

# WHO'S WHO

## NEW TESTAMENT FEMALE MINISTRY ROLE MODELS

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Jesus and the New Testament authors everywhere assume that women are made in the divine image. By affirming the inherent worth of women, Jesus and the early church departed from the cultural norms of their day. This attitude engendered a sense of confidence and freedom in women that encouraged them to participate fully in Christian worship and ministry. Just as earlier God called Eve to inhabit and rule the Garden with Adam, now, through Christ, God gives women and men an opportunity to respond to the two highest callings imaginable as co-heirs of salvation (1 Pet 3:7) and co-laborers with Christ. Who are some of the women in the New Testament on whom the Lord particularly confers this honor?

### 1. WOMEN PROPHETS AT JESUS' BIRTH (Luke 1-2)

Overwhelmed with joy (Lk 1:39-56), Mary offered up her tribute to the Lord. In the Magnificat, she praised the Lord for the great honor of being chosen to bear the Son of God (Lk 1:38-39). Similarly, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit prophesied that Mary would be most blessed among women (Lk 1:42). As soon as the prophetess Anna saw the baby Jesus, she "gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (Lk 2:38). In the opening chapters of Luke, God has already mentioned three women by name who fulfill a prophetic role in announcing the Messiah's birth.

Thus at the very beginning of Jesus' life, we already have signs of the way God is restoring the fallen world, by employing women to proclaim the truth. How appropriate for women to herald Jesus' birth, for the long-awaited prophecy of Genesis 3:15 was to find fulfillment through "the seed of a woman." God's promise would take on the form of /be born as a human infant, grow up and "strike the head of the serpent" (Gn 3:15). So intent was God at making the point that before God women and men are equal, that God reversed the created order both in every act of reproduction and in the story of redemption. Whereas the first woman Eve came from Adam, every subsequent man comes through woman (1 Cor 11:12), and the Savior comes through Mary. But ultimately it is their interdepend-

ence on each other in the Lord (1 Cor 11:11) and their mutual dependence on God (1 Cor 11:12) that Paul is trying to underscore.

By reaching out to women and men in his earthly ministry, Jesus was reversing the effects of the curse, which separated the sexes and appointed both for God's wrath. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus purchased our salvation and offered redemption to *all* people.

### 2. PETER'S MOTHER-IN-LAW (Matthew 8:14-15, Mark 1:30-31, Luke 4:38-39)

The gospels depict Peter's mother-in-law waiting on Jesus only moments after he has touched and healed her. Perhaps, her response seems insignificant, but apparently God thought highly of her. All the synoptics record this healing and her subsequent attendance on Jesus (Mt 8:14-15, Mk 1:30-31, Lk 4:38-39). She exemplifies what it means to be a servant. She gets up "at once" (Lk 4:38-39), a word that in other places portrays the alacrity with which Jesus responded to human needs (Lk 1:64; 4:39; 5:25; 8:44, 47, 55; 13:13; 18:43; 22:60; Acts 3:7; 5:10), and she "ministers" (*diakoneo*) to Jesus. This Greek word elsewhere in the New Testament describes acts of apostolic ministry (e.g. 1 Tim 3:13, Acts 1:17, 1 Tim 1:12). What could she possibly be doing? Perhaps no more than waiting on Jesus and his disciples, serving them food and drink, and making them feel at home. Yet her hospitality and gracious service do not go unnoticed.

The gift of hospitality is so important that Paul includes it in his list of qualifications for the office of a bishop (1 Tim 3:2). Likewise, it is the small deeds of kindness, the quiet ways that we show we care, and the ability to make someone feel at ease that deserve more attention in our hectic, performance-oriented society. These acts of service reflect a disposition that is becoming to the servant of God. Peter's mother-in-law is overwhelmed with gratitude. Like the thankful leper, she takes the first opportunity she has to express her appreciation to Jesus. Isn't that what Christian service is all about? It is the voluntary offering of ourselves in grateful response to Christ's work in our lives.

### 3. THE WOMAN AT THE WELL (John 4:1-42)

Jesus' longest recorded discourse with an individual takes place with a woman. The dialogue between Jesus

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and the unnamed woman from Samaria is often preached at evangelistic meetings. The Samaritan woman is also among Christ's first evangelists. Because of her testimony, "many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him" (John 4:39). Far from objecting to this publicity, Jesus builds on the work that the Father has established through her and draws these converts into a deeper relationship with him (John 4:41). The townspeople's own words attest to the effectiveness of her witness: "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world" (John 5:42). Unlike most methods of evangelism, her approach leaves plenty of room for personal inquiry and individual discovery of Jesus. In choosing a woman, who is both a Samaritan and an adulteress, as his first evangelist, Jesus makes the point that the world's notions of acceptability are *not* determining factors for Christian ministry.

#### 4. JESUS' DISCIPLES (Matthew 27:55-56, 27:61, 28:1-11, Mark 15:40-41, 16:1-11, Luke 8:1-3, 24:1-11, John 20:1-2, 10-18)

In a male-dominated society where women's names are often left unrecorded, the historian Luke (8:3) is careful not to overlook Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Susanna and many others<sup>1</sup> who, next to the Twelve, comprise Jesus' inner core of disciples. Mary's deliverance from seven demons made her one of Jesus' most loyal followers. In the company of other women, she watched Jesus in his final hours on the Cross (Mt 27:55) and arrived first at the tomb on the morning of the resurrection (Mt 28:1ff, Mk 16:1ff, Lk 24:1ff, John 20:1ff). God, in turn, rewards her with the honor of being the first to see the risen Savior (Mk 16:9, John 20:11-18). As in the case of Peter's mother-in-law, the members of this inner circle serve Jesus with thanksgiving for his healing in their lives. Like the Shunammite woman who provided the prophet Elisha with room and board (2 Kgs 4:8), these women minister to Jesus by providing for him "out of their own means" (Lk 8:2-3).

Who would have imagined that in addition to bringing back their unused spices, these women would be the first bearers of the Good News? Yet every gospel account shows Jesus sending the women as emissaries to the disciples. In appointing women to proclaim the resurrection, God was setting a new precedent. In ancient Judaism, only the witness of two or more men was considered admissible evidence in court. By announcing the resurrection through the testimonies of women, God was affirming the role that women need to play in sharing the Good News. The Great Commis-

sion will only be fulfilled as both women and men take part in evangelizing and discipling the world.

#### 5. MARTHA AND MARY (Luke 10:38-42, John 11:1ff, 12:1-2)

Mary is remembered as the woman who "sat at Jesus' feet," drinking in the words of her Master. We admire her humble position, but do we fully appreciate the significance of her posture? In *Beyond the Curse*, Aida B. Spencer, a professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, provides this insight, "To sit at someone's feet for a first-century Jew ... would be an act to symbolize higher level formal education ... and a position typical of rabbinic students expressing respect to their rabbis."<sup>2</sup> Supporting this theory, Dr. Spencer quotes Jose ben Joezer of Zeredah (c. 160 B.C.), who says, "Let thy house be a meeting-house for the Sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst" (*M'Abot* 1:4). Thus, by sitting at Jesus' feet, Mary is adopting the position of a student (literally, "disciple") before her rabbi. How does the Master receive Mary? Jesus fully affirms her desire to learn and study under him.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus pays a visit to Bethany, where we again find Mary at Jesus' feet, this time anointing them with perfume and wiping them with her own hair. Mary is one of the few disciples who has listened carefully enough to Jesus to discern that his time on earth is rapidly coming to a close. The Holy Spirit has opened her ears to hear the truth of this hard teaching. The expensive perfume that she lavishly pours on Jesus is her way of preparing Jesus for his burial. Dulled by his own greed and evil intent, Judas cannot understand Mary's extraordinary display of devotion. A thief at heart, Judas sees only the loss of money he could have pocketed if the money for the perfume had been put into the common purse (John 12:6). Once again, though, Mary has chosen the better part.

Martha, on the other hand, has often been disparaged as the workaholic. But is that really fair? Apparently, she has the gift of helps, which Jesus gladly accepts at dinner before his entry into Jerusalem (John 12:1-2). It was just that on one particular day she had become so caught up in her housework that she did not leave much room to receive her guest of honor.

A real sign of her growth occurs after Lazarus' death. When Jesus finally enters their hometown, Martha goes out to greet Jesus and says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). What may sound like a complaint is actually an incredible declaration of faith. She believes that Jesus has the power to heal. What's more, by the end of her conversation with Jesus, she makes this remarkable confes-

sion: "Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God." (John 11:27).<sup>3</sup> Martha has grown profoundly in her understanding of Jesus and his ministry. It was this recognition of who Jesus is that allows her to offer up good works that are pleasing to God.

#### 6. WOMEN PROPHETS AND EVANGELISTS IN ACTS (Acts 2:17-18, 21:9)

A startling sermon ushers in the New Testament church. Addressing a crowd of over 3,000, Peter declares that the words of the prophet Joel are being fulfilled in their presence. Acts 2:17-18 reads:

In the last days, God says,  
I will pour out my spirit on all people,  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy, *[italics mine]*  
Your young men will see visions,  
Your old men will dream dreams.  
Even on my servants, both men and women,  
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

Philip's four daughters served as prophets (Acts 21:9). Perhaps they even formed a team. Such a joint effort would have allowed them to capitalize on their relationships and benefit from one another's support in prayers and encouragement. They would have also been able to provide feedback and accountability. The Book of Acts makes it clear that the Lord has given prophetic gifts to both men and women.

#### 7. PRISCILLA AND ACQUILA (Acts 18:18-19, 24-26, Romans 16:3-5)

When an enemy of the Cross, Paul saw no difference between women or men who followed the Way. He indiscriminately persecuted all Christians (Acts 8:3, 9:2). Similarly, after his conversion, Paul sees no need to differentiate between co-workers by gender. While he lived with certain cultural constraints, he again and again recognizes and commends the labor and sacrifice of his partners in the gospel, both male and female.

Priscilla and Aquila traveled and worked with Paul and taught the eloquent preacher, Apollos (Acts 18:18-19, 26). Priscilla's name in most instances precedes her husband's, suggesting that she assumed a more prominent role in their teaching ministry. In Paul's greetings at the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul calls Priscilla and Aquila his "fellow workers in Christ Jesus ... who risked their lives for [him]" (Rom 16:3-4). Furthermore, the apostle remarks, "Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them," so far-reaching was the impact of their ministry (Rom 16:3-5). They were also leaders of the church that met in their home (Rom 16:5). Together Priscilla and Aquila model for us suc-

cessful husband and wife team ministry, and as a team they witness to God's continuing efforts to rebuild the oneness that was lost at the Fall.

#### 8. PHOEBE (Romans 16:1-2)

The name that appears first in the list of Paul's co-workers in Romans 16 is Phoebe, whom Paul addresses as a *diakonos* of the church. Although this same word is translated as "minister" when referring to men (see Eph 3:7, 6:21; Col 1:7, 23, 25; 1 Tim 4:6), biblical scholars have consistently translated it as "servant" (NIV, NAS and KJV) when referring to Phoebe.<sup>4</sup> Yet by calling Phoebe a "*diakonos* of Cenchreae," Paul seems to be underscoring her role as a recognized minister of the church in this area. Furthermore in verse 2, Paul goes on to call her a *prostatis* "over many and even of myself." The verb form of this word means "to place before or over" (cf. 1 Thes 5:12-13), thus implying that Phoebe is "a woman set over others." Liddell and Scott's *Greek English Lexicon* define the noun form of this word as "a leader or chief, ruler, president, guardian." Clearly this word connotes leadership.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, she was a "benefactor" (NRSV) of the apostle, supporting him financially and spiritually. In return, Paul asks the church at Rome to provide for her in any way that she may require of them (Rom 16:2). Given her prominent position in this list of names, her two titles, and the degree of respect Paul shows her, can there be any doubt that Paul respects her authority in the church?

#### 9. THE APOSTLE JUNIA AND OTHER CO-WORKERS OF PAUL

In the middle of Paul's list of co-workers in Romans, we find Junia, whom he calls "outstanding among the apostles" and "in Christ before me" (Rom 16:7).<sup>6</sup> As early as the second century, in his commentary on the Romans, Origen refers to Junia as a woman. In the fourth century, Chrysostom writes, "Oh! How great is the devotion of this woman, that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle!"<sup>7</sup> If scholars centuries closer to Junia assume that she is a woman, why do modern commentators have such difficulty accepting this fact? Could it be that we prefer to suppress the truth than to change our cherished theological predispositions?

In Romans 16, Paul also sends greetings to Mary (v.6), Tryphena and Tryphosa (v.12) and Persis (v.12), Julia and Nereus' sister (v.15), who have all labored intensely for the gospel's sake. The reference to "[Rufus'] mother and mine" (v.13) suggests an intimate relationship between Paul and Rufus' mother, who may have served as a spiritual mentor and nurturer. There is certainly no dispute that many of Paul's closest

associates and most distinguished colleagues were women. The apostle actively pursued the advancement of God's reign with the help of women ministers.

#### 10. MINISTERING MOTHERS (*Acts 12:12, 2 Timothy 1:5*)

As a leader of a house church (*Acts 12:12-17*), Mark's mother must have had a profound influence on her son, who would later become one of Paul's co-workers and Peter's spiritual son. We can also see from Paul's letters that Lois and Eunice, Timothy's grandmother and mother respectively, greatly influenced the development of this young pastor's life (*2 Tim 1:5*). These New Testament examples are in keeping with the Old Testament teaching of the need for parents to take the lead in raising godly children.

#### 11. THE ELECT LADY (*2 John*)

The apostle John writes his second epistle to "the elect lady" (v.1).<sup>8</sup> Some interpreters have understood this appellation strictly as an allegorical allusion to the church, but then who are "the children" to whom John also refers? Others perceive this letter as personal correspondence to a particular mother and her children. It is possible that both lines of thought are correct. John may well have been addressing a woman elder, with children of her own (cf. v. 1, 2) and the church in her home (*2 John 10*).<sup>9</sup> If Lydia, a successful businesswoman, is attributed with founding and leading the first church in Philippi (*Acts 16:13-15*), why could this elect lady not preside over a church in her home while at the same time have children of her own?

#### 12. TABITHA (*Acts 9:36-43*)

We discover in Acts the story of Tabitha, a minister of good works (*Acts 9:36-43*). Others must have considered her ministry of helps and poverty relief indispensable, because upon her death Peter was asked to revive her. The precursor of modern heroines such as Florence Nightingale, Amy Carmichael and Catherine Booth, she understood that Jesus' ministry is to the whole person and that God is intimately concerned with people's physical needs. Today there is no end of opportunities to serve in our communities. While men and women are both called to this task, it would be a tremendous advantage to have more women serving in churches, in outreach to Muslim women, in crisis counseling centers and in battered women's shelters.

#### CONCLUSION

Throughout the pages of the New Testament, from Peter's mother-in-law to Tabitha, we find women who

faithfully serve Jesus and the church. Sometimes only a few lines are devoted to them. Other times the same individual or group of women are repeatedly alluded to. Often they are engrossed in deep theological dialogue. They are the source of enormous support in the faith community. In all of these instances, God underscores the integral part women play in establishing God's rule.

Until Christ's return, the needs of the world are only increasing. Some persons may continue to vacillate on the proper "role" of women in ministry, but Scripture is quite adamant about equipping *all* the saints for service, without regard to gender (*Eph 4:11-13*).<sup>10</sup> By not describing the full array of gifts or specifying all the duties of a particular church office, the Bible leaves considerable freedom to determine how each individual will contribute to the growth of God's kingdom. By God's grace, contemporary women and men are taking up the challenge to serve God to the best of their abilities and are discovering new and innovative ways to fulfill their responsibilities and calling within the Body of Christ.

What are *you* doing in response to God's call?

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<sup>1</sup>The feminine case in the Greek indicates that the "others" specifically refer to women.

<sup>2</sup>Aida B. Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 58.

<sup>3</sup>Peter is the only other disciple to make this profound confession (*Mt 16:13-19*).

<sup>4</sup>Helen Barrett Montgomery (1924) offers this translation of *Rom 16:1-2*: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a minister of the church at Cenchreae ... assist her ... for she herself has been made an overseer to many people, including myself." Apart from Montgomery's translation and the NRSV, which refers to Phoebe in a footnote as a "minister," no other Christian version calls Phoebe a "minister" or an "overseer." KJV, NAS and NIV have "servant," NKJV "succorer," RSV and JB "deaconess," Phillips "helper," NEB "holds office in the congregation," TEV "good friend," and Living Bible "a dear Christian woman ... who has helped many in their needs." How long will translators resist the best and simplest translation?

<sup>5</sup>These insights are based on the Spencers' study on Phoebe as prepared for a Brethren in Christ conference. William D. Spencer and Aida B. Spencer, "God's Order Is Familial," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 13 (April 1990): 35-36.

<sup>6</sup>Dr. Aida B. Spencer elaborates on the significance of this verse: "Junia is a common Latin woman's name. Junius is the male counterpart.... If a scholar were to posit or to assume that women cannot have authority, what could he do with Junia? What some scholars have done is to posit that Junias ('Junian' [the accusative form of Junia] is in the text) was a shortened form of Junianus. However, Latin diminutives were formed by lengthening, not shortening a name, as, for example, Priscilla, which is the diminutive of Prisca. Understandably then,

the form 'Junias' has yet to be found in extrabiblical sources." *Beyond the Curse*, 101.

Dr. Spencer further cites James Hope Moulton and George Milligan's standard Greek lexicon, which describes "Junia" in one instance as a "daughter" and in another as a "mother" in *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum* (I.448; III.3927). The *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 306, quoted in Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 101.

<sup>7</sup>As cited in Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 101.

<sup>8</sup>John's second epistle is followed by his third epistle, which is addressed to the individual Gaius (3 John 1).

<sup>9</sup>Plummer, Morris and Palmer concur with this interpretation in their commentaries. See *1,2,3 John, Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. Stephen W. Smalley (Waco, Texas: Word books, Publisher, 1984), 318 and Earl F. Palmer, *1,2,3 John, Revelation, The Communicator's Commentary*, (Waco, Texas: Word books, Publisher, 1982), 82.

<sup>10</sup>In fact, a discussion of roles divided along gender lines in the three key NT passages on gifts (Rom 12, 1 Cor 12 and Eph 4) is notably absent.

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## SERVANT LEADERSHIP

*The following transcription is presented as both a definition and an illustration of the New Testament concept of leadership. This exchange took place during the question and answer period of a women's meeting at Willow Creek Community Church. Church elder Laurie Pederson's answer was given extemporaneously.*

### *The Question:*

As an elder in the church, how do you handle being in authority over others in the church, but being in submission to your husband at home? Doesn't this create an enormous conflict?

### *Laurie's Response:*

The question suggests that I wear two very distinct and actually incompatible "hats." It is presumed that I put on the hat of authority and exercise power over people within the church. Then, when I walk through the door of my home, I take off the hat of authority and put on the hat of submission, with my husband exercising power over me.

As I understand New Testament teaching on authority and submission, I don't see such a picture of two separate hats. The kind of authority and leadership that Christ modeled and taught always found expression in servanthood — considering the welfare and well-being of others: lifting, not lording over (Matthew 20:25-28).

Within the local church, ultimate oversight is vested in the elders collectively as representatives of the congregation. I don't view myself as having any personal authority as an individual elder. When the elders as a leadership team consider issues and arrive at decisions — based on biblical principles and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, their ultimate sources of authority — those decisions then hold authority for that particular local body. Again, that leadership is carried out with a shepherding, serving spirit, considering the welfare of the body. The "hat" the elders are called to wear is that of a servant-leader.

Similarly, our marriage is based on the principle of mutual submission that Paul articulates in Ephesians 5:21-30. In that context, Scott does not view his role as wielding authority over me, "calling the shots," holding the power or making the final decisions in every area. In fact, we both feel responsible to bring strength, nurturing, spiritual vitality, and our unique competencies and gifting to the relationship. We're both called to consider the well-being of the other in any decision-making process and to exercise leadership according to our spiritual gifts.

In our culture, the term "servant-leader" seems like an oxymoron. By Webster's definition, leadership and submission are antithetical concepts. But not so by Christ's definition. He exemplified both authority and submission. He modeled servant-leadership for all of us in our own areas of competency. To Him, there was only one "hat." Whether at home or in the church, we are challenged to follow His example.