



FutureChurch



Icon of Phoebe, the deacon, named by Paul in Romans 16.

Women in Paul's Ministry

Introduction

In spite of the difficult passages about women in Paul's writings that can become real obstacles to a genuine appreciation of Paul, there is abundant evidence of the activity of women in various kinds of ministry in the Pauline churches. They collaborated with him and were his co-workers. Their leadership roles included hosting house churches, evangelizing, teaching, travel, and offering hospitality to visiting church members.

Women Leaders at Philippi

Euodia and Syntyche

The first that we encounter are two women with Greek names, Euodia ("good fragrance") and Syntyche ("good luck") in Phil. 4:2-3. They are not getting along with each other—or possibly, they are together in a disagreement with Paul. Paul has written three previous chapters on the theme of unity, urging the recipients of the letter to take the examples of Christ and of himself by being willing to surrender certain rights and privileges in order to be one in Christ. Now he solemnly entreats these two women to be united in their thinking, and he urges a third party, not called by name, to mediate their disagreement. By way of explanation, Paul says that Euodia and Syntyche have struggled and contended alongside Paul and someone else named Clement in the work of advancing the gospel. This means that they were engaged in the work of evangelization.

Episkopoi and Diakonoi

The opening lines of Paul's letter to the Philippians contain a reference found nowhere else in the greetings of his letters: he and Timothy greet not only the holy ones or saints in Philippi, but add a greeting to their episkopoi and diakonoi. Certainly the Greek word episkopos, which ordinarily means overseer or manager, does not yet refer to what will later be a "bishop," though that is the word that eventually came to be used for this office. Proof that that is not yet its meaning is the fact that there are more than one in the same city; the word is in the plural. Rather, this is more likely a reference to the leaders of house churches, groupings of believers that met in private houses for worship and other means of nurturing their faith life. Since

Philippi was a Roman military colony, it seemsto have been the first of the Christian groups to begin using such a term for its leaders.

The other group addressed in Phil. 1:1 are the diakonoi. This word, adapted later to mean "deacon," was a general word for ministers, attendants, and agents or official representatives. Here it refers to a designated group of persons who provide some kind of assistance in the community. But where do Euodia and Syntyche fit into this schema and why does Paul single them out? If we follow the flow of Paul's argument about unity, we can see that his appeal to them comes at the very end and is the climax. It is not a miscellaneous comment. The disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche (more likely than their common disagreement with Paul) is a major problem, and perhaps the major problem that Paul is facing in the Philippian church. If this is so, then these two women are not insignificant members of the church. They are likely to be among the episkopoi, that is, the hosts of groups of believers who meet in their houses, and members of a local council of leaders. Thus they are major figures in the Philippian church, persons who lead and are responsible for the life of faith there.

Lydia

There is another woman character who appears in stories about Philippi, this time in Acts: Lydia. The narrative in Acts 16 describes Paul and Timothy going to the river just outside the city walls on the Sabbath, looking for a Jewish place of prayer. Instead of finding a mixed group, however, they encounter a group of women. One was a cloth merchant named Lydia who had her own household. "The Lord opened her heart" to believe. She and her household were baptized and she then provided hospitality to Paul and Timothy (Acts 16:13-15). Later, after a difficult experience in the city when they were about to leave, they went back first to the house of Lydia, where they encouraged the group that had formed there (Acts 16:40). This group was the nucleus of the Christian community in Philippi meeting in the house of Lydia, who was therefore the provider of hospitality and the natural presider at their common meals.

Women Prophets in Corinth

There were nameless women, too. Some of them are mentioned in 1 Cor. 11:2-15. They are the Corinthian women prophets whose social freedom was disturbing to Paul. They claimed charismatic authority to ignore traditional behavior with regard to head covering, still an issue today in some cultures. If we only focus on the head covering problem, however, we miss the importance of what they were really doing. This reference to women who pray and prophesy fits the pattern we see elsewhere in early Christian prophecy: that women were always found among the prophets. It is the Holy Spirit who decides who has the gift. Prophecy was a gift and a ministry in the first generations of the church. The memory of these women prophets means that both men and women engaged in this service to the community and that all other references to prophets, for example, 1 Corinthians 14, refer to both women and men.

Women Leaders in the Letter to the Romans

Phoebe

The most important place in the Pauline writings, however, to find information about women's ministry is Romans 16. Here are eight named and two unnamed women who are remembered by Paul as part of his ministry. The first and most important is Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2). These verses are a recommendation of her to the recipients of the letter. Paul calls her by two titles: diakonos of the church of Cenchrae (one of the seaports of Corinth) and prostatis of many, including Paul.

The title diakonos we have already seen in the opening lines of Paul's letter to the Philippians. It can be translated "minister" or "deacon," but the translation "deaconess" is not correct, since this refers to an order of diakonal women that arose in the third century. Paul uses the masculine term; the feminine had not yet evolved. The word connotes a minister, attendant, or envoy. In this case, it is the envoy function that seems dominant, because it is evident from the language that Paul uses that she is carrying his letter to Rome. She is unknown to the communities there, and Paul introduces her.

Another site in the Pauline letters that probably refers to women deacons is 1 Tim. 3:11. The majority of scholars hold that this letter is written by someone else after the time of Paul but in continuity with the Pauline legacy. Here, in the context of qualifications for diakonoi, "the women" are to be dignified, sober, and trustworthy. While it is possible that wives of male deacons are intended, the better interpretation is that women also filled this role in the church of Timothy.

The second title Paul uses for Phoebe in Romans 16 is prostatis. This reference has been much studied in recent years as we seek to understand better these women in Paul's life. It is the feminine form of the masculine prostatés. In both genders the word generally means patron or sponsor of some kind. In this patronage culture, calling someone a patron implies higher social status and power. There is an interesting parallel from Corinth at about the same time that Paul is writing his letter to the Romans from there. Another woman, Junia Theodora, was commemorated in several inscriptions by her fellow country people from Lycia (western Turkey) for her prostasia, which consisted of hospitality, patronage, and networking in Corinth for traveling Lycians. It is likely that Phoebe did the same for traveling Christians like Paul. This no doubt involved hosting a house church like Lydia, Euodia, and Syntyche in Philippi.

Prisca

The second woman named in Romans 16 is Prisca, sometimes also called Priscilla. According to Acts 18:2-3, with her husband Aquila she had come from Italy to Corinth. In 1 Cor 16:19, they are hosting a house church in Asia (western Turkey, probably at Ephesus). Now, this couple with Latin names are back in Rome, again hosting a house church. They too, like Paul, were leather workers and traveled a great deal. Here we see a husband and wife who work side by side in their trade and also together in the ministry of evangelization and ongoing instruction. Later in the same chapter, the two of them together take Apollos aside and instruct him more properly in the faith (Acts 18:26). Their names also occur in 2 Tim. 4:19.

Junia

Another missionary couple appears in Rom. 16:7. Andronicus and Junia, Paul's relatives or fellow country people, early converts and imprisoned at some time with Paul, are prominent among the apostles. Here again, much ink has been spilled over this reference, because it seems that both of them are called apostles. The wording suggests not that the apostles know them well, but that among the apostles, they are well known. This Junia has quite a textual history. Because the Latin name is in the accusative case in Greek, it would look the same whether a woman's or a man's name. However, there is no other known example of the male name, which would be Junias, while the female name Junia is common (some texts say Julia, which is just as common a Latin name). In early centuries, Junia was thought to be a woman. In fact, the late fourth-century preacher John Chrysostom remarks on what a wonderful woman she must have been that Paul called her an apostle. Later in the Middle Ages, it was decided that if this person was an apostle it must be a man, and Junia became Junias. Only within the last half of the twentieth century has the interpretation been reassessed and Junia once again recognized as a woman apostle. Her apostleship with her husband probably consisted in itinerant evangelization.

Other Women Leaders

Maria, Tryphaena, Tryphosa & Persis

Other women are mentioned by Paul in Romans 16, as he sends greetings to all those he knows at Rome. Maria in v. 6 has worked very hard; Paul uses the word he usually does for ministry. In v. 12, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and “dear Persis” are remembered, all of whom have labored in ministry. Finally, Julia is named among others in v. 15. There remain two unnamed women, the mother of Rufus in v. 13 and the sister of Nereus in v. 15. Of Rufus’ mother, Paul says that she is a mother to him as well, which undoubtedly testifies to her gifts of hospitality.

Apphia

The letter to Philemon is really addressed to three people: Philemon “beloved brother and co-worker,” Apphia “our sister,” and Archippos “fellow soldier,” as well as to the church in their house. Soon, however, the text becomes Paul’s message to Philemon over the situation with Onesimus. Is Apphia Philemon’s wife or sister, or does she have a similar relationship with Archippos, or are they all related somehow? Whatever is the relationship among the three, we know that Apphia is one of the three prominent leaders of this house church.

Nympha

There is one more name that should be mentioned here: Nympha in Col. 4:15. Though most scholars doubt that Colossians was written by Paul, still it stands within the Pauline circle of writings. Here the letter to the Colossians is to be sent also to Laodicea, a few miles away, where Nympha is named as host of a house church. Like Lydia and others at Philippi and elsewhere, she engaged in ministry that included hospitality, spiritual leadership, and other kinds of attention to the needs of the members.

Conclusion

The record of these women reveals the intimate involvement of women in the first years of the formation of the church. They were workers alongside their male counterparts and sharers in the ministry of communicating the gospel in whatever ways possible.

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