



Women in the Bible

Theme: Women in the Early Church

Acts 16:13-15, Acts 18:1-3 and 26, Romans 16:1-16

After Jesus' resurrection, the early church had to work out logistical questions of authority and structure. Who would be in charge? Who would financially support the work? In the earliest works of the New Testament, the leadership of women seems to be a given. As time goes on without the arrival of the end times, women's leadership comes under increasing scrutiny. The reversals Jesus and Paul preached seem to revert to societal norms.

The Women of Acts

Throughout the Acts of the Apostles, women are present in small roles. In a meeting of the apostles early in their ministry, Acts lists the male apostles by name then adds, "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers" (Acts 1:14). In ancient texts, it was usual for men to be named and women not to be. This verse is remarkable, though, in that it even mentions the women who were present. Scholars believe that women are present for many of the scenes in the New Testament, even if their presence is recorded.

In Acts 16:13-15, a woman named Lydia appears to the traveling apostles Paul and Silas. Paul's preaching moves her, and she invites him to stay at her house. Lydia does not appear to have a husband in this brief vignette, and she is "a dealer in purple cloth," indicating her status as a merchant (Acts 16:14). In fact, Lydia is clearly an independent woman in her story because it says that she "and her household" were baptized. In early Christian communities, it was not individuals who were baptized but entire households, including enslaved people and, we believe, children. Lydia, not a man, is the head of her household.

Priscilla appears for the first time in Acts. She is introduced with her husband Aquila, and they are both Jews who have fled Rome due to persecution. When Paul stays with them, they find themselves convinced and become part of The Way. Both are quick studies. When they hear a Jew named Apollos preaching about Jesus, they gently correct him. "When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately" (Act 18:26). Most remarkable about this verse is that Priscilla is named first. She must be an exceptional leader to be listed before her husband.

Women and Paul

In Romans 16, Paul offers greetings to many specific people in the community. Included the list are many female figures, including widows and church leaders. Priscilla and Aquila seem to have returned to Rome. "Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus" (Rom 16:3). Not only is Priscilla, also known as Prisca, listed first again in their married pair, but she is also named as a co-laborer with Paul. This part of the letter seems to be asking the community to accord her and her husband their due respect. Because Priscilla is listed first (or at all!), the implication is that she deserves the respect because of her own merit, not simply because of being associated with a faithful husband.

Phoebe is first in this list, not as a part of the community in Rome but as a visitor. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae... for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well" (Rom 16:1-2). No male is named with her, and Paul tells the Romans that she is his benefactor. She is an independent woman, much like Lydia or Mary Magdalene, working on Paul's behalf.

Another interesting woman in Paul's list, along with Phoebe and Prisca, is Junia. "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was" (Rom 16:7). Dr. Lin explains that the history of interpretation of Junia is interesting. It becomes a problem for later interpreters that Paul says she is "prominent among the apostles." Surely Paul could not have meant that a woman was an apostle, interpreters said, so Junia must have been a misprint. Her name therefore became Junias in some manuscripts. However, Junias is not a name in the ancient world, and Junia is. Likely, Junia was, indeed, a woman whose name was erased from history for a time.

Pastoral Epistles

The so-called Pastoral Epistles paint a very different picture of women's leadership in the church. These letters are 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus. Many scholars agree that they were not written by Paul himself. Rather, they were likely written in Pauline communities under Paul's name.

In 1 Timothy, the author says in Paul's voice, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (1 Tim 2:12). A similar instruction is visible in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. While scholars almost all agree that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, many believe these two verses to have been added to the letter long after Paul wrote it, probably in order to make 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy match.

Note also that in Greek, "woman" and "wife" are the same word, as are "man" and "husband." This verse could therefore read: I permit no *wife* to teach or to have authority over a *husband*. The new verse is no less distressing, but it does have a different meaning that may be worth exploring.

Thus, it seems that women's leadership was assumed in the earliest days of the Christian church: Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles refer casually to women in small but significant roles. As the tradition developed and codified, women were increasingly pushed out of leadership positions altogether.