As illustrated by Lydia and the other women at Philippi, many ancient women became devout believers in the new Way (Acts 16:13–15, 17:12; Luke 23:27). God gave these women different spiritual gifts in order to equip them for leadership in the church as ministers of the word and ministers of service.

Women served as “ministers of the word” using words to preach, prophesy, evangelize, pastor, and teach others in obedience to Christ (1 Pet. 4:10–11, Acts 6:2–4, Eph. 4:11–13). Included in this category are the apostle Junia (Rom. 16:7), the prophet(ess) Anna (Luke 2:36), and teacher Priscilla (Acts 18:26). Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and Salome the mother of James and John were the first witnesses of the resurrection commissioned to tell the good news. Philip’s four daughters were active prophets whom Polycrates, the bishop of Ephesus, called “great luminaries” in the ancient church. Many women at Corinth were prophesying and praying (1 Cor. 11:5). Women elders at Crete were teaching younger women (Titus 2:3–4). Within the lifetime of the Apostle John, Governor Pliny tortured two women ministers as the leaders of a congregation in Bithynia-Pontus in Asia Minor, during the reign of Roman Emperor Trajan (A.D. 98–117).³

Women were also functioning as church overseers, the equivalents of today’s “head” pastors. The Apostle John addresses his second letter to a woman overseer and the members of her house church. Phoebe, a minister at Cenchreae, was commended by the Apostle Paul to the church at Rome, as “a woman set over others,” a “leader” over many and even over Paul (Rom. 16:1–2).² The church at Philippi was subject to Paul’s colleagues (“coworkers”) Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2–3) and to Stephana’s household (1 Cor. 16:15–18),³ and house churches at Rome and Ephesus were subject to the team ministers Prisca and Aquila who “risked their lives” for Paul (Rom. 16:3–5, 1 Cor. 16:19).

Women also served as “ministers of service,” by their actions meeting the physical and emotional needs of others in obedience to Christ (1 Pet. 4:11, Rom. 12:7–8). The “disciple” Tabitha or Dorcas was such an effective minister of service that the church at Joppa would not allow her to die (Acts 9:36–41). Martha many times oversaw the use of her house as an inn for the stay of Jesus and disciples (for example, John 12:2, Luke 10:38–40). The order of widows was an order of prayer which had as one of its prerequisites a ministry of service (1 Tim. 5:5–10). Lydia, a successful career woman (a seller of the royal purple dye), took a leadership role in the new church at Philippi while offering hospitality to Paul, Luke, Silas, and Timothy (Acts 16:14–15, 40). Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many other women disciples provided for the economic needs of Jesus (Luke 8:2–3, Matt. 27:55, Mark 15:41). They denied themselves by giving generously to Jesus’ mission.

Early church writers such as Irenaeus regularly contrasted Eve, the woman who sinned by trying to steal wisdom, with Mary, the woman who pleased God by yielding to God’s wisdom by believing that “no promise is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37–38). For instance, Irenaeus writes, “For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith.”² The Bible writers certainly record women (as well as men) who did not trust God, but they also testified to a host of women, such as thoughtful Mary, the mother of Jesus; righteous Elizabeth; unwavering Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha; and many women ministers who were exemplary models of the Christian life and of leadership in the church. These New Testament and early church women followed Jesus with a devotion so steadfast and effective that the Holy Spirit employed it to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ across continents and down the ages to you and to me.⁷

Notes

2. Acts 21:8–9; Eusebius, Church History 3.31, 37, 39.
6. Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3.22.