NEW TESTAMENT WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

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WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IS NOT NEW

There is a modern fallacy that women in church leadership is a new concept in the last few hundred years, an accommodation to secular feminism. However, women were very active in ministry in the early church, before the church started to institutionalise. If the church has accommodated to any culture’s views on gender roles, it was actually to the Greco-Roman assumptions about appropriate gender roles. The restoration of women to church leadership has actually undone what was originally a cultural accommodation.

The New Testament uses a variety of terms for ministry positions, terms that were originally taken from secular life, “diakonos (minister), apostolos (missionary), presbyteros (elder), episcopos (overseer), prophet, and teacher. Eventually the titles of bishop (episcopos), priest (presbyteros), and deacon (diakonos) came to be identified with the principal offices of the Christian church. Throughout this period of development, women held each of these offices” [1].

During the first and second centuries the churches met in homes. Women were prominent as leaders during this time. Positions of church leadership were granted on the same basis as secular positions were granted in Greek and Roman society, on the strength of the person’s experience as household managers [1]. “Women’s authority in this domain was well established. Their administrative, economic, and disciplinary tasks in that role were excellent preparation for church (and public) office. In addition, women with relatively more wealth or higher status assumed the role of patron of a group” [1].

As the church institutionalised in the third and fourth centuries, the house churches were transformed. Instead of the church being a private body, it transformed into a public organisation with political power. As the position of bishop in particular started to gain political as well as spiritual authority, and the church crossed over into the public sphere, women’s roles in ministry were challenged for the first time [1]. The cultural system of the time associated men with honour and women with chastity. For a woman to cross over into the public sphere where men pursued honour was to usurp men’s prerogatives and would often draw the allegation of the woman’s unchastity [1].
**EXAMPLES OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP**

Despite the rhetoric in the third and fourth centuries, we have evidence that there were women in leadership for many years after the church started to institutionalise. On the island of Thera, there is an epitaph for a woman called Epiktas, who is named as priest or presbyter (presbytis). This epitaph dates to the third or fourth century [1]. In the Church of Saint Praxedis in Rome there is a mosaic that dates to the ninth century with a picture of a woman entitled “Theodora Episcopa”, that is Bishop Theodora [1].

In the New Testament there are also a number of allusions to women leaders. Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection, and the first to be commissioned to tell others of the resurrection. The earliest manuscripts of John’s gospel end in chapter 20 with Mary’s witness to the twelve [1]. John’s gospel presents Mary Magdalene, not Peter as the model for discipleship [1]. Chapter 21 was added later, making Peter the key witness of the resurrection, and commissioning him to be shepherd of the flock [1]. This has obscured Mary Magdalene’s status as the first witness of the resurrection and as John’s model of faithful discipleship.

In amongst Paul’s letters we find reference to a number of women leaders in the early church. Priscilla and her husband Aquila, we are told in Acts 18, “explained to [Apollos] the way of God more adequately” (verse 26) [1]. Priscilla and Aquila also travelled with Paul and founded house churches [3]. Paul refers to another woman, Phoebe as sister and diakonos in Romans 16:1, using the same word that he uses to describe his own ministry and that of Apollos [3]. Paul refers to Timothy in 1 Thessalonians 3:2 in the same way, as “brother” and “deacon”. This characterises Phoebe, like Timothy, as a co-worker of Paul’s [3]. Paul calls Phoebe his patron acknowledging Phoebe’s generosity and support [1]. Paul’s introduction of Phoebe does not relate to her relationship with men, her gender or status in patriarchal society, but instead her role in the church as sister, diakonos and patron [3].

Another woman of the Roman church that bears some discussion is Junia. Paul calls Junia and her husband Andronicus “foremost amongst the apostles” (Rom. 16:7). John Chrysostom in the fourth century used Junia as an example for the women of Constantinople [1]. “To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles—just think what a wonderful song of praise that is!...Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle” [4].

Junia’s story has been suppressed by patriarchal assumptions. Androcentric translators assumed that the term “apostle” could not be attached to a female name, and so added an “s” to the end of Junia’s name to make her name masculine. Ancient Christian writers understood the apostle Junia to be a woman [4]. Greek New Testaments from Erasmus in 1516 to Nestle’s 1927 accepted Junia as female. “All extant early translations (Old Latin, Vulgate, Sahidic and Bohairic Coptic, and Syriac versions) without exception transcribe the name in what can be taken as a feminine form” [4]. English translations of the New Testament from Tyndale until the end of the nineteenth century translated the apostle’s name as Junia [4].

Christian commentators who consider Junia to be feminine include Origin, Rufinus, Rabanus Maurus, Ambrosiaster, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Theodoret of Cyrhus, Psuedo-Primasis, John Damascene, Hraban of Fulda, Haymo of Halberstadt, Hatto of Vercelli, Lanfranc of Bec, Bruno the Carthusian, Theophylact, Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard, Ambrose, Claudius of Turin, Sedulius-Scotus, Guillelmus Abbas and Herveus Burgidolensis [4].

Lydia of Philippi is an example of a household manager who held a significant position in her church [1]. Lydia was one of the first to respond to the gospel in Philippi [1]. When Lydia was converted her household, which would have included family members, domestic slaves, and slaves working in her purple fabric business, were baptised with her [1]. She would have exerted influence over a large group of clients and friends [1]...

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