

WOMEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH DID WHAT?

By Dianne D. McDonnell

Christ gives spiritual gifts to all His children, men and women, so that we can build His Church. Not everyone is given the same “gift” for “we have gifts that differ.” (Romans 12:6.) God designed His spiritual gifts so that we would need each other! No one person would have **all** the spiritual gifts it would take to build His Church. Both men and women were given these various gifts and worked hard together **jointly** spreading the gospel and nurturing the new church. Ephesians 4:11-13 lists gifts of the Holy Spirit that deal specifically with church building and public ministry-- apostles, prophets, evangelists, ministers and teachers.

Many people have assumed that women were not given these more public gifts—only men. Yet the New Testament tells us of some women empowered by the Holy Spirit as a “spiritual gift” to do these different jobs equally with some men with the same calling! Did **all** men and women receive these leadership spiritual gifts Paul lists in Ephesians? No, many receive a less public role, **but a role just as essential**, such as encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, and showing mercy, as in Romans 12:6-8. In 1 Corinthians 12:7, Paul lists wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, discernment of spirits and acquiring other languages or interpreting other languages-- all of these are essential spiritual gifts needed by the entire church!

This article will deal only with the most public of “spiritual gifts” given to some women as well as to some men. In each case they are empowered by the Holy Spirit, led, strengthened, and “called” by God to a certain role.

Apostles: There were other apostles beyond the twelve.¹ Paul greets Junia, a Roman woman converted before Paul, praising her as “outstanding among the apostles,” Romans 16:7. “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding² among³ the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.” NIV⁴

They are outstanding or **eminent** from among the apostles. Many mentally read this scripture as--They are (said to be) outstanding among (they substitute “by”) the apostles. Adding these four words would totally change the meaning of this scripture! However, these four words—said to be/by--are not in the Greek text! “By” is a totally different Greek word than the word translated “among”. Paul never relied on the opinions of other apostles to back his praise. He knew these two very well, having been in prison with them. He was praising them as “**outstanding (or eminent) among** the apostles.” Paul considered them apostles just as he considered himself to be an apostle.

Junia was a common female name and there are no historical examples of any Roman male named Junia.⁵ She is praised with Andronicus, who was believed to be her husband.

Both were doing an excellent job among the apostles after the twelve, and had been imprisoned with Paul probably because of their active leadership roles.

“Paul mentions many women by name in his epistles, and the same terms used to designate male church leaders are used to designate female church leaders. **A woman named Junia is called an ‘apostle’.** Similarly, inscriptions from around the Mediterranean world describe specific Jewish women as **‘leader’, ‘elder,’ ‘mother of the synagogue...The early church’s specific leadership functions posed no barriers to women.’**”⁶

Prophets: An evangelist named Philip had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses. Acts 21:8,9. Other women in the church were praying and prophesying aloud in the churches and a controversy arose over whether these participating women needed to veil themselves as the Hebrew women did. Finally Paul decided their long hair was covering enough as they prayed and prophesied during church services, 1 Cor 11:5-16. Also see Acts 2:18, “...**both men and women...shall prophesy,**” referring to the messages given in different languages to both men and women on the day of Pentecost. Anna was also a prophetess, Luke 2:36.

Evangelists: Priscilla, together with her husband Aquila, accompanied Paul on an evangelizing trip to Ephesus. Paul continued on and left them behind to evangelize. At Ephesus, Priscilla (listed before her husband Aquila) taught the learned minister Apollos more accurately in the faith, Acts 18:18-26. Some translations add that this happened in their house but the Greek for Acts 18:26 only tells us that they took Apollos unto themselves and doesn’t mention a house. The word used for explained or expounded is the same word used when Peter publicly explained the truth in Acts 11:4.⁷ Priscilla and Aquila also established a church in Rome, Romans 16:3-5, and risked their lives for Paul.

Both Euodia and Syntyche evangelized publicly with Paul; they “contended at my side in the cause of the gospel”. Both women zealously “contended”, and the Greek word that Paul used conjures up verbal team wrestling! The word⁸ means, “to wrestle in company with”. They publicly wrestled with words right beside Paul as they all three publicly defended the faith! Their names are “in the book of life” together with a male co-worker named Clement, Phil 4:2-3 NIV

Pastors or Ministers: In Romans 16:1-2, Phoebe, a woman, was a “*diakonon*” of the church in Cenchrea. The same Greek word translated “servant”⁹ here, is translated “minister” in **twenty-two** other scriptures such as in Col 1:25 “Of this church I was made a **minister** according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God,” NAS

Phoebe is believed to have delivered the book of Romans after traveling some 800 miles from Cenchrea near Corinth to Rome. Paul writes “I commend¹⁰ (or introduce) to you, our sister Phoebe,” Then he introduces her as a minister¹¹ of the church in Cenchrea and urges the church at Rome to help her with the matter that brings her to Rome, for “she has been a great help to many people, including me.” The word translated merely “great

help” or “helper” is a word meaning “a woman set over others, a patroness,”¹² She was not a servant in the way we think of a servant, but a wealthy woman with money to use to travel and to protect and help others. She served as a minister.

Paul greets Nympha among other church leaders and greets her house church. She is the only leader mentioned by name in her town. Col. 4:15.¹³ Lydia had a church meeting in her home, Acts 16:14, 15 and 40. Also Chloe, whose converts are indicated as belonging to Chloe as a group or church,¹⁴ in 1 Cor 1:11 “For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you.” NAS

Paul praises a household of ministers headed by a person named Stephanas or Stephana, a woman's name, the feminine form of Stephen. 1 Cor 16:15-16 “Now I urge you, brethren (you know the household of Stephanas that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have **devoted themselves for ministry to the saints**), that you also **be in subjection to** such (meaning such ones, “men” is not in the Greek) and to everyone who helps in the work and labors.” NAU

She and her household were the first converts in Achaia, and now her household was devoted to the ministry. The words translated as “they have devoted themselves” could also be “they have appointed or ordained themselves”.¹⁵ Paul urges the members to be subject to such people, or to subordinate themselves to this household, indicating that he is indeed talking of ministers with authority. Some translations use “such men” but “men” is not in the Greek. Was Stephana having trouble with church members not treating her with respect because she was a female? Notice that Paul rejoiced that she and the two males with her (her sons?) had arrived to re-supply his needs.

Paul is scolding the Corinthians saying that they had not supplied what he needed but Stephana and the two men had arrived and provided for him. Paul concludes his rebuke by saying that people such as this should be acknowledged! (Again “such **men**”, as some translations render, is not in the Greek text.)

He indicates that the Corinthians were not giving Stephana respect or recognition as a minister, but Paul praises her and her household. Because this passage is so clearly speaking of ministers, many try to maintain that Stephana was an abbreviation for a man's name, but Stephana was a Greek female name, and their arguments are partly based on disbelief that a woman could head a household of ministers.

Another woman who was serving as a pastor or evangelist was the woman John writes the book of 2 John to. He addresses her in Greek as “Eklektee kuria”, the first word meaning “Chosen of God,” Thayer's definition; and the second word, “Kuria” is the feminine form of “Kuros,” which means “supreme in authority”!¹⁶ John writes to her, “It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us.” 2 John 1:4. “In the New Testament, pupils or disciples are called children of their teachers, because the latter by their instruction nourish the minds of their pupils and mould their characters”.¹⁷ Her “children” are as John's “children” in 3 John 1:4, they are her converts to the truth. Again in verse five he refers to her again as

“kuria”, such a high feminine title of respect that it is used only these two places in the entire New Testament! She was “beloved” “by all who know the truth” and “supreme in authority”! He warns her of a certain deceiver, “do not take him into your house” as her house was obviously a church meeting place. She was clearly a woman John highly regarded and greatly respected. She may have been the apostle Junia once imprisoned with Paul, Romans 16:7, as her actual name is never given. Did John carefully hide her real name, the names of the brethren, and the location of the church because the Roman authorities were searching for her and her converts? At the close of 2 John Paul also mentions, “the children of your **chosen (or elect) sister** send their greetings” which indicates a second woman chosen by God in an ecclesiastical sense.

Teachers: Many of the previously mentioned women, including Priscilla, Junia, and Phoebe, were also teaching as part of being an evangelist, apostle or minister.

In Conclusion: Eph 4:11-12 “And his **gifts** were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,” RSV

Some of God’s people are prepared for works of service serving others, “the work of the ministry” by spiritual gifts given by God Himself. God does not consider women to be less deserving of spiritual gifts than men, “For there is no partiality with God” Romans 2:11. He designed both personalities to work well together as spiritual brothers and sisters. Paul realized that God was without prejudice concerning race or sex, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, **there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus**¹⁸...heirs according to the promise” Gal. 3:28-29. Race, social differences, or our gender are not to disqualify a Christian from serving Christ Jesus. There is a oneness in Christ, and a oneness in being heirs. Both men and women understood they were heirs **together** looking towards Christ’s Kingdom and they worked together as apostles, prophets, prophetesses, evangelists, ministers, and teachers using their spiritual gifts to build the early church.

¹ Other apostles beyond the twelve include Paul, Col. 1:1, Barnabas in Acts 14:3,4; and Epaphroditis, an “*apostolon*” mentioned in Phil. 2:25; and also many “*apostoloi*” in 2 Cor. 8:23.

² “outstanding” or “of note” is from the word *episemos* Strong’s number 1978, defined by *Strong’s Greek Hebrew Dictionary* as “remarkable, eminent”.

³ The Greek *en*. “the preposition *en* always has the idea of ‘within.’ In the plural *en* is translated ‘among’ although it still has the basic idea of ‘within.’” Pg 108, *Beyond the Curse* by Aida Besancon Spencer.

⁴ Bible abbreviations are: NIV, New International Version; NAS, New American Standard; NAU New American Standard Update; RSV, Revised Standard Version; KJV King James Version; NKJ, New King James.

⁵ *Thayer’s Greek Definitions* “a Christian woman at Rome” 2458 *Iouneas*.

⁶ Article by Karen Jo Torjesen, a researcher of this subject, *U.S. News and World Report*, August 10, 1998, page 52.

⁷ *Ektithemi*, Strong's 1620.

⁸ *sunathleo* (soon-ath-leh'-o), Strong's 4866, defined as "to wrestle in company with".

⁹ Phoebe was a *diakonos*, Strong's 1249, "a Christian teacher and pastor", Translated "minister" in all the following scriptures, Matt. 20:26, Mark 10:43, Romans 13:4,8, 2Cor 3:6, 2 Cor 6:4, 2 Cor 11:15,23, Gal. 2:17, Eph 3:7, 6:21, Col 1:7,23,25; Col 4:7 and 1Tim 4:6.

¹⁰ *sunistao* (soon-is-tah'-o); Strong's 4921, to introduce (favorably).

¹¹ Translated as "minister" by Greek scholar Alfred Marshall, *The Interlinear NASB-NIV parallel New Testament in Greek and English*, page 477.

¹² *prostatis*- Strong's 4368, defined by *Thayer's* as "a woman set over others, a female guardian, a protectress, a patroness, caring for the affairs of others and aiding them with her resources."

¹³ The KJV and the NKJ are in error in this passage about the female Nympha, see the NIV, NAU, NAS, or RSV which all read "her house".

¹⁴ Some translations add "house" or "household of Chloe" which is not in the Greek text.

¹⁵ See *Thayer's Greek Definitions* for *tasso*, 5021.

¹⁶ See Strong's definition 2962

¹⁷ *Thayer's* reference on **children**, "*teknois*" Strong's 5043.

¹⁸ "in Christ Jesus" indicates in the church, and this oneness refers to the present, not the future. See Col 1:24, and Romans 25:5, 16:3,9; 1 Peter 5:14, 1 Thes 3:2.

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