



Clothed in Christ: Our Highest Identity

My husband and I recently joined Christians in France for a week of worship, Bible study, and small group discussion. As the week ended, our Bible study leader asked if there was a topic we should consider. Immediately, a woman shouted, “Women leaders in the church” and the room erupted in cheering. Quickly, I reached into my bag and handed out CBE bookmarks and later gave the woman a copy of CBE’s *Still Side by Side* in French. Eagerly, she read the endorsements and pointed to my name and asked, “What’s this name doing on the book?” She wondered how an Arab came to lead a Christian organization advancing women’s biblical equality. Assumptions based on ethnicity and gender can blind us to the gifts God gives people. History and Scripture provide examples of why you can never read a name or look at someone and know what they’re capable of, for God is “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,” (Eph. 3:20).

Historian Tom Holland shows how Christians upended one of the most abusive, powerful empires in history: Rome.¹ Elevating power as the highest virtue, Rome killed millions and demeaned many more as inferiors—slaves and women. The weak—those deemed useless to Rome—were tossed over city walls as defenseless prey to wild animals. Those who resisted were crucified along a thousand roads, reinforcing Rome’s dominion. Who could have imagined that a crucified Jew and his followers would triumph over Rome? Yet the Roman cross—a symbol of power over the weak—became God’s path to a new creation which Paul called “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,” (1 Cor. 1:23).

Viewing all humans as created in God’s image (Gen. 1:27), Christians like Macrina (AD 327–379) rescued infants abandoned as rubbish.² Even more, Paul’s heartbeat was Gal. 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Clothed in Christ, we have a new identity with new possibilities for our purpose and calling, one that surpasses cultural bias based on ethnicity, class, and gender. The majority of leaders Paul cites in Romans 16 were women, slaves, and non-Jews. Reframing authority in terms of belonging and kinship, Paul returned to Philemon his slave Onesimus whom Paul called his beloved son, his very heart, one useful to Paul. No longer a slave to Philemon but a dear brother (v. 10–15), Onesimus is freed and serves as Bishop of Ephesus, which soon becomes a thriving center of Christian faith.

Challenging cultural assumptions of value and purpose, Paul takes his lead from Christ who revealed his identity first to a woman outside Israel. Astonishing the disciples, the Samaritan woman becomes an evangelist

to a hated people (John 4:4–44). Jesus also welcomed the Syrophenician woman whom the disciples tried to *shoo away*—reflecting Jewish assumptions that her people were “dogs” (Matt. 15:23). Yet she showed that dogs can have greater faith than the privileged, the male disciples who represent Israel’s twelve tribes. These and other biblical accounts foreshadow the birth of the church at Pentecost as the Spirit empowered “Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome both Jews and converts to Judaism; Cretans and Arabs...” (Acts 2:9–13). A fulfillment of Joel 2:28, the Spirit equipped the church with supernatural gifts not limited by gender, race, or social class.

Women become teachers, church planters, deacons and leaders, with character qualities that reflect the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–26). The chart below shows the character qualities required in leaders that include women.

Elders/ Overseers: (1 Tim. 3:2–11)	Temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money...	Priscilla was a teacher and church planter. She functioned as a pastor. Acts 18:24–26, 1 Cor. 16:19–20, Rom. 16:3–5, 2 Tim. 1:2, 4:19.
Deacons: (1 Tim. 3:8–11)	Serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money...	Phoebe was a deacon and leader in the church. She carried Paul’s letter to the church in Rome and likely explained its contents. Rom. 16:1–3.
Widows and Older Women: (1 Tim. 3:11, 5–16, Titus 2:3)	Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things...	Widows and Older Women: freed from marital duties used their time and resources to minister to and serve the church. 1 Tim. 3:5–16.
Fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–26)	Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...	Required of all leaders.

Clothed in Christ, leaders are known by their gifting *and* their character—qualities that transcend cultural expectations based on embodiment.

Notes

1. Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (Basic Books, 2019).
2. Michael Bird, “Tom Holland’s Dominion,” *Euangelion*, July 2020, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/euangelion/2020/07/tom-hollands-dominion/>.