

# FROM A PASTOR'S NOTEBOOK

## REGARDING THE CONCEPT OF THE "FELLOW WORKER/FELLOW LABORER" AS IT INFORMS WOMEN IN MINISTRY ROLES

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How should women be involved in Kingdom ministries? Which specific ministries are to be opened to them? Should any remain closed? How shall we decide?

In studying this issue in the New Testament, I contend that Paul's use of such terms as

*fellow helper*  
*fellow worker*  
*fellow laborer*  
*fellow soldier*

offer clarification for the matter of women in ministry. I contend that if studied carefully, we will see such terms were applied *fairly and without qualification* across the board, whether it be to angels, males or females, thus inviting great implications regarding the specific issue as to whether or not women are allowed "in on" specific ministries in the church. Note the use of such terms, and then the conclusions they yield:

1. "*Fellow Heir*" (*sugklerinoma*, sugklhronomov) occurs in Ephesians 3:6 and equates the Gentiles with the Jews in inheritance of the Kingdom. This notion demands a full equality between the two, a concept which will inform how the "fellow-" notion applies to men and women in ministry.
2. "*Fellow Helper*" (*sunergos*, sunergov) occurs in
  - A. 2 Corinthians 8:23 of Titus, who is also called "my partner" (*koinonos*) and "fellow helper."
  - B. 3 John 8, referring to Christian workers in general. This term calls for the church to support them (it can be assumed that women are part of this group).
  - C. 1 Thessalonians 3:2 of Timothy.
  - D. Colossians 4:11, of Jesus who is Justus.
  - E. Philippians 1:3 of the *women* Euodia and Syntyche, who are classified *on par with* the man Clement, all being referred to indiscriminately as "fellow laborers."
3. "*Fellow Servants*" (*sundoulos*, sundoulou) occurs in
  - A. Revelation 19:10 of an angel in referring to himself as John's equal and not his superior.
  - B. Revelation 22:9, as above.
  - C. Colossians 1:17, of Epaphras.
4. "*Fellow Soldier*" (*sustratiotes*, sustratiwthv) is used of
  - A. Philemon in Philippians 2.
  - B. Archipus in Philippians 2.

### APPLICATIONS AND INFERENCES

I contend, based on the use of the titles "fellow laborers, etc." that *if* these titles are employed in reference to the office and duties of a *male* doing ministry, and *then* those same titles are also applied by the same author to a *female* doing ministry, it logically follows that the female and the male must be doing similar ministries for God, equal in service and status. I suggest, therefore, that this is exactly what we see here in the New Testament!

That is to say, if studied carefully we see that *both* Clement (a male) *as well as* Euodia and Syntyche (females) are referred to by the *same* title ("fellow workers"), thus demanding that we place them in the same category. The implications here are tremendous. *Both* carried the same title and role and hence, there is no sense of *discrimination or separation* between the two classes of ministers!

If we put it in today's terms, it's as if Paul is calling Clement "minister" and using that same title to refer to Euodia and Syntyche ("ministers"). If this is so, then in Paul's eyes (and the Holy Spirit who inspired Paul to use this title in such an inclusive manner) both Clement as well as Euodia and Syntyche are equal in role and function. For me, this conclusion is forceful, logical and inescapable, being the most simple (remember "Occam's Razor!") and obvious to the reader. This conclusion is also profound in its implications for present-day ministry roles.

I reinforce these notions on the basis that if these same root terms (the "fellow-" or *sun-* prefix in Greek) connote full equality when associating Gentiles and Jews in regards to the kingdom, (and this is indeed a given which no one dare dispute, asserted in Eph 3:6) then they must also connote equality when associating males and females in Kingdom ministry. Furthermore, let it be understood that the angel of Revelation denotes his equality as a servant alongside of John's

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servanthood by using the *sun-* Greek term. Paul therefore, in applying the term *Sunergos* (“fellow laborers”) to both men and women, denotes an equality in the ministries they are doing, and an equality in their particular status. For me, the logic here is watertight and indisputable:

If Clement, a man = *sunergos*

And if Euodia, a woman = *sunergos*

Then men and women both can be a *sunergos* in the Kingdom of God.

And if *sunergos* means fellow laborer (as it does) then there is no in-equality between the nature of the ministry of the man and the nature of the ministry of the woman. How can it be concluded otherwise?

This all goes to say that Paul, in referring to the ministries of the men and women in his circle, never once refers to the ministry of men in a different manner (or with a different title) than the ministry of women. He does *not* use two different terms, which *would* connote a different nature of ministry of the two individuals. Quite the contrary, what the men do and who they are in kingdom service (and what they mean to Paul) is defined as *sunergos*, and what the woman do and who they are in kingdom service (and what they mean to Paul) is *also* defined as *sunergos*. This, then, implies that the women were ministering alongside the men *in fully equal terms, manners and ministries!* This is in keeping with Galatians 3:28 and Acts 2:17.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRESENT MINISTRY ROLES

Whatever we might conclude from this study, one thing must be clear: If Paul were in our churches today, he would not refer to the men’s work as “above” or different than the work of the women. He would see them and speak of them as equal and similar to each other, giving both the men and the women the same title: fellow workers, fellow laborers.

I suggest that if this was Paul’s position, then shouldn’t it also be ours? If Paul “did it this way,” shouldn’t we also “do it this way”? And if we fail, insisting on some position other than this, are we not failing to fulfill Paul’s command (as given under the Holy Spirit) when he said: “Follow me, as I follow Christ” (1 Cor 4:16)?

Such a manner of speaking on Paul’s part, regarding leadership roles in ministry, connotes men and women to be on equal footing with one another in serving Christ, and with one stroke banishes the notion of dominance, superiority, or higher validity in the case of the man as opposed to the case of the woman.

Such a manner of speaking is also fully in keeping with the “Jesus spirit” we see in the Gospels, which elevates those who serve to positions of honor and esteem.

I suggest, therefore, that these studies must be taken into account in informing how we see and view women both as persons and fellow ministers. I suggest that however we resolve the “women in ministry” issue, these studies will help us resolve it with grace and dignity given to women. Should we err in the position we take, we should be sure to err on the side of giving too much honor, too much grace, too much dignity, and too much esteem, as opposed to not enough! I suggest that by seeking to love more (rather than to diminish or marginalize), even if we err in that quest, we will please Jesus and bear good testimony to Jesus, as opposed to questing for any other ambition. For me, to do otherwise is to do less than Paul did, and should we choose that course, we are also doing less than Jesus himself commands. When that happens, we cease to represent Jesus and begin serving another Gospel.

Let us suppose we have two churches, church A and church B: Church A sets out to do all they can to elevate their women, to treat them as dignitaries, as worthy of high esteem, to salute their ministry gifts, to bless them, to treat them with great sensitivity and love, never belittling nor relegating them to the margin. But Church B communicates to their women the notion that men are to dominate and lead women, and that women are to be invisible, quiet, service-oriented regarding the children and the kitchen, and forbidden to offer insight or assistance in “spiritual issues.”

Now, given such a scenario, my question must be: Which church would most reflect Jesus? In which church would Jesus be most comfortable? Which church would be most attractive to the watching world? And which church would most reflect the Jesus-spirit of love and grace, dignity and excellence? Certainly, when placed in such a framework, it is not hard to conclude that we as a church (and as males in the church) must set forth to do all that is within our power to love, honor, exalt, esteem, dignify and salute anyone who is, by virtue of culture or society, in a “one down” role (such as blacks, children, the poor, the mentally retarded, etc.) for that is the Jesus-way and that is the way of love. This being the case, we must also do this with women, who are our friends, our sisters, wives, children and mothers.

I close with an invitation to be rebuked or corrected should I somehow, by these conclusions, have gone astray. I am teachable and I will bless the hand that disciplines me, if it can be shown to be based on the whole counsel of God. Until then, by virtue of Bible study and my own personal “Code of Honor,” I will stand by these conclusions.