

Women and early church authority*

Did women occupy positions of leadership and authority in the Pauline church? This recent essay investigates this important question. The author notes that Paul refers to a total of thirteen women, of which five had leadership roles in their respective communities: Chloe (1 Cor.1:11), Prisca (Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2), and Phoebe (Rom. 16:1–2). In keeping with Roman culture, it is argued, but ultimately transcending its boundaries, each of these women functioned in equal partnership with men in the church: Chloe as "a patroness of some kind"; Prisca in teaching with her husband, Aquila; Euodia and Syntyche by "visiting friends and setting up networks for 'evangelization' "; and Phoebe as "a benefactress and guardian" and as a deacon[ess].

The essay helpfully takes inventory of women who are mentioned by Paul and who functioned in leadership roles in the Pauline churches. It indicates that women were indeed operating in spheres of genuine, significant responsibility. The illumination of the Roman background illustrates the way in which such roles were in keeping, or out of keeping, with prevailing cultural norms. As will be seen, however, the article ends up proving the exact opposite of what it sets out to demonstrate. In particular, the following criticisms apply:

1. Acknowledgment should be made of the very limited number of references to women in leadership in the Pauline churches. The fact that only a handful of women are mentioned does not alter the fact that there were women in leadership positions in those congregations; it nevertheless may be significant to get the balance right.

2. In what kinds of positions of leadership did these women actually serve? It turns out that none of the women mentioned in Paul's letters were overseers or pastor-teachers. Thus, while women were involved in exercising some sort of leadership, they do not seem to have occupied places of ultimate human responsibility for God's church.

3. What, exactly, is meant by "leadership" or "authority" in the first place? If what is meant is positions of genuine, significant responsibility, then the implication is that women in churches today, likewise, should be given roles where they can exercise their spiritual gifts in significant ways. If what is meant, however, is positions of ultimate responsibility for God's church, that is, women pastor-teachers or elders, this article does little to substantiate the functioning of women in such roles in the Pauline churches.

4. The study of the descriptive components of Paul's letters (i.e. which women are mentioned; which roles did they occupy) should be supplemented by an analysis of the prescriptive teaching of Paul on the subject of women's roles in the church. Otherwise, the impression is given that Paul was merely operating with reference to culture rather than being guided by transcultural norms. As passages such as 1 Timothy 2 show, however, Paul did in fact establish general parameters (which he already found in the Hebrew Scriptures) for women's roles in the church. In short, not merely Paul's practice, but also the principles underlying the patterns found in the Pauline churches should be part of the investigation. Moreover, while the mention of these particular five women is to some extent accidental, Pauline norms regarding women's roles in the church are foundational and thus much more important, although one certainly may expect Paul to

abide by his own principles in the churches under his apostolic jurisdiction.

The terms "leadership" and "authority" thus need to be properly defined, and descriptive as well as prescriptive components of Pauline and other biblical teaching on women's roles in the church should be considered. Otherwise, Cotter's article implies that women occupied the same positions as men in every respect in Paul's churches and that no norms were brought to bear on such practice by the apostle. But this implication is not proven by the data in the article, nor is it true.

Wendy Cotter, "Women's Authority Roles
in Paul's Churches: Countercultural or Conventional?"
Novum Testamentum 36 (1994): 350–72,
reviewed by Andreas J. Köstenberger

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