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PAUL PRAISES A WOMAN APOSTLE

By Rena Pederson

Like many women, I was surprised when I first heard Junia's story. I was speaking to a book club about women in the Bible when an audience member raised her hand and suggested that "Junia" was a little-known apostle who ought to be included.

Junia? I had never heard of her before. But the woman in the audience insisted that Paul praised Junia in the book of Romans and that years later translators changed it to a man's name because they didn't believe a woman could be an apostle.

I was stunned. I had spent a lifetime of Sundays in church, paying attention most of the time, yet I had never heard a word about someone named Junia

As a newspaper reporter and a Christian, I was intrigued—and that was the beginning of my "missing person's search" for Junia. It took me through dozens of Bible translations, to theology schools across the country, and around the world to the catacombs in Rome.

The minute I got home, I rushed to my bookshelves and looked up Junia's name in the Bibles I had on hand. There it was, in Romans 16:7—"Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives, who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles and they were in Christ before I was."

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But about half the Bibles had what looked like a man's name – Junias – instead of the female name. Commentaries were equally split, but the newer commentaries acknowledged that Junia was probably the wife of Andronicus, both of whom were prominent among the apostles. Eerdman's *Dictionary of the Bible* went on to say that Junia is the "only woman called 'apostle' in the New Testament; she may have had a charge of some sort and may have been among the restricted leadership of the church." That is, she was not an Apostle with a capital "A," like the twelve disciples, but she was a leading messenger, an apostle with a little "a."

Some commentaries even acknowledged that Junia's name had been changed later by church leaders who were uncomfortable with the idea of a woman being an apostle.



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So the woman in the audience had been right. That surprise led me to seek out top New Testament scholars around the world—and the vast majority agreed that Junia was indeed a historical figure who played a valuable role in the early church. This affirmation led me to write my book, *The Lost Apostle: Searching for the Truth about Junia*.

The Invisible Woman

Since its publication last year, Junia's story has given me a deeper appreciation of the difficulties women face gaining recognition in the world of religion. The problem of "the invisible woman" in American culture had been on my mind for some time. It seemed as if every time I gave a book talk, a woman from the audience would come up afterward and shyly say, by way of introduction, "You don't know me. I'm nobody."

The truth is that, despite having more freedom in today's liberated world, many women still feel like nobodies, insignificant in our culture, unworthy of regard. The way women are treated by the church has repercussions on how women are treated by society and how women perceive themselves. They need reassurance that the stories of women count.

After *The Lost Apostle* was published, women ministers often came in twos and threes to my book signings and said encouragingly, "I'm so glad you wrote this." One of these ministers, Rev. Nancy Kellond, told me that when she first felt a calling to the ministry two decades ago, she had a hard time picturing herself as a female church leader because she had never seen one in the pulpit. In her first three postings, she broke ground as the first woman minister. She is now the first female pastor in a Methodist Church that is 168 years old, baptizing the babies, comforting the sick, and sharing communion and God's word with dignity and sensibility and grace.

Other women are still facing rejection by church leaders. About the same time my book was published, seminary professor Sheri Klouda and Sunday School teacher Mary Lambert made headlines when they were dismissed by church leaders in different parts of the country. Their only mistake was that they were women.

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Dr. Klouda was banned in January 2007 from teaching her seminary class at a Texas seminary simply because of her gender. Although she had been teaching there for two years with very good reviews, the administration decided to discontinue her teaching before she could finish her tenure track, basing their decision on their interpretation of the controversial passage attributed to Paul in the first epistle to Timothy: "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent."

After considerable soul-searching, Dr. Klouda filed a federal lawsuit against the school, saying that she lost her tenure-track position because of her sex. The incident was especially ironic because Dr. Klouda was booted from her teaching position the same semester that Dr. Drew Gilpin Faust was named the first woman president of Harvard University. It was a reminder that women can teach and lead today in some of the finest universities in America, while some theological schools continue to reject women's gift of leadership.

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Mary Lambert was abruptly dismissed as a Sunday School teacher in Watertown, N.Y., even though she had been teaching church classes there for 54 years. Her minister, like the head of Professor Klouda's seminary, interpreted the same verse from Paul as a universal description of what women supposedly can and cannot do.

But the Watertown minister ignored the fact that Mrs. Lambert, a member of the church board, chaired the same pulpit committee that had chosen him as the new minister! She had, in effect, exercised authority that granted him a position. In another ironic twist, the Watertown congregation is affiliated with the American Baptist Churches (ABC), which supports the ordination of women, but the ABC also supports the autonomy of individual churches, which allowed this decision to be made. In another example that was almost laughable, two Catholic women in Southern California were forbidden to serve in any ministry until they repented of wearing buttons that read "Equal Rites – Ordain Women," which they wore while serving the Eucharist.

On What Basis?

The banning of women preachers and teachers, and the relegation of women to secondary roles as ministers are reminders of why we need to shine a brighter spotlight on stories of early church women like Junia. There needs to be an honest debate about the role of women in the denominations that continue to discriminate against women despite biblical moorings such as Junia's testimony in Romans 16:7. (The Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination at 16 million, does not approve of the ordination of women, along with the Church of Christ, the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and the conservative branch of the Presbyterian Church.) Even women in Protestant denominations that do ordain women encounter a stained glass ceiling. More than half the graduates from their seminaries are women, but only 3 percent of those women are assigned to churches larger than 350 members. Most are assigned to assistant pastor positions and few become leaders of large congregations.

One of the great ironies is that women are being fired or held back based on words believed to be addressed by Paul to Timothy—and yet Timothy himself was instructed by women! Paul's other references to women include praise for Lois and Eunice, Timothy's mother and grandmother, for shaping Timothy's strong faith through their teaching and example. As Christians for Biblical Equality often reminds us, there were many other early Christian women besides Lois and Eunice who spread the gospel—women like Priscilla and Phoebe. And Junia.

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Yet misguided notions that women should not be church leaders still prevail. A girl can grow up to be almost anything today—the commander of a NASA space station like Eileen Collins, or Secretary of State like Condoleezza Rice, or a Fortune 500 CEO like Anne Mulcahy of Xerox—but not a minister or even a teacher in some of the larger Christian denominations.

The unhappy result is that women view themselves as being less worthy. The power of suggestion is remarkable. A recent study by researchers at British Columbia University showed that when women are told that females are bad at math, they perform worse on math tests than women who are told that this is a false stereotype they can overcome. Even a neutral reminder of their gender was enough to cause the women to score worse on the tests. When I read about the study, I wondered how much more corrosive

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to women's self-confidence is the continued misconception that women can serve God only in supportive, secondary roles?

Junia's story is more proof that women in the early church did teach and lead—and were praised by Paul for doing so. Her story is not some kind of “magic bullet” to resolve all differences about women's roles in the church, but it is certainly one more good reason to challenge the status quo.



Rena Pederson is director of communications for the National Math and Science Initiative and the author of three books about women and faith. Most recently a speech writer in Washington, D.C., she also served as an editor of the *Dallas Morning News* for 16 years. She was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize in editorial writing and served on the Pulitzer Prize board for 9 years. Rena has two sons, Greg and Grant. Her book *The Lost Apostle: Searching for the Truth about Junia* is being reissued in paperback in April by Jossey-Bass.

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