

SHAPE

your gifts for God's good purposes



PART EIGHT

THE WHOLE CHURCH Pt. 2

PARTNERS IN MINISTRY





Part Eight: The Whole Church Pt. 2

Partners in Ministry

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I. New Creation Realities

Why do we see so many examples of male-only leadership through the Old Testament and even into the Gospels?

We need to remember that the Old Covenant was inseparably linked to the tabernacle and temple system, both of which have been fulfilled in Christ and are no longer necessary.

“This makes it doubtful that the pattern of an all-male priesthood should have any continued theological bearing on the New Testament church and therefore women’s place in leadership.”

– Elita Friesen and Chris Price, *The Whole Church*

Jesus gathered twelve male disciples around him. The disciples function as representatives of the 12 tribes of Israel, the “sons” of Jacob (later called “Israel” for he “wrestled with God”). In this way, Jesus was “reconstituting Israel around himself”, and it would only make sense that he uses men to signal this.

The decisive moment that begins the New Covenant, the new terms of the relationship between God and humanity, comes through Jesus’ death and resurrection. The fact of females as the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus highlights this new reality.

As the Spirit hovered over the waters at creation, bringing order out of chaos, so now – in Acts 2 – the Spirit hovers over his Church, the community of God, renewing God’s creational intent; one which brings together people from every people group, and unites us in Christ.

“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophecy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.”

– Acts 2:17-18

Paul will summarize who this impacts the community: “Before the coming of this faith [in Jesus Christ], we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ has clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and 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.”

– Galatians 3:23-29

II. Women Leaders in the New Testament

What about 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1? Don't these say that "elders" or pastors can only be male?

"Whoever desires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife [literal: "a one-woman-man"], temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach..."

– 1 Timothy 3:1-2

Most scholars argue that the phrase "a one-woman man" is an idiom, a cultural saying (like when we use "guys" to refer to a whole group of people) which essentially refers to fidelity to the Christian sexual ethic and could be applied to men and women. Since "male" is the default point of reference in that ancient culture, unless something is specifically speaking to women, the male version of the idiom would be used. So, the point of Paul using this idiom is not to make a point about gender, but the quality of marital faithfulness.

The only pronouns Paul uses in the whole section here, and in Titus 1:5-9, is Greek: *tis* – "Whoever". There are no personal pronouns – "he", "she", "it" – to designate a gender for "overseer", when Paul could have easily included that if he wanted to be clear that he means this is gendered.

Here are two leading scholars who hold to a male-only leadership position, and what they say about these passages:

Douglas Moo says that the phrase 'a one-woman man'- 'may mean . . . that the male elder/overseer must be faithful to his wife, without excluding unmarried men or females from the office. . . [I]t would be going too far to argue that the phrase clearly excludes women.'

And Tom Schreiner says:

'The requirements for elders in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9, including the statement that they are to be one-woman men, does not necessarily in and of itself preclude women from serving as elders'[1]

And if 1 Timothy 2 isn't a blanket prohibition, there are no texts that say, "Women can't lead or teach." There are, however, good examples of where Paul affirms those sorts of roles.

Romans 16:1-7

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. **2** I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. **4** They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

5 Greet also the church that meets at their house.

Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.

6 Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you.

7 Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

1. Phoebe, the Deacon

Phoebe is called a deacon, which is a leadership role in a church that aims to serve the practical needs, like we read of in Acts 6.

A good example of how "*diakanon*" is used elsewhere is in Philippians 1:1b:

"To all God's people [or "saints/holy ones"] in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers [*episkopos*] and deacons [*diakonon*]." – Philippians 1:1b

As a "congregational", Baptist church, well, to quote our Bylaws:

"Under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the membership of the Church is the source of authority in the Church." – Summit Drive Church Bylaws

[1] Moo, 1981. 'The Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-15: A Rejoinder.' *TrinJ* 2, New Series: 198-222, 211.; Schreiner, 2010. 'Philip Payne on Familiar Ground: A Review of Philip B. Payne, *Man and Women, One in Christ*.' *JBMW* 15, no. 1:33-46, 35.

The very first Baptist statement of faith, from in the early 1600's, included female deacons, and we have included the women as deacons at Summit.

2. Pricilla and Aquilla, Teachers and Church Leaders

3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. **4** They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

5 Greet also the church that meets at their house.

The Greek word for “co-workers”, *synergos*, is a word Paul uses to indicate a leadership position (see 1 Corinthians 16:16-18). It is likely that this husband-and-wife team are the leaders of that house church.

In Acts 18:2, Luke, the writer, initially introducing them with the husband's name first, then the wife's – a convention of that day, which continues to be typical in ours.

But all the subsequent times Luke mentions them as Pricilla and Aquilla, the wife is named first (Acts 18:18;19;26). That's odd. Why?

Well, we see this bit about Apollos, this deeply gifted, travelling preacher and his interaction with this couple:

“He [Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Pricilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.”

– Acts 18:26

The most likely explanation for her being named first is that she is likely the “lead” in their teaching ministry. She's not just making the tea. She had a crucial role, maybe the leading role, in educating one of the greatest preachers in history. We have to take this feature of the text seriously.

Now, some argue that this is a private setting, not a church setting. And that's true. But because this event happens in a home shouldn't lead to the conclusion that her teaching ministry is limited to that setting.

Nothing here, or elsewhere, suggests that. Like, in Acts 28:23, Luke uses the same Greek word used here, *ektithemi*, to describe Paul's public teaching.

3. Andronicus and Junia, Outstanding Apostles

7 Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

This is likely a husband-and-wife team who were among the very first Christians (“In Christ before I was”). It's likely that they were among that group who had gathered at Pentecost and may have been among those who witnessed Jesus' resurrection and were commissioned by Jesus himself to take the message of good news to the world.

In the Bible there are at least two categories where “apostle” is used. It is used narrowly; we might say capital “A” Apostles to refer to the 12 disciples of Jesus who were called as eyewitnesses to his life and teaching. But Paul also lists “apostle” as form of gifting and call for the church.

“Andronicus and Junia would be apostles in the same sense as were Barnabas (Acts 14:14; 1 Cor 9:5-6), Epaphroditus (Phil 2:5), and Titus along with “the brothers” who were sent to administrate the offering (2 Cor 8:23). “Apostle” is one of the foundational spiritual gifts in Paul's lists that are determined by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:28-29; Eph 4:11).”

– Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender*

A very small number of translations, which evidence ideological bents against women in ministry, have tried to argue that this should be translated are “esteemed by” or “prominent in the sight of” the apostles. It seems likely this is to get around the fact that a woman is listed with the title “apostle.” But that is a stretch to translate that way for several very nerdy grammatical reasons (Paul Jewett notes: “The adjective *episemos* lifts up a person or thing as distinguished or marked in comparison with other representatives of the same class, in this instance with other apostles.” – *Romans*, in CLW 271, fn.59). Scholarly consensus is strongly in favour of the reading we find in the NIV.

a. Junia was recognized as a female apostle in virtually unanimous understanding of the church until the late Middle Ages.

b. Vulgate: (4-5th C): “Junia...notable among the apostles.” These are translations done by native speakers of ancient Greek who are being honest about the text.

c. Most commentaries and sermons of the early Church Father commentaries on Romans 16 recognize that Junia is named as an apostle. This is notable since for other reasons many did not support women in leadership roles, but as native Greek readers/speakers their translations carry a great deal of weight. Consider this note from John Chrysostom:

“To be even amongst those of note, just consider what a great encomium this is...Oh how great is the devotion of this woman [Junia] that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle! – John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 31, 4th C

d. Beginning in the 1300’s, one scribe masculinizes Junia to Junias because she was called an apostle. That name really doesn’t exist in any documents from the New Testament era and has virtually been laid to rest as a legitimate translation option. Of note, when translators used the masculinized form “Junias”, they had no problem with the most natural translation of “among the apostles”. For example, the Revised Standard Version (1971) translates: “Greet Androni’cus and Ju’nias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners; they are men [“men” is not in the Greek] of note among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.” When the ESV updated the RSV, they moved back to translate “Junia” as female, but with an ideological bent away from women having any authoritative ministry role, they chose a forced and far less likely translation, that goes against the ancient translators of: “well known to the apostles.” This is to avoid having to acknowledge a woman with that ministry title.

Perhaps commissioned by Jesus himself, and likely part of the community gathered at Pentecost, Andronicus and Junia were sent – that’s what “apostle” means – to preach the news of Jesus, seeking to bring men and women to faith. And they were outstanding in this. Paul mentions that both had been in prison with him, which indicates that Junia’s ministry extended beyond the walls of her household. This is no minimal role.

Conclusions from Romans 16:1-7

When we take this text with utter seriousness – paying attention to the grammar and word ordering, and how it’s been translated by early, native Greek speaking theologians – what we see is Paul’s beautiful affirmation of a female deacon, Phoebe, who served the church brilliantly, at great cost to herself to honour Jesus. We see a wife and husband – Pricilla and Aquilla – who have a significant leading and teaching role. And we have this team of apostles – Andronicus and Junia – bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus and establishing churches based on that testimony. This is what we get when we simply try to read the text as well as we can.

In our SHAPE series we’ve been trying to show how the Spirit of God gifts the church to serve him and the world. This is the New Creation situation we inhabit. From Paul acknowledging these “co-workers” in the gospel in leading and teaching roles in the early church, to the early Baptist impulse to release women to lead and teach, God gifts and empowers women for ministry.

III. Working Together as the Whole Church

“It is not the *rights* of women to occupy ‘official’ ministerial roles, nor their *equality* to men in those roles, that set the terms of their service to God and their neighbors. It is their *obligations* that do so – obligations that derive from their human abilities empowered by divine gifting.”

– Dallas Willard

Ministry leadership is never about gaining power, or advancing our status, but always taking the humble posture of a servant and – like the parable of the talents – it’s our *obligation* to serve out of our God-given gifts and calling.

- To the woman out there, or the young lady, or the preteen girl, the promise of Joel 2, as Peter quotes in Acts 2:17 – it’s for you: “Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.” And these, Peter says, are “those days.” May you discover the deep joy of being released into the fullness of your gifting.
- To the men, young and old, this same promise is for you. “Your sons and daughters will prophecy...” May you know the joy of taking your place to serve the purposes of God’s kingdom as God’s one people.
- This is not just about “her” but about “us”. This series isn’t about “she” but “we.” That’s what we’ve been saying through the whole SHAPE series. For there is no competition for who gets to serve where – just the joy of living into the gifts and call he’s given each one of us. We are the whole church, working together for God’s glory, each according to our gifts (Romans 12:3-8).

Life Group Discussion and Reflection

Open up

1. What has been your experience, positive or negative (or both), in relation to being equipped and empowered for ministry?
2. How might the experience differ for men and women in this regard?

Dig In

3. Read the text of **Romans 16:1-7**. How does the example of the women and men that Paul commends, challenge or encourage you and your current thoughts about how men and women are to serve together in ministry?

4. Consider this quote from Dallas Willard: “It is not the *rights* of women to occupy ‘official’ ministerial roles, nor their equality to men in those roles, that set the terms of their service to God and their neighbors. It is their obligations that do so – *obligations* that derive from their human abilities empowered by divine gifting.” – Dallas Willard

How will you let this shape the way you encourage those around you in ministry?

Live It Out

5. Through our SHAPE series we’ve been encouraging our whole community to consider their gifts, abilities, and sense of God’s call. What are some of the “growing edges” of ministry that you’ve sensed God moving you towards? What next steps can you take in these areas?

Prayer

Take time to pray a blessing on each person in your group – that each one would sense the good gifting and call for ministry. Pray for those “growing edge” areas, and next steps that were shared. Pray for our whole community, that we would respond with deep love and joy to the good work God has given us for this moment.