



Seeing Women, Finding Equality

Sometime around 112 AD, Pliny, the governor of Bithynia (in present-day Turkey, a little east of Istanbul) wrote a letter to the Roman emperor, Trajan, asking for advice. His concern? What do with Christians. In his words, “I have never before participated in trials of Christians, so I do not know what offenses are to be punished or investigated, or to what extent.”

Pliny’s letter reveals how Rome viewed Christians, but it also tells us a lot about the early church. When I was assigned this short letter as a reading in college, one comment caught my attention. After learning that Christians took part in mostly innocent behavior, Pliny wanted to investigate further: “I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.”

What? Two female slaves who were called deaconesses?

At the time, my interest in biblical gender equality was in its infancy, but I was pretty sure women’s leadership in the church was a modern innovation. But there they were, two deaconesses, in literally the earliest Roman document we have referencing Christianity!

Why did no one ever talk about this? Why was it not one of the first things I saw in my reading on the subject? Did people not know, or did they not care? This was my first exposure to what I would later learn was a pattern of Christian blindness to the women early church. Sometimes the blindness is simple ignorance, other times it is willful.

Consider the wild ride Junia (Rom. 16:7) has been on over the centuries. The church father Chrysostom marveled at her devotion to God, but within a few centuries, scholars had decided that she was a he. How? In Greek, a name’s ending changes based on its role in a sentence, so the form of Junia in the Greek manuscripts is *Iounian* (Junian). This is the form we’d expect for the extremely common female name, Junia. But it would also be the correct form of the otherwise-unknown male name, Junias. Since this person was called an apostle, some reasoned it must have been a man, Junias. Today, most scholars agree that Junia was a woman. However, now that she’s finally Junia again, some have decided that she must not have been “outstanding among the apostles” as we always thought, but only admired by the apostles. One has to wonder, is there anything we won’t do to erase women leaders from the Bible?

Where they aren’t erased, biblical women are often misrepresented. The Samaritan woman is remembered as a serial adulteress, when it’s just as likely her five marriages

were the result of things beyond her control, like infertility or the death of husbands. We remember that Mary chose Jesus over chores, but we fail to teach that by taking the position of a rabbi’s student, she challenged gender norms, and Jesus affirmed her.

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The list of New Testament women who are ignored, minimized, demonized, or erased doesn’t end there. There’s Phoebe, Priscilla, Lydia, Euodia and Syntyche, “the chosen lady” of 2 John, the women who financed Jesus’ ministry, and many more. One way or another, the existence and importance of the Bible’s women are erased from the evangelical consciousness.

Our failure to recognize these women is tragic in its own rite. But our blindness to the Bible’s women also means we see only a partial picture of the Bible and church history. This in turn distorts our view of God, ourselves, and our community. It allows us to swallow the lie that God and church tradition prefer men to women.

Though volumes have been written on New Testament women, there is always more to discover. If you’re new to the subject or even if you wrote some of those volumes, I hope this issue of *Mutuality* will let you see the New Testament’s women (and our God) in a new way.

(Speaking of seeing New Testament women, I’d like to call your attention to the beautiful painting of Junia that graces the cover of this issue, courtesy of artist Sarah Beth Baca. Check out more of her work, including her series of women in the Bible, entitled “Full Image,” at facebook.com/SarahBethArt or at society6.com/sarahbethbacaart.)

In Christ,
Tim Krueger