



THEMATIC OVERVIEW

*A time of learning, discussion, and prayer as we explore Scriptural teaching about gender and leadership in the church.*

*As a Grace Group, we will explore together how to embody God's grace in our practice given the historic harms and contention in church and culture around how gender and leadership are held together.*

**Welcome + Opening Prayer + Commitments**

*Show me your ways, Lord,  
teach me your paths.*

*Guide me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are God my Savior,  
and my hope is in you all day long. —Psalm 25:4-5*

*But who can discern their own errors?  
Forgive my hidden faults. —Psalm 19:12*

Commitments:

- 1/ What were women doing in the New Testament and Early Church?
- 2/ How does what's described inform and square with the perspectives we bring?
- 3/ What questions are stirred in us as we explore?

**A Summary of Women's Roles in the New Testament** (see pages 2-5)

*Questions to help us explore our own lived experience (5 min)*

1. Have you heard about these women and their roles before? If you've been church-going for much of your life, have they been taught to you? If so, how were they taught to you?
2. Who are some wise women in your life and how have they shaped you? What role do/ have they play(ed)?

*Questions to help us reflect more deeply (10 min)*

3. When you think about women in the New Testament, which ones come to mind? What do you know about their story or their role in the Jesus movement or the early church?
4. What types of roles have you seen women play in the churches you have attended?
5. How would you complete the following sentence: Women can \_\_\_\_\_ in the church?

**Storytelling + Reading Romans 16** (see page 6)

*Further reflection*

6. How do the examples of women's engagement in ministry presented in Romans 16 compare with your perspectives and beliefs about women in ministry?
7. What questions does Romans 16 stir for you?
8. What is one thing you want to remember or approach differently because of today's discussion?

RESOURCES

*Find more resources for further reading and listening on our website:  
[allsoulsseattle.org/resources/collections/gender-and-leadership](https://allsoulsseattle.org/resources/collections/gender-and-leadership)*

A couple notes to begin:

1. This 4 week conversation is not a one-and-done on this topic by *any* means. We will continue to talk about this, learn about this, and seek to implement what we're learning.
2. There a couple of books that have released this year that I think can equip us for these conversations in new ways. It's a wonder to me that they come out only months after our transition in Dec, and I'm curious how they would have helped us through that. But they are here now, and I think they're required reading for anyone who wants to develop a robust biblical understanding/theology of what women were doing and purposely freed to do in the NT.
  1. The first is called *Icons of Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Theology for Women's Ordination*, written by William Witt and released in Feb
  2. The second is called *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*, written by Beth Allison Barr and released just last month (Apr).

These will be assigned reading for our leadership as we seek to encourage, welcome, support, and be blessed by the ministry of women within our community.

3. I also just want to name that this discussion is being led/facilitated by two men-- RJ and me. Reason being, we think it's important that the invitation here be extended to you by your pastors, and we're who you're stuck with. We will be hearing from other voices though, as we go along.

So, our focus for this evening is **what**— what, as in **what were women doing in the early church?**

What can we see them doing, what gospel ministry were they given to, what leadership do they provide to worshipping communities, and those exploring life with Jesus? What have women *already* been doing in Scripture and church history? What roles did women play in the family of faith?

## Women's Roles in the New Testament and within the Early Church<sup>1</sup>

Through study of both the Old and New testaments examples are found of women participating in God's kingdom within roles including prophet, apostle, deacon, church planter, teacher, evangelist, and missionary. Here is an overview of roles women occupy in the New Testament.

### *Disciple*

The first followers of Jesus were not called "Christians," but "disciples," a term that means "learner." A disciple learns by hearing and imitating his or her master (John 13). Jesus chooses his disciples, and calls them to gather and make new disciples (John 15:16; Matthew 28:18-20).

In Luke's gospel account there are two groups within the larger body of disciples: the twelve and the women (8:1-3). Luke names some of the women who were "with" Jesus during his Galilean ministry: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna (8:3). We're told that for two years these women, along with many more (Luke 8:3), were constantly with Jesus, witnessing his miracles and hearing his teaching. In Luke 24:6, we are reminded that Mary Magdalene and Joanna, and other women, have been with Jesus and heard Jesus' teaching. At the empty tomb, the two men in "dazzling clothes" say to the women, "He [Jesus] is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again" (Luke 24:5b-6). The women are reminded of what Jesus had told them.

In Luke 10:1, Jesus sends his disciples out in pairs to visit towns he would later visit. One scholar writes, "This was active participation in Jesus' mission, preaching the kingdom as he did, healing and exorcising as he did. Joanna and the other women would talk to the women where they gathered at the well or market stalls, visit them in their homes, relating some of Jesus' parables and sayings. She would be available for the people to bring the sick to her, as they were used to going to village women with healing skills."

### *Apostolic Witness*

One way Paul uses the term "apostle" is for "one who has seen the risen Lord" ("Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (1 Cor 9:1)). Women are featured in all four of the gospel resurrection accounts.

In Matthew, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are commissioned by the risen Jesus to "go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee" (28:10). In John's account, Jesus also commissions Mary Magdalene to "go" and "tell" the brothers (John 20:18), and, when telling them, she says, "I have seen the Lord." This first-person, direct account of the resurrection is the same as that of other disciples who later tell Thomas, "We have seen the Lord" (John 20:25). It is Mary who, "heralds the first Easter as the first Easter herald."

The fact that women were "sent" to Jesus' male disciples in the resurrection narratives led Hippolytus, an early church father, to remark that women were, in truth, "apostles to the apostles".

---

<sup>1</sup> ["All Souls Response to PCA View of Women Deacons"](#)

### *Prophet*

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that Christ gave the gift for some to be prophets to build up the body (4:11). One theologian writes, “Prophets are the ‘interpreters,’ the declarers of the word, will, mind, or oracles of God unto others... Hence, those who expounded the Scripture unto the church under the New Testament were called ‘prophets,’ and their work ‘prophecy.’” 1 Corinthians 14 indicates that prophesying includes communication to the gathered assembly of a revelatory nature (14:30) and has a teaching or instruction element for the edification for the church (14:31).

Women prophets are present in Luke and Acts. Luke presents Anna as a “woman prophet,” which is the same Greek word the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses to translate the Hebrew *nəḇī’āh* (Luke 2:36). Anna is led by the Holy Spirit to speak about Jesus “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). It is possible that Luke’s depiction of Anna, as a prophet, foreshadows Pentecost when Mary the mother of Jesus and other women prophesy (Acts 1:14; 2:17). Luke also identifies Philip’s four daughters as women with the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9). While prophecy is a possibility for any Christian, “It is primarily identified with certain leaders who exercise it as a ministry. Philip’s daughters are probably depicted as included among these leaders, since they appear to be more than just occasional prophesiers.”

### *Deacon*

In Romans 16, Paul describes Phoebe as a *diakonos*. Within the NT, the word is often used of someone who performs a service or ministry (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23, 25; and 1 Tim. 4:6). The term is also used for those devoted to the “practical service of the needy.” Paul uses another word for Phoebe that has a strong connotation of leadership and authority— *prostatis*. *Prostatis* refers to a benefactor who offers protection. Paul notes that she has been a benefactor to many (Rom. 16:2). It is possible that Phoebe may have been in charge of the charitable work in the church at Cenchrea.

It is likely that there were also female deacons present within the church at Ephesus. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul provides Timothy with qualifications for deacons. Paul begins in 3:8 by stating, “Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money.” Then in 3:11, he states, “Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.” While the ESV translates 1 Timothy 3:11 as “wives likewise,” other translations read “women likewise” leading one to read Paul as moving from first discussing male deacons and then to female deacons (e.g. TNIV, NRSV, ASV, RSV, NASB, CEB).

### *Co-Worker*

One of the terms Paul uses for individuals engaged in gospel ministry is “co-workers.” Within the NT, co-workers write letters (1 Thessalonians), check up on and encourage Christian communities (1 Cor. 4:17, 16:10), provide a location and oversight of a local house church, and instruct and evangelize (Acts 18, Rom. 16, 1 Cor. 16). Paul identifies female co-workers in his letters including: Priscilla (Rom. 16:3), and Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3).

### *Laborer*

Paul also often uses the phrase “to labor” or to “work hard” to describe gospel ministry (1 Cor. 4:12, 15:10; Gal. 4:11; Phil. 2:16; Col. 1:29; 1 Tim. 4:10). Paul states in 1 Cor. 16:15-16 that he expects the churches to “submit” to those who “work hard.” In 1 Thess. 5:12-13, Paul directs the church to recognize and honor its leaders, who are described as “those who labor [work hard] among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you.” One scholar argues that each of the 23 NT instances of the verb “to labor” is used as a technical term for missionary and congregational work.

In Romans 16, Paul acknowledges three women who have worked/labored in the Lord-- Tryphena and Tryphosa (v.12), and Persis (v.13)-- and one woman, Mary, who worked very hard among the church in Rome (v.6). Based on Paul’s use of the word “to labor” elsewhere in the NT, it is likely that these women were engaged in missionary and congregational work and that their churches were to honor and submit to them.

### *Teacher*

Priscilla is often held up as an example of a woman who taught a man. We are told that after Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos boldly speaking in the synagogue, they took him aside and “explained the Way of God to him more accurately” (Acts 18:24-28). Apollos then emerges as one of the early church’s key figures.

While Priscilla and her husband taught, they also played important roles in Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome. This husband and wife ministry team was engaged in church planting, teaching, and preaching (Rom. 16.5; 1 Cor. 16.19; Acts 18.1-3, 26-28).

### *Apostle*

In Romans 16:7, Paul greets Andronicus and Junia, who are “prominent among the apostles.” In this context, the word apostle most likely means “itinerant missionary.” In 1 Corinthians 12:28, Paul says, “God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers...” Similarly, in Ephesians 4:11, he states: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.”

Junia, and her husband Adronicus, were likely engaged in evangelism and church planting, and they were itinerant. Their work as apostles also landed both of them in prison with Paul (Rom. 16:7). Paul’s use of the word “prominent,” likely means that their missionary work was fruitful.

The practice of the early church demonstrates that women were using their gifts in a broad range of ministry. The first “Christian” sermon preached (Acts 2) anticipates that in the new era inaugurated by Pentecost both men and women would prophesy. Of all the passages in the Old Testament Peter could have quoted for this sermon, he selected Joel 2:

“I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy... Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18).

## Storytelling

*From my own experience I know this is a complex subject. I haven't arrived at my conclusions overnight, but have spent years in scripture journeying on this path...*

## Reading Romans 16

Romans 16 provides a unique glimpse into the roles women played in the earliest churches.

- Read [Romans 16](#) aloud
- Read through Romans 16 a second time on your own, and underline or write down each woman's name that you find.
- Review the women named in Romans 16

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.