has just as much authority as the husband (7:2-5). For that society, this teaching was amazingly egalitarian, but it says nothing about a woman's role in the church. The same is true of Eph. 5:21-33, where Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands and husbands to love their wives in a self-sacrificial way.

He notes that other apostles were accompanied by their wives when they traveled (1 Cor. 9:5), but he does not say what role the wives had.

In chapter 11, Paul gives instructions about head-coverings for women who prophesy or pray. Because of the complexity of this passage and its importance in the debate, we will address it in a separate paper. Paul's comments in 14:34-35 will also be addressed in a future paper.

Paul does *not* mention the role of women as first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection (15:5). He is probably citing a tradition in the way that it was given to him, and the tradition probably did not include the women because they were not legal witnesses in Jewish society.¹³

Galatians 3:28 has been an influential verse in the debate about women: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Paul has taken three major social divisions of the first-century church and united them. Technically, he is speaking about unity, not equality,¹⁴ and he is speaking of salvation, not leadership. Even after writing this verse, he is able to give different directives to men, women, and slaves.

However, equality in salvation *can* have implications for social relationships.¹⁵ For example, we believe that Jews and Gentiles should have equal

¹³ "The testimony of women carried little weight in Judaism, and it was evidently for that reason that they are not included in this earliest extant confession of the Church" (Richard Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* [Eerdmans, 1984], 77).

¹⁴ Mary Evans agrees, but points out that both men and women are given the same status before God: "sons" (*Woman in the Bible* [InterVarsity, 1983], 64).

¹⁵ Thomas Schreiner, a conservative, concedes this: "Klyne Snodgrass argues that Galatians 3:28 cannot be confined to salvation but also has social implications.... I believe Snodgrass is correct" ("Women in Ministry," in Beck and Blomberg, 186, referring to Snodgrass's article in Alvera Mickelson, ed., *Women, Authority, and the Bible* [InterVarsity, 1986], 161-81). But Schreiner points out that we must read Paul to see what the social implications are, rather than imposing modern ideas about equality. He cites Judith Gundry-Volf as an egalitarian who "rightly argues that Galatians 3:28 does not abolish all gender differences" (187).

opportunity for leadership. It would be wrong to say, “Gentiles are equal when it comes to salvation, but if anyone in the congregation is Jewish, then the pastor must be Jewish, even if he is poorly qualified.” Some people argue that it is wrong to have similar rules that favor men over women, but personal equality does not *always* necessitate equal roles. When it comes to salvation, the pastor is on the same level as everyone else, but he does not have the same *role* as everyone else. Similarly, Christian business owners and employees are equal when it comes to salvation, but that does not require equal roles in the business. There are limits to the social consequences of our unity in Christ.

Egalitarians generally conclude that Gal. 3:28 is a call for equal roles within the church, whereas traditional scholars usually do not.¹⁶

In Philippians, Paul pleads for two women to agree with one another (Phil. 4:2). They had “contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers [*synergoi*]” (v. 3). These women were not just serving behind the scenes—Paul indicates that they were at his side, contending with opponents, apparently doing the same sort of gospel work that Paul, Clement, and other co-workers did.¹⁷ The fact that Paul takes space in his letter to address the quarrel between these women suggests that their quarrel was affecting other people in the church—that the women were influential in some

¹⁶ Beck and Blomberg observe that neither Keener nor Belleville put much stress on this verse (166), and it seems to be less used in recent egalitarian works. Stanley Grenz notes that “the egalitarian case may be overstated” on this verse (*Women in the Church* [InterVarsity, 1995], 107).

¹⁷ David Scholer writes, “The term ‘coworker’ (*synergos*) appears to be what in the Pauline churches would be a veritable ‘official’ term for a person who works with leadership and authority in the gospel. Paul uses this term only for such persons, which includes Urbanus (Rom 16:9); Timothy (Rom 16:21); Titus 2 Cor 8:23); Philemon (Phlm 1); Demas (Phlm 24); Apollos (and himself, 1 Cor 3:9); Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3; here is the other instance of the use of this term for a woman); Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25); and Clement (Phil 4:3) (see also the general use of the term in Col 4:11)” (“Euodia and Syntyche: Bishops at Philippi?” in *Selected Articles on Hermeneutics and Women and Ministry in the New Testament* [Fuller Theological Seminary, 2003], 146).

way.¹⁸ They might have had a formal role in the church, but Paul does not give them a title.

In Colossians 4:15, he mentions that a church met at the home of Nympha, who was wealthy enough to own a house large enough for the church to meet in. In Philemon 2, he greets Apphia, probably the wife of Philemon.¹⁹

The pastoral letters

Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus say several significant things about women. The most famous passage, 1 Tim. 2:11-15, will have to wait for another paper.

In 1 Tim. 3:1-7, Paul gives characteristics of a good overseer.²⁰ In vv. 8-10 he lists desirable traits of deacons. In v. 11, he says, "Women must likewise be dignified...."²¹ Commentators debate whether "women" here means female deacons, or the wives of the deacons described in vv. 8-10 and then again in v. 12.

The use of "likewise" in v. 11, just as in v. 8, could suggest that female deacons are in view. On the other hand, the fact that male deacons are again described in v. 12 could suggest that male deacons are in view throughout the passage. In this latter interpretation, v. 11 gives desirable traits of deacons' wives, just as v. 4 gave desirable traits of children for the overseers. But it would be odd to specify traits of a deacon's wife but say nothing about an elder's wife, unless the deacon's wife had a special role, such as assisting women in baptism.²²

¹⁸ The women "had gained a position of such influence as to make their present conflict a risk to the well-being of the church" (Evans, 129).

¹⁹ Belleville says, "The fact that she appears in the letterhead indicates she was a leader of the church at Colossae" (53). Paul did not greet women in the introduction of any other letter.

²⁰ As we discussed in an earlier paper, these should not be viewed as absolute requirements for church leadership, for Paul himself was not "the husband of but one wife," nor did he have a family to manage well (vv. 2, 4). Similarly, in new churches, it would have been necessary to appoint recent converts (cf. v. 6) as leaders. Paul is giving guidelines, not requirements.

²¹ We have used the fairly literal NASB for this verse. The NIV has "their wives," but the word "their" is not in the Greek. The TNIV and NRSV have "women."

²² "Whichever position is adopted as to whether women are to be 'deaconesses,' there is still consensus that women should be involved in 'diaconal' or service ministries in the church" (George W. Knight III, "The Family and the Church," in Piper and Grudem, 354).

Walter Liefeld concludes, “It is impossible to tell whether these were the wives of the deacons or women who were serving as deacons.”²³ Although historically we understood this verse as authorizing the role of deaconess, it does not prove the point. Rom. 16:1 offers better support, although it has another possible interpretation as well.²⁴

Paul says that “a deacon must be the husband of but one wife” (v. 12). As we discussed in an earlier paper, Paul is giving desirable traits for a deacon, not absolute requirements. We allow single men to be deacons or ministry leaders, and similarly, we allow remarried men to be deacons, whether they remarry after a divorce or after their first wife dies. The Greek phrase apparently meant “a one-woman man”—that is, one who did not have a mistress, one who was faithful to the wife he had.²⁵ We do consider *this* to be a requirement.

We also believe that a similar rule should apply for female deacons: They should be faithful. If they are remarried, they should be faithful to the husband they now have. When Paul said that male deacons should be faithful to their wives, it would have gone without saying in that culture that a similar rule would apply to female deacons. As discussed in a previous paper, biblical rules are often phrased from the male perspective even when they apply to females as well.²⁶ The main point is that female leaders should be of good character.

²³ Walter Liefeld, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (NIV Application Commentary; Zondervan, 1999), 134. Hurley points out that since the masculine word *diakonos* was used for both males and females, “the fact that Paul used *diakonos* to introduce the men in 1 Timothy 3:8 explains the necessity of another word in verse 11 if he wished to turn attention to women deacons” (231-32).

Conservatives who accept female deacons include Thomas Schreiner (in Piper and Grudem, 505, n. 13), Walter Neuer (*Man and Woman in Christian Perspective* [Crossway, 1991], 121), and Ann Bowman (“Women in Ministry,” in Beck and Blomberg, 283).

²⁴ There is evidence that the early church had female deacons. In one of the earliest nonbiblical references to Christians, Pliny the Younger (governor in Asia Minor A.D. 111-113) reported to Emperor Trajan that “I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses” (*Letters* 10.96-97). The text is available online in several places, such as <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/pliny.html>.

²⁵ Craig Keener, *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Hendrickson, 1991), 94.

²⁶ A future paper will discuss whether this might apply to v. 2.

In 1 Tim. 5:3, Paul addresses another group of women: “Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.” He notes that widows should be supported by their families—“If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith” (v. 8; cf. Mark 7:11-13). But if the widow did not have family support, the church apparently provided support.

“No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty” and of good character (vv. 9-10). Younger widows should not be put on the list, he says, “for when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge” (vv. 11-12).

Timothy already knew what this “list of widows” was, but today we have to read between the lines to see what Paul was talking about. Apparently the widows made a life-long pledge to serve the church in return for its financial support, and remarriage was a violation of that pledge. Paul felt that women under age 60 might be so anxious to marry that they could not be trusted to keep a pledge of celibacy.

How much of this is applicable to the modern church? Did Paul intend for his letter to Timothy to become a manual of church organization for subsequent centuries and cultures? Should churches have a roster of older widows pledged to celibacy? Although it is permissible for churches to have such a list, we do not believe that the Bible requires this. There is wisdom in Paul’s letter, but he wrote to a specific church, and the specific admonitions he gives must be evaluated to see whether they are appropriate in other settings.²⁷

Paul praised the faith of Timothy’s mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5), but we are not told whether they brought Timothy to faith in Christ. However, Paul also warned Timothy that women were targets of false teachers who “worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but

²⁷ We noted in an earlier paper that the instruction Paul gave in 1 Tim. 3:6 would not apply to the church in Crete (cf. Tit. 1:6-9); he did not intend his letter to be a manual for all churches. The point is that unless we believe that *all* instructions in 1 Timothy apply to the church today (which we do not), then we must discuss each instruction to ask *whether* it applies, or how it might be adapted. A future paper will discuss whether 1 Tim. 2:11-12 is a directive for all subsequent centuries.

never able to acknowledge the truth” (2 Tim. 3:6). These women had apparently heard the gospel but had not accepted it.

Paul told Titus to “teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live...but to teach what is good. They can then train the younger women to love their husbands and children...and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God” (Tit. 2:3-5). Paul trusted older women to teach younger ones, and at least one purpose of this instruction is cultural, so that outsiders would have less to criticize about the gospel.²⁸

General epistles

The remaining books of the New Testament say little about women and little about leadership in the church. Hebrews mentions Sarah, though scholars debate whether she is mentioned in passing or is commended as having faith (11:11). The author implies that faith inspired the women who received the dead raised back to life again (v. 35). James mentions that Rahab had exemplary faith (2:25).

Peter, after advising everyone to submit to government authorities, and slaves to submit to their masters, also advises women to be submissive to their husbands (3:1); he cites Sarah as exemplary in this respect (v. 6). He advises men “in the same way” to treat their wives with respect, as the weaker vessel, because they are equal heirs of salvation (v. 7).²⁹

John greets a “chosen lady and her children” (2 John 1), but this is usually interpreted as a metaphor for the church (the Greek word *ekklesia* is feminine, and the church is considered the bride of Christ—2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27).

Revelation has both positive and negative imagery of women. The church is described as a woman (12:1-17) and as a bride (21:2)—a bride who joins the Spirit in inviting people to come to Christ (22:17). A more negative view is seen in 14:4, which says that the 144,000 “are those who did not defile themselves with women,

²⁸ Similarly, he advises slaves to be subject to their masters so that “they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (v. 10). His advice is culturally appropriate, but we cannot assume that it implies an endorsement of the cultural setting in which it was given.

²⁹ Paul is making a general observation—he is not implying that *all* husbands are stronger than their wives. Nor is he saying that women are weaker intellectually or spiritually. On average, men are physically stronger than their wives, but, according to Peter, that should lead men to respect their wives, not abuse them.

for they kept themselves pure.” It is debatable whether we can ascertain anything about gender roles in the real world from these apocalyptic symbols.

Conclusion

Women had various important functions in the early church. Some taught, some prophesied, some provided financial support, and many worked in the gospel. Various people are called apostles, but rarely is anyone, whether male or female, given any other title. We know the names of only two men who are called “elder” and one woman who was called a “deacon.”³⁰

Since titles are rarely given, it is important to look at what people did, not what titles they had, and it is significant to see that in several cases, women worked alongside men in spreading the gospel, and the same Greek words are used to describe their work as are used for male leaders.

In our next paper we will examine 1 Cor. 11, which refers to women in the church at Corinth who prophesied and prayed.

³⁰ Peter and John call themselves elders in 1 Peter 5:1 and 2 John 1. As we concluded above, Romans 16:1 probably calls Phoebe a deacon; the seven men of Acts 6:5 are not specifically called deacons. It may have taken some time for terminology to become standardized.