

## CHAPTER 14

### WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

What is the role of women in the church? Controversy continues about what women can and cannot do in worship, in leadership, and in other service for the church. As you might expect, the religious denominations are widely divided on this matter. It isn't difficult to locate verses in the New Testament that seem to position women in a subordinate role to men in the church. Other verses have been used to indicate full equality of women and men in matters related to the church. The denominations seem to adhere to different ones of these verses, ignoring the others.

The approach taken here, is to carefully explore the nuances and precise meanings of specific words in some of these difficult passages. Then we can see if a conclusive argument can be made either supporting or denying women an equal standing with men in the body of Christ.

#### **Scriptures Justifying Equality of Men & Women in the Church**

Perhaps Gal. 3:28 is the most direct statement in the Bible on the matter. God sees Christian women and men as identical and interchangeable in their many roles in the church;

*Gal. 3:26-29 (NIV; my underlining)*

*You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed Yourself with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, Slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

By this passage, God makes no distinction between males and females within His body, the saved. Realistically, if one does make distinctions between males and females within the church, then someone else could be equally justified in making distinctions between people of different

nationalities (... 'neither Jew nor Greek....'). While some groups do indeed make such distinctions, the vast majority of groups do not. By this passage then, one should not consider distinctions in the standing of men and women within the church.

The scriptures give many indications that women played prominent roles in the church. They were involved with establishing, nurturing, and educating the new and fragile congregations. The church was growing as the gospel was being accepted. Paul speaks proudly of a woman named Phoebe;

*Rom. 16:1-2 (NIV)*

*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me.*

*In the KJV, Paul describes Phoebe as a 'servant.' In fact, most of our commonly used English translations also call her a 'servant.' Here are their translations of Rom. 16:1 (my underlining);*

*(NKJ):*

*I comend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea.*

*(AS):*

*I commend unto you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church that is at Cenchrea.*

*(LB):*

*Phoebe, a dear Christian woman from the town of Cenchrea, will be coming to see you soon. She has worked hard in the church there.*

*(NIV) ;*

*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea.*

*(RS):*

*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea.*

*(SE):*

*I recommend our sister Phoebe to you. She is a servant of the congregation in the town of Cenchrea.*

*(GNB):*

*I recommend to you our sister Phoebe, who serves the church at Cenchrea.*

*(LT):*

*I commend and to you Phoebe the sister of us, being a servant of the congregation in Cenchrea.*

Strong's dictionary (Reference-11; #1249) defines 'servant' as used here;

*"... specially, a Christian teacher and pastor (technically, a deacon or deaconess): deacon, minister, servant."*

Consistently, Thayer (reference-12; #1249) defines the word 'servant' as used in this verse, in this way;

*"a deaconess, a woman to whom the care of either poor or sick women was entrusted."*

If you think that this definition describes a lesser role for women in the church, look at the very similar definition provided for the (male) deacon according to Thayer (Reference-12, #1249);

*"one who, by virtue of the office assigned him by the church, cares for the poor and has charge of and distributes the money collected for their use."*

Leadership positions then, are often described as positions of servitude- a humbling way to keep members of the body of Christ from artificially elevating their stature above that of any other member of the body of the saved.

The lexicons provide sufficient information to indicate that Phoebe did play a leadership role in the church. Also implied in Rom. 16:1-2 is that Phoebe had been sent by Paul to the church at Rome, for a specific task. Paul was just sending word ahead, to encourage the members there, to cooperate with her.

Priscilla was also a female co-worker with Paul;

*Acts 18:1-3 (NIV)*

*After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a Tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.*

*Acts 18:18 & 26 (NIV; my underlining)*

*Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla, and Aquila. Before he sailed he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken.*

*He [Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more*

adequately.

*I Cor. 16:19 (NIV; my underlining)*

*The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.*

*Rom. 16:3 & 4 (NIV; my underlining)*

*Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.*

Priscilla was involved in the evangelical work at least as deeply as her husband. Worship was conducted in her home, and she was involved in the more advanced training of Apollos.

Two other women were specially noted by Paul;

*Phil. 4:2 & 3 (NIV; my underlining)*

*I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.*

Whatever the disagreement between these two women, Paul wanted it resolved. For Paul, it was important enough that he asked the church at Philippi to help in solving the problem. More important here though, is that Paul credits both women with having worked with him in teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Other women are specifically mentioned in the Bible- with the implication that they took on leadership roles in the working of the body of Christ. The examples given here though, are sufficient to validate the influential role of evangelical women even in the early church.

The church *worship* also saw women in positions of leadership;

*I Cor. 11:5 (NIV)*

*And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head- it is just as if her head were shaved.*

*Despite Paul's admonition, it's evident that women (like men) were able to prophesy in the church. So women (like men) in the early church obtained a measure of the miraculous gifts (Chapter-7; Miraculous Gifts). Thayer (Reference-12; #4395) gives us the meaning of 'prophesy' as it is used in this verse. He suggests that the meaning goes beyond the normally understood meaning of 'speaking for God';*

*"to teach, to refute, reprove, admonish, comfort others."*

There's no doubt that anyone performing such tasks within the church setting, is definitely carrying out a leadership role. Further support for this conclusion is given by the scriptural importance given to 'prophesy';

*I Cor. 14:3 & 4 (NIV)*

*But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.*

*By using this gift of prophecy, women were able to 'edify' the church, and this was considered an important spiritual gift. Further information about this gift comes from Thayer's definition of 'edify' in this context (Reference-12; #3618);*

*"to promote growth in Christian wisdom, affection, grace, virtue, holiness, blessedness."*

This evidence for women acting responsibly and with leadership in the church is therefore quite strong.

Also worthy of note is something Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. He wrote that 'in the Lord' there is a direct association... a commonality between men and women. The central point is the equivalence of Christian men and Christian women in the eyes of God and the church;

*I Cor. 11:11 & 12 (NIV)*

*In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.*

Within the framework of this passage, Thayer (Reference-12; #5565) indicates that the phrase 'not independent' denotes the concept of not being separate or apart,..... having an association with,..... and not being aloof from someone or something.

Taken altogether then, the passages discussed here strongly suggest that women could- and actually did take an active part in the leadership of the early church.

### **Scriptures Used To Support A Subordinate Role For Women In The Church**

Some denominations and groups accept women as equal members of the body of the saved, but subordinate in the workings of the body of the saved. They also have convincing sets of scriptures upon which they draw to prove

their point. Here are four groups of verses that I've most often encountered in discussions with these religious groups;

*I Cor. 14:34-35 (NIV)*

*... As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.*

*I Cor. 11:6-10 (NIV)*

*If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.*

*Titus 2:3-5 (NIV)*

*Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.*

*I Tim. 2:9-14 (NIV)*

*I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. A woman*

*should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.*

Other scriptures could easily be added to this list. These are sufficient though, to demonstrate the attitude taken by Paul with regard to women in the church.

These verses are in strong contradistinction with those previously discussed. The apparently conflicting statements can be resolved by investigating the situations occurring when the statements were made. The nature of the era in which the early church was forming and growing in various cities is important. It was a rather traumatic experience for the Jews to convert to the New Covenant. Paul didn't expect these new converts to magically change overnight. Instead, he allowed for a realistically slow transformation from the Old- to the New Covenant. In this regard then, he made concessions to the new church; some of their old practices (like those involving the place of women in religion and in society, in general) would have to be "phased in" over a period of time. By slowly phasing in the Christian attitudes about society and the women, the fragile church would not be in danger of being broken down. This would explain why Paul specifically named women in the scriptures we looked at previously. He wanted the transforming church attitudes to reflect that he saw the Christian women as fully equivalent to the men. He simply knew that to enforce the new attitudes on the old customs would have made a difficult societal blockade for the early church to maneuver. The apostles knew that the new and weak Christians would have to be slowly weaned off the old practices. Eventually they would grow into the New Covenant attitudes.

Paul fully knew the Old Law. He was well-versed in the teaching of Chapter-18 of Ezekiel... where the sins of the parent are not passed on to the offspring (Chapter-5; Original Sin). With such knowledge, Paul would not have thoughtlessly spoken the words in I Cor. 11:8-10 or I Tim. 2:13-14. In fact, Paul's statements immediately after I Cor. 11:10, seem to take a stand opposite to that of these listed verses.

*I think there are a couple of hints contained within the listed passages, that support this explanation for Paul's stand regarding women in the church. In his admonition to women in the letter to Titus, Paul gives a reason why he expected the women to behave in the way indicated. He said,..... "so that no one will malign the word of God." A reasonable conclusion then, is that Paul*

*was concerned with the sensitivity of people to adapt to, and adopt this new way.*

An example of the concern for the fragility of the emerging church lies in its attitude toward slavery. The societal custom at the time of the beginning church, was acceptance of that practice. In contrast, the civilized world of today fully rejects any form of slavery. In the scriptures slavery was not encouraged or required. But it was tolerated. The apostles seem to have taken the position that the transition from Judaism to the New Covenant was upheaval enough. To compound it with other drastic societal changes could have been dangerously counterproductive. The role of the church was not to free the slaves, but to win over their souls to Christ. Therefore, we see statements by Paul like this;

*Titus 2:9-10 (NIV)*

*Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.*

*I Pet. 2:18-21 (NIV)*

*Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a Beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*

At the end of Titus 2:10, Paul once again gives a reason *why* the slaves should behave as indicated. It was to make God's word attractive to an unknowing people.

There is one final point on this matter. Review Paul's New Testament letter to Philemon. That letter is devoted to the problem of a runaway slave. Paul encouraged this Christian slave to go back to Philemon and keep him as a brother in Christ. Notice that at no time did Paul insist that Philemon give freedom to the slave.

The way the early New Testament church handled slavery is akin to the way it dealt with women in the church. The societal customs were allowed to slowly wither away within the body of Christ, in order that the conversion of people to Christianity would not be cataclysmic.

In Reference-21, R.C. & C.C. Kroeger have an interesting perspective on the issue of women speaking in the church;

*"Research into the cult patterns of ancient women has a high priority in an understanding of Paul as missionary to the Gentiles. The ceremonial shouts of women, obligatory in certain pagan practices, contained no meaning but aroused considerable religious awe in the hearers. These sacred cries are attested in Corinth; thus it is understandable that the apostle, in seeking to curtail meaningless noise and confusion during worship would ask women to refrain from such utterances while allowing them to pray and prophesy meaningfully."*

### **A Female Apostle ?**

More than a few believe that among the apostles was a female named Junia. The claim is made that the female apostle is named in Rom. 16:7 (my underlining);

(KJV):

Salute Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen, and my

*fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.*

*(NKJ):*

*Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.*

*(AS):*

*Salute Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen, and my fellow-prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also have been in Christ before me.*

*(LB):*

*Then there are Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who were in prison with me. They are respected by the apostles, and became Christians before I did. Please give them my greetings.*

*(NIV):*

*Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.*

*(RS):*

*Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners; they are men of note among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.*

*(SE):*

*Greet my relatives, Andronicus and Junias. They were in jail with me. The apostles think they are special. They were in Christ before I was.*

*(GNB):*

*Greetings also to Andronicus and Junias,\* fellow Jews who were in prison with me; they are well known among the apostles, and they became Christians before I did.*

*\* **Junias or June; some manuscripts have Julia.***

*(LT):*

*Greet Andronicus and Junias, the relatives of me and fellow prisoners of me, who are notable among the apostles, who and before me have been in Christ.*

Except for the KJV and the NKJ the translations consistently use the name, Junias. This is the masculine form of the name, as indicated by Thayer (Reference-12; #2458) but he leaves open the possibility that the feminine form might apply in this verse;

*"Junias, a convert from Judaism, Paul's kinsman and fellow prisoner..... Junia (a woman's name) which is possible. The name occurs again as the name of a Christian at Rome in Rom. 16:15....."*

The GNB adds a footnote, revealing that some ancient manuscripts use the feminine form, Julia. On the other hand, the RS is forthright in calling Junias a man.

So, we cannot with certainty determine the gender of Junia (or, Junias).

Independent of whether this person is a male or female, perhaps the meaning of the phrase 'who are of note among the apostles' can clarify whether Junia (Junias) was an apostle. If we can discover that this verse

excludes this person from the group of apostles, then the gender is unimportant.

The intended meaning of the phrase, 'who are of note among the apostles' is left vague in the KJV, NKJ, AS, NIV, RS, and even the LT. The LB and the SE are definitive on this question. These two translations clearly exclude both Andronicus and Junias from apostleship. The other translations leave us wondering which of the following is true;

1. These two people are apostles, and are noteworthy members of that group;

*OR,*

2. These two people are recognized by the apostles as noteworthy people.

This large number of vague translations can be made to support the meaning given by the LB and GNB when we clarify what Paul meant by 'apostles' in this verse. According to Thayer, our usual understanding of 'apostle' needs to be broadened, to grasp its meaning as used in Rom. 16:7. Here's Thayer's definition of 'apostle' as used in this verse (Reference-12, #652);

*"In a broader sense the name is transferred to other eminent Christian teachers...."*

With this definition, all the translations consistently deny what we normally think of as apostleship, to both Andronicus and Junias. Other 'eminent Christian teachers are described as apostles but were known to not be apostles as we generally use the term to describe 'the twelve';

*Acts 14:14 (NIV)*

*But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this....*

*I Thess 1:1 & 2:6 (NIV)*

*Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the  
Thessalonians...*

*.... As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden  
to you...*

In conclusion then, there appears to be sufficient information given in the scriptures to show that regardless of gender, Junias (Junia), was *not* an apostle in the sense that we normally use the term.