

**AUTUMN
RIDGE
CHURCH**

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FAQs

MEN AND WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AT AUTUMN RIDGE CHURCH

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Q1: Have there been any changes in how we regard Scripture?

No. Nothing has changed and we continue to fully affirm what is written in our Statement of Faith.

We believe the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. (Autumn Ridge Church Statement of Faith: The Word of God)

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

It is a tragic and grievous thing when a church elevates any influence as equal to or above the authority of Scripture. Though we do so with imperfect understanding, it is our intent to happily submit to Scripture in all things.

Q2: Are we saying that those who disagree with this decision are unbiblical?

No. We believe that many who agree and many who disagree do so for biblical reasons. Not just one side, both sides. That doesn't mean that everyone is right. It would be incoherent to say that both viewpoints are correct. And yet, people on both sides can be on the right track if they're doing their best to understand as best they can and to hold on to each other in unity as we all hold on to the view that we are convinced is best.

Live in such a way that we don't make demands on one another's conscience, but we may make demands on one another's charity. —N.T. Wright

We dismiss the notion that one position values Scripture more highly than the other. Rather, both sides deeply cherish Scripture, yet they disagree on how to best understand the intended meaning of it.

Both viewpoints are supported by weighty biblical scholarship. Intelligent and faithful followers of Jesus may disagree on what biblical writers intended to teach. That is the case with these two positions.

Q3: Is this an essential or non-essential issue?

We believe that this is a non-essential issue and not a matter of orthodoxy.

Essentials of orthodoxy are often thought of as what's been articulated in some of the earliest creeds. Essential to our faith are such doctrines as the Trinity, divinity of Jesus, atoning sacrifice of Jesus, and his resurrection. The role of women in leadership in the local church, though significant, does not rise to the level of orthodoxy. Whether one views it as being of secondary or tertiary importance, it is a non-essential.

Q4: What do we say to those who have left or are thinking of leaving over this decision?

We grieve whenever someone chooses to leave and we never take that lightly. We also believe that unity is based on our inclusion in Jesus Christ, not agreement.

It is possible for a congregation to hold a wide range of conflicting viewpoints that remain within orthodoxy. For many years our church has included those who stridently disagree on politics, eschatology (study of end times), soteriology (study of salvation), and a host of other issues. It's not possible for a church to accommodate in practice all viewpoints that it welcomes. This is most clearly seen in the question at hand. Perhaps this is part of the genius behind the recurring New Testament call to mutual submission.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:20-21)

We believe that unity is more important than agreement on nonessentials. The reputation of the church, the advance of the gospel, and most important of all, the credibility of Jesus is worth it.

We invite you to read Romans 14. It's stunning. Paul engages disruptive, emotional, deep-down disagreements in the church in Rome, without pronouncing which sides are right and which are wrong. Instead, he advocated for peace and understanding that bound them together, all without resolving the disputes.

One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. (Romans 14:5-8)

Paul valued being right with each other out of devotion to Jesus above being right about the various issues that confounded this church. What's keeping us from doing the same? We would never ask you to go against your better judgment. Be curious. Study. Pray and seek God's face. Do your best to understand as best you can. We'll do the same.

And at the end of all that, disagreement will remain. According to the Apostle Paul, that's OK. Instead of weakening a church, it actually reveals the strength of our unity in Christ. We are encouraged by a letter written by Chris Dolson, Senior Pastor of Blackhawk Church, in Madison, Wisconsin. When their Elder Board came to the same decision as ours, he wrote the following to his congregation.

Reasonable, Bible-believing Christ-followers regularly disagree on various subjects. Sadly, some migrate to churches that agree with their views. Uniformity is the norm. Everyone votes the same, looks the same, and acts the same. Rarely do people who hold opposing views agree to disagree agreeably and stay in the same church. We are praying that we will be that rare church where people who disagree about a substantive issue can learn to love and serve one another in

unity. Let's dialogue but not divide...Uniformity is simple. Unity is messy business. Uniformity is natural. Unity is supernatural.

With all our hearts, we agree.

Q5: Does this decision put us on a slippery slope toward affirming same-sex marriage or other LGBTQ issues?

No. We affirm an historic, orthodox view of gender, sexuality, and marriage.

Marriage was designed by God as a covenant between one man whose natal sex is male and one woman whose natal sex is female, for life. Any sexual activity outside of that covenant transgresses God's good design and is a sin against God and one's own body.

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies. (1 Corinthians 6:18-20)

We believe that it is unfortunate and uncharitable when the inclusion of women in leadership is treated as a slippery slope into sin or doctrinal error. The role that women play in church leadership is categorically different from issues like same-sex marriage. Women are to be equally honored as image bearers and coheirs with Christ. Churches benefit when all members of the body are free and encouraged to exercise their giftedness.

Q6: What is our church's historic practice and position regarding women in leadership?

During Paul Siewert's tenure as Sr. Pastor, in the mid 1980s, church leadership agreed to reexamine the question of women's ordination. After two months of study, Pastor Siewert concluded that women can be ordained into ministry. Shortly thereafter, Carla Werre became the first woman ordained by our church. It should be noted that we don't have records of discussions that triggered this reexamination. Neither do we have records that address any possible range of nuance that was present in their thinking or what they intended to be understood by their decision.

Significant inclusion of women in ministry continued under the leadership of the next pastor, C. John Steer. When Autumn Ridge Church (then named First Baptist Church) embarked to find Pastor Siewert's replacement, they discovered that finding candidates was a difficult task. Advisors to the church identified a confusing governance structure as the culprit, and it was recommended to the church that significant changes be made.

At that time, church leadership was better described as a council, consisting of deacons, deaconesses, and heads of various ministry committees (some committees were headed by women). Either by design or happenstance, the structure included women into this body of church governance. When C. John Steer emerged as a leading candidate, he made clear that he wasn't intimidated by the governance structure, though he was sympathetic to the recommendations from previous advisors. Instead of

changing governance prior to his arrival, it was agreed that Pastor Steer would assist church leadership in the development of a new structure.

In either 1990 or 1991, the church council officially transitioned to a board of elders. This sparked a question. Can women serve as elders? Understandably not wanting to advance further change and possible controversy as a freshly minted pastor, he opted to follow the congregation's general consensus to limit the position of elders to men.

There is an irony in our history. Women who previously enjoyed inclusion in church governance were no longer included. Other roles for their ministry and leadership would remain and expand in the coming years.

Women were and continue to be hired as pastors. Women were and continue to be commissioned and funded as missionaries from Autumn Ridge Church. Some female missionaries have in the past and continue in the present to engage in significant aspects of pastoral ministry, including, but not limited to preaching to, teaching, and baptizing men. Whether or not this was the intent of church leadership, women have been empowered by Autumn Ridge Church to exercise authority over men.

For at least four decades, Autumn Ridge Church has been a mixture of restricting and not restricting women in leadership.

- As pastoral officiants of funerals and weddings, women regularly teach and/or preach the gospel to men.
- Women are the leaders of key ministries and ministry departments, i.e., they exercise authority over men.
- Even prior to 2022, women occasionally preached during weekend services and other large, congregational gatherings, e.g., Family Camp.
- Women frequently teach men in smaller congregational gatherings, e.g., classes and small groups.
- Women are the primary leaders in major initiatives, e.g., Chair of the XP Search Team.
- Women lead in worship.

There are no records of an Autumn Ridge Church (or First Baptist Church) doctrinal statement regarding women in leadership. There is only a series of practices that are best described as a compromise.

Q7: Why make a change at all, wasn't the compromise working?

Answering this question requires understanding our recent history and current reality. The compromise (see below) did work well for a long time. During the pastoral transition (due to the retirement of C. John Steer), however, people on both sides of this issue asked questions about it with greater frequency.

- People who believed there should be restrictions on women wanted to know why we allowed women to be pastors and teach.
- People who believed there should not be restrictions wanted to know why we allowed women to be pastors but wouldn't allow them to be elders.

These questions were raised consistently from 2018 to the present. About every six weeks we host an event for those who are new to Autumn Ridge Church. It's called Let's Connect. Questions about women in leadership have been asked at every Let's Connect since it began in 2021. It became clear to the Elder Board and pastors that we were between a rock and a hard place.

- If the compromise remained in place, some people on both sides of this issue would leave our church.
- If we fully restricted women from leadership (they could no longer be pastors or leaders), people would leave our church.
- If we removed restrictions on women for leadership, people would leave our church.

Believe it or not, when what we fear most is going to happen no matter what we decide—there is freedom in that. We decided to study, pray, and develop a practice that is clear, coherent, and consistent with a faithful reading of Scripture. This required looking both to our past and to Scripture.

In 2018 the Elder Board recognized the need to formally articulate our practice regarding women in church leadership. We were searching for a new lead pastor, which required a definable position that could be given to prospective, pastoral candidates. To that end, the following statement was drafted and adopted by the Elder Board.

Women in Leadership Policy Statement

On Gender and Ministry in the Church

Autumn Ridge affirms that both men and women are created in God's image and entitled to equal dignity in society, the home, and the church; both should use their spiritual gifts for the health and ministry of the church.

It is the practice of Autumn Ridge that

- *Only men serve as elders and as the senior pastor.*
- *Both men and women serve in any other pastoral or church leadership role.*
- *We are committed to approaching this subject with extreme humility, knowing that a variety of biblical views are represented in our congregation, and it is our desire to maintain unity on this issue.*

The substance of this statement was not a new development. It represented what had been our church's practice for decades. Its genius is found in frustrating both those who believed there should be restrictions on women in leadership as well those who believed there shouldn't be restrictions. It was never intended to be a biblically defined position. Rather, it was a compromise. An ARC leader who was in favor of the compromise describes it as "indefensible" and "not making any sense." Why would he say that?

New Testament authors, especially the Apostle Paul, are fluid in how they use terms to refer to local church leadership. Everything we mean by our contemporary use of the term pastor was communicated by three distinct terms. Those terms are:

- **presbuteros** (elder, noun form only)
- **episkopos** (overseer, has noun and verb forms)
- **poimen** (shepherd, has noun and verb forms)

These terms are not synonyms. They are distinct and used interchangeably, as complementary descriptors of a singular church office. New Testament authors regularly interchanged them within the same flow of thought.

[Paul's address to the elders from the church at Ephesus]

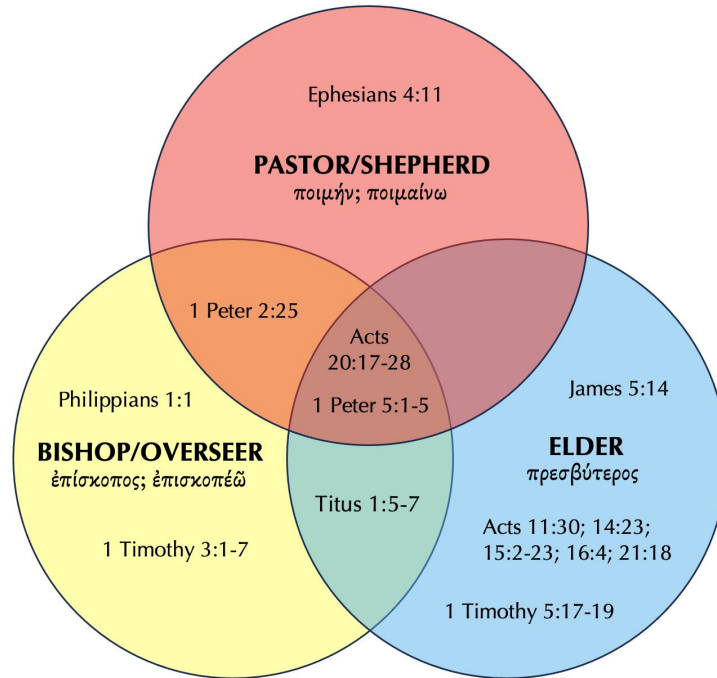
Keep watch over (verb form of *episkopos*) *yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers* (noun form of *episkopos*). **Be shepherds** (verb form of *poimen*) *of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.* (Acts 20:28)

*The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint **elders** (presbuteros) in every town, as I directed you. An **elder** (presbuteros) must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an **overseer** (noun form of *episkopos*) manages God's household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.* (Titus 1:5-7)

*To the **elders** (presbuteros) among you, I appeal as a fellow elder (presbuteros) and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: **Be shepherds** (verb form of *poimen*) of God's flock that is under your care, **watching over** (verb form of *episkopos*) them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.* (1 Peter 5:2-3)

Neither Paul nor Peter were referring to distinct offices. The varied terms spoke to different facets of what it means to be in local church leadership, what we mean by pastor.¹

¹ It is right to note that these distinct terms are not always included together. *So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.* (Ephesians 4:11-13). Here, pastor (noun form of *poimen*) is listed among the roles that Christ gave the church. Elders and overseers aren't even mentioned. This has led some to conclude that pastor and elder/overseer are two distinct positions. In this view, all elder/overseers are pastors, but not all pastors are elder/overseers. Perhaps that is correct. Even if it were so, it is not available to us to simply give women the title of pastor, while withholding from them the title of elder/overseer. We would also be required to delineate the differences between those roles. The case for distinguishing these as separate offices/roles is interesting. And yet, it seems to fall short when considering common church experience. People do shepherd and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to do so, even without holding a church office. Small group leaders are one example. Those who hold the office of pastor are also tasked with elder/overseer responsibilities in the church, in ways that a small group leader is not. It's simply not possible to disentangle these functions from one another at the pastoral level. It would be nothing more than word games to assert that women can be pastors but not elders, bringing us back to our original dilemma.



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Perhaps they chose this approach because they were not fixated on prominence and privilege (often associated with titles), but on responsibilities instead. An honest look at our history shows that we have adopted a way of using New Testament terminology that emphasizes titles and have created a distinction in roles where there wasn't one originally. That is not to say that every elder/overseer/shepherd functioned identically to fellow office holders in the first century church. Reason demands and Scripture more than implies that office holders shouldered the privilege of leadership differently.

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. (1 Timothy 5:17)

There was a singular office, described with three distinct terms, used interchangeably, that was held by multiple leaders at a time, who jointly fulfilled all the duties related to pastoral ministry. If we look at the policy that was written in 2018, considering these facts, but this time using terms interchangeably, as did Paul and Peter, we must acknowledge a dilemma.

It is the practice of Autumn Ridge that

- Only men serve as **elders/overseers/pastors** and as the senior **elder/overseer/pastor**.
- Both men and women serve in any other **elder/overseer/pastor** or church leadership role.
- We are committed to approaching this subject with extreme humility, knowing that a variety of biblical views are represented in our congregation, and it is our desire to maintain unity on this issue.

Being candid with ourselves means acknowledging that our practice is self-contradictory. We do not second guess or question those who brokered the compromise. We celebrate their intent to cultivate and maintain unity. We also understand the confusion and angst that has grown in response to it. We have found ourselves in a troubling dilemma. If we assert that women cannot be elders, then we must also assert that they cannot be pastors. If we assert that women may be pastors, we must also assert that they can be elders. So, which is it?

Adopting a practice that is clear, coherent, and consistent with a faithful reading of Scripture mandated ending the compromise and adopting one of the following options:

1. Adopt a form of church governance that reappropriates the biblical term elder as a title for a modern position of leadership in the church (i.e., member of a board of directors), and acknowledge this role as being distinct from what is represented in the New Testament. This would eliminate the contradiction in our stated practice. A pastor and an elder would be fundamentally different roles. And yet, because this modern role would not be rooted in the New Testament, there would be no biblical basis for disallowing women to be elders. Therefore, women would be permitted to occupy and serve in all positions of leadership.
2. Decline to adopt a form of church governance that reappropriates the biblical term elder as a title for a modern position of leadership in the church (i.e., member of a board of directors). Maintain our historic practice of affirming women as pastors, necessitating that women may also be elders. Therefore, women would be permitted to occupy and serve in all positions of leadership.
3. Decline to adopt a form of church governance that reappropriates the biblical term elder as a title for a modern position of leadership in the church (i.e., member of a board of directors). Maintain our historic practice of not allowing women to be elders, necessitating that women may not be pastors either. Therefore, only men would be permitted to occupy and serve in positions of pastor and elder.

Option 1 was never seriously considered. It's our desire to align with Scripture as best as we know how. While there is nothing sinful or contradictory to Scripture when a church has a board of directors, it is our desire to maintain alignment with a biblical understanding of elder/overseer/pastor as best we can.

How well did Options 2 and 3 fulfill the requirements of clarity, coherence, and consistency with a faithful reading of Scripture? Further, what implications came with these options?

Option 2

- **Is it clear?** Yes. Women can serve in and occupy any position of leadership at Autumn Ridge Church.
- **Is it coherent?** Yes. There is no aspect of this practice that contradicts another.
- **Is it consistent with a faithful reading of Scripture?** Yes, remembering that there are intelligent, goodhearted, Jesus loving Christians who disagree.
- **What are the implications?** Women can now be fully considered as eligible candidates for any elder or pastoral position.

Option 3

- **Is it clear?** No. While it is clear that women may not serve as elders or pastors, it is not clear where to draw the boundaries for women's leadership and teaching.
Examples:
 - Is it still permissible for a woman in a director position to lead volunteers who are men?
 - Is it still permissible for a woman to give insight into Scripture in a small group setting where men are present?
 - Is it still permissible for women to lead men on the mission field, or should those women no longer be supported missionaries of Autumn Ridge Church?
- **Is it coherent?** Yes. The practice of treating elders and pastors as though they are different biblical positions has been removed.
- **Is it consistent with a faithful reading of Scripture?** Yes, remembering that there are intelligent, goodhearted, Jesus loving Christians who disagree.
- **What are the implications?** Women in pastoral positions, or those women whose positions have pastoral responsibilities would be fired or demoted. Additionally, women on the mission field who teach men and lead men would no longer be funded.

This was a difficult dilemma indeed. Though Option 2 was the least disruptive, we wanted to do more than find the path of least resistance. Irrespective of the implications, it remains our intent to do what is loving and honoring of Jesus, Scripture, and the church.

Q8: Are there biblical examples of women in leadership?

Yes. Both the Old and New Testaments are stacked with examples of God ordaining women to lead and exercise authority equal to men, even over men.

OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

Hagar

Hagar was not a leader. And yet, she enjoys a unique distinction in human history. Her inclusion in the Genesis narrative is tethered to Abram's (later named Abraham) sin. She was an Egyptian, and possibly became a member of the household during Abram's time in Egypt, during which he gifted his wife to Pharaoh, pretending she was his sister (Genesis 12). Later, unable to believe that God would keep his promise to give Abram and Sarai a child, Hagar was the tool of their skeptical, pragmatic reasoning.

Sarai conceived a scheme; Abram and Hagar conceived a son. In time the burden of Sarai's contempt burned too hot, the pregnant Hagar fled camp. Desperate and facing certain death, the Lord came to her rescue. This was Hagar's response.

She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." (Genesis 16:13)

Hagar is the first person to ascribe a name God. The brilliance and significance of this act shines from every angle. It's a woman, not a man who first gives a name to God. It's a covenant outsider, not an

insider that first gives a name to God. Lastly, God is not diminished by being named. This is significant. When Adam named Eve it no more made him superior to her than naming God made Hagar the superior. God was pleased to be named by a slave, who was a woman, who was a covenant outsider. Hagar may not be a counter example to the view that women should be restricted in leadership. She is, however, an example of God embracing and elevating the lowly who was made low by the patriarchal power structures of the Ancient Near East, a counter-example to those who see Adam's act of naming Eve as a display of his authority over her.

Miriam

Miriam was a prophet, and contributor to Scripture.

When Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea." (Exodus 15:19-21)

The first observation is that she was a prophet. Second, she led in worship. Without question she led women. Did men join, following her lead? The passage above doesn't give us a clear answer. Taken with other passages, her God ordained leadership applied to all the people of Israel. Consider how Miriam is described by God, through the prophet Micah.

I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam. (Micah 6:4)

Along with Moses and Aaron, God sent Miriam to lead the people of Israel, both the men and women.

Deborah

The account of Deborah can be read in Judges chapter 4, with her song comprising all of chapter 5. She wasn't just a prominent judge, she was a prominent leader spiritually, civically, and militarily. Though concentrated in a narrower window of time, her light shines just as brightly as King David's. Her leadership was not the result of there being a lack of qualified, suitable men, and nowhere in Scripture is it ever implied that God made an exception for her leadership.

Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. (Judges 4:4-5)

Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go." (Judges 4:8)

When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, Sisera summoned from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River all his men and his nine hundred chariots fitted with iron. Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the LORD has given

Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?” So Barak went down Mount Tabor, with ten thousand men following him. At Barak’s advance, the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot. (Judges 4:12-15)

She was respected and relied upon by Barak, a man with enough respect and gravitas that ten thousand men followed him into battle. Barak not only trusted her, but he also submitted to her commands. Perhaps the most intriguing fact about her, Deborah is the only judge who doesn’t have anything negative described of her in the Book of Judges. In chapter 5, she is named first (a significant honor) and together with Barak she sings a song of victory. Again, a woman contributes to the content of Scripture.

If it’s a sin for women to lead men, how is it not sinful for God to install Deborah as a leader? All that is right, good, and holy is an expression of God’s character. Ultimately, it’s an expression of love (Matthew 22:36-40). Anything that is a sin or evil is a violation of God’s character, i.e., love. Anything that is ordained and commended by God is an expression of God’s character, i.e., love. If God cannot change, if God cannot violate his own nature, and if God installed Deborah as a spiritual, civil, and military leader, it’s not a violation of anything good and holy for women to be fully included in leadership, whether that leadership be in the church, parachurch organizations, or any other sphere. In fact, their inclusion is an expression of love.

Huldah

The first person in human history to canonize Scripture was a woman. Her name was Huldah.

Hilkiah and those the king had sent with him went to speak to the prophet Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tokhath, the son of Hasrah, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the New Quarter. She said to them, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Tell the man who sent you to me, ‘This is what the LORD says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people—all the curses written in the book that has been read in the presence of the king of Judah. Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and aroused my anger by all that their hands have made, my anger will be poured out on this place and will not be quenched.’ Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before God when you heard what he spoke against this place and its people, and because you humbled yourself before me and tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD. Now I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place and on those who live here.’ ” So they took her answer back to the king. Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the LORD with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the Levites—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the LORD. The king stood by his pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the LORD—to follow the LORD and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, and to obey the words of the covenant written in this book. Then he had everyone in Jerusalem and Benjamin pledge themselves to it; the people of Jerusalem did this in accordance with the covenant of God, the God of their ancestors. Josiah removed all the detestable idols from all the territory belonging to the Israelites, and he had all

who were present in Israel serve the LORD their God. As long as he lived, they did not fail to follow the LORD, the God of their ancestors. (2 Chronicles 34:22-33)

The impact of this woman's influence and spiritual leadership is nothing short of astounding. It should not be lost on us that Huldah claimed to speak for God. She told the men of the king, "This is what the LORD says..." (2 Chronicles 34:24). Huldah commanded the men of the king to carry the command from her to the king. Again God ordained that a woman exercise authority over men.

When in doubt about the veracity of God's word, men in power turned to her. Men in power obeyed her. This ignited profound repentance and revival. The example of Huldah should be held up against the claim that women in leadership places the church on a slippery slope.

Slippery slope arguments are logical fallacies. Huldah is a counter example to the belief that women in leadership compromises anyone's discipleship. King Josiah reigned 31 years. Instead of expediting a slide into debauchery, and sexual and gender confusion (the kinds of sins which Israel was already mired in), the opposite was true. Huldah's spiritual leadership sparked repentance that led the nation out of the culturally acceptable sins, and into holiness.

Old Testament narrative is an exhibition hall of God's delight in honoring and including women, installing them as leaders. This does nothing to violate his nature; nor does it violate masculinity and femininity. Rather, it's a return to the good design that was marred and mangled after the first sin. Spiritual death, physical death, and the death of peace and harmony between the sexes is a pockmark on the masterpiece of God, not brushstrokes of the master artist. These women are the counter examples to the claim that women should be restricted from leadership.

NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

The way that Jesus interacted with, loved, served, commissioned, and entrusted people is the way that we should as well. The essence of discipleship is deferring to the teaching and the way of the one we follow. May we be covered in the dust of our rabbi.

Mary

After a memorable encounter with Elizabeth, and John the Baptist's joyful response while still in utero, Mary offered a song that was either spontaneously uttered or carefully crafted. Her words, her thoughts, that very song is Scripture.

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." (Luke 1:46-55)

What is not up for debate is that her song, known as the Magnificat, is more than background details, adding color to inspired narrative. It is proclamation of theological truth and expresses a keen understanding of redemptive history.

The style of Mary's song resembles Old Testament hymns of divine victory. There are clear parallels to the Psalms. But there are even more resonances with faith-filled songs of faithful and inspired women, like Miriam (Exodus 15:1-21), Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10), and Deborah (Judges 5:1-31). What these songs have in common with Mary is the celebration of God fighting on behalf of his people, acting in conformity to his covenant love, and overturning what may have seemed like impossible odds. In the words of Barbara Reid, "These songs are not sweet lullabies; they are militant songs that exult in the saving power of God that has brought defeat to those who had subjugated God's people."²

It may be correct to label Mary's song as rare, but it isn't unique. She was simply the next in an ancient line of women who proclaimed doctrine to all humanity, through the pages of Scripture. The theological insights of this young woman have been used to inspire worship and disciple billions of men and women for two millennia.

Mary was far more than a utilitarian contributor to the incarnation of Jesus. She was an ongoing ministry partner, leader, and contributor to the spread of the gospel. As we'll see at the end of this section, she was among those who were filled with the Spirit, who then spoke in tongues, and prophesied to men and women from around the known world.

The Samaritan Woman

John 4 contains numerous disquieting surprises for those accustomed to first century Jewish culture. In speaking to the Samaritan woman Jesus dismantled societal norms regarding ethnicity, religion, and gender. It's not that Jesus talked to her that is worthy of note. Rather, it's what she did and who she then talked to that should occupy our attention.

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world." (John 4:39-42)

Many people came to faith in Jesus from this community. It was this woman; it was her verbal proclamation that was their bridge to him. Is there any difference between what she did and what Paul explains as necessary for the salvation for those who don't know the good news?

*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? **And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?** And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:14-15)*

² Nijay K. Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How women led, taught, and ministered in the early church*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2023) p.53

Instead of hinting that it was inappropriate for this woman to proclaim to men, instead of later offering explicit correction about how a woman transgressed God-designed gender roles, Jesus seemed to be happy about it. He even changed his itinerary so that he could stay for two extra days to continue the work of evangelism. Were her feet beautiful?

At this point we must engage a serious question. Who started the evangelistic work in that Samaritan community? We only have two possible answers: Jesus, or the Samaritan woman. If we say that she started it, we must then affirm that it is biblical for women to preach to men. Should someone reply that she initiated it, but without Jesus' approval, that simply doesn't square. Jesus was never squeamish about prohibiting people from telling others about him (Mark 1:41-42; Mark 5:43; Mark 7:33-36). Jesus didn't prohibit her proclamation. Everything about this narrative presents her actions as good.

If we answer that Jesus started the evangelistic work, then it's biblical for women to preach to men. Jesus intentionally initiated a conversation that resulted in her proclaiming him to the village, their request of him to stay, and ultimately many of them turning to him as their Savior. Clearly this was Jesus' plan all along. That is why John wrote, "Now he had to go through Samaria." He didn't have to go through Samaria to preserve time. If Jesus had a timeframe to honor, it makes no sense that he would burn two additional days in Samaria.

Finally, it's worth our time to also consider the placement of this encounter. Instead of viewing the events of John chapters 3 and 4 as unrelated incidents, we are better served to read them as side-by-side comparisons. It's in John 3 that Jesus entertains Nicodemus' nighttime, under the radar rendezvous. He was an educated, influential man, who struggled to understand the gospel. Post resurrection he would become a public, fully devoted follower of Jesus. Now compare that encounter to the one in John 4. Here is an uneducated woman, lacking positional influence, who not only quickly embraced, but immediately spread the good news about Jesus.

Galilean Women

Whenever we imagine what it must have looked like for Jesus to travel from place to place, teaching, performing miracles, and enjoying parties, we'd be misguided to imagine a male only scene. Jesus had many female disciples.

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means. (Luke 8:1-3)

Women traveled with Jesus. Women funded the ministry of Jesus. Many female disciples were present to watch the crucifixion of Jesus (Matthew 27:55). Galilean women were the first to arrive at the empty tomb (Luke 24:6-7). It's beneficial to consider why Gospel writers specifically named some in attendance and not others.

It is a good general rule, capable of explaining most occurrences of personal names in the Gospels, that when characters in the Gospels (other than public figures such as Pilate or

*Caiaphas) are named, it is because they were Christians well known in the early church and of whom the first readers of the Gospels in question would have already heard.*³

Because they were alive when the New Testament was written and distributed, people could talk to and learn from them. Naming them encouraged that. Naming them elevated them as trusted witnesses and people of influence in the first churches.

In Luke 10, Jesus sent out the 72 as advance teams to prepare the towns and villages for his arrival. Were these 36 male pairs? Is it possible that some of these were female pairs or husband and wife teams? The text doesn't definitively indicate either way. What we know is that Jesus had female disciples who traveled with him. The 72 were picked from this company. Jesus was happy for women to proclaim the good news about him (John 4:39-42).

Even church fathers who struggled to disentangle themselves from misogynistic viewpoints did not find it problematic that women were included in the 72.⁴ Theorizing about Andronicus and Junia, from Romans 16, Origen (AD 185-254) wrote,

*It may indeed be that they were relatives of Paul according to the flesh and that they believed in Christ before him and were regarded as excellent among the apostles of Christ. From this it may be understood that they were perhaps of the seventy-two who were themselves also called apostles, and that it is on that account that he says they are excellent among the apostles, even among those who were apostles before him.*⁵

Though much closer to these events than us, Origen was 200 years removed from the commissioning of the 72. We cannot say definitively either way, though it does seem more likely than not that Jesus sent out both men and women.

Mary and Martha

Also in Luke 10, we read of a stunning interplay between Jesus and two sisters, in which he affirms the inclusion of women in what had always and only been a male occupied space.

*As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, **who sat at the Lord's feet** listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)*

³ Richard Baukham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017) p.211-212

⁴ More about Junia will be included in a later section. At this point it suffices to note that scholars agree that Junia was in fact a woman. It is not important at this point to speculate as to whether she and Andronicus were well known among the apostles or well known by the apostles. What is significant is that women were historically recognized as sent out by Jesus for ministry.

⁵ Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans 10.21.2, as translated into Latin and preserved by Rufinus, translated into English by Thomas Scheck

“Who sat at the Lord’s feet” is a descriptive phrase, but it’s not describing location. This was an idiom, or an expression that means she is in the position of a disciple. She wasn’t simply in the room. She was included as a disciple of the rabbi. The reason for discord between Martha and Mary can’t be reduced to an unfair distribution of domestic labor. Martha believed that Mary was wrong to assume a status that was reserved for men only.

She is ‘sitting at his feet’; a phrase which doesn’t mean what it would mean today, the adoring student gazing up in admiration and love at the wonderful teacher. As is clear from the use of the phrase elsewhere in the NT (for instance, Paul with Gamaliel), to sit at the teacher’s feet is a way of saying you are being a student, picking up the teacher’s wisdom and learning; and in that very practical world you wouldn’t do this just for the sake of informing your own mind and heart, but in order to be a teacher, a rabbi, yourself. Like much in the gospels, this story is left cryptic as far as we at least are concerned, but I doubt if any first-century reader would have missed the point. That, no doubt, is part at least of the reason why we find so many women in positions of leadership, initiative and responsibility in the early church; I used to think Romans 16 was the most boring chapter in the letter, and now, as I study the names and think about them, I am struck by how powerfully they indicate the way in which the teaching both of Jesus and of Paul was being worked out in practice.⁶

First century Jewish culture, just like almost all human culture had calcified around status, value, and privilege being based on gender differences, ethnic differences, and economic differences. This explains Martha’s difficulty in understanding and accepting the equal inclusion that Jesus extended not only to her sister, but to herself as well. To add a layer of historical and cultural understanding to the context, consider the following prayers of the ancient world.

I thank god that I was born Greek and not barbarian, a free man and not a slave, a man and not a woman, but above all, I was born in the age of Socrates. (Attributed to Plato)

Blessed art thou, O God, for not making me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. (Jewish Prayer)

The latter is a prayer that the Apostle Paul would have likely uttered daily, prior to becoming a follower of Jesus. It was following Jesus that would eventually lead him to write these words.

Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. (Colossians 3:11)

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and 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. (Galatians 3:28-29)

The previous observation of N.T. Wright helps us understand just how disruptive Jesus was to the status quo, “in that very practical world you wouldn’t do this just for the sake of informing your own mind and heart, but in order to be a teacher, a rabbi, yourself.” Affirming anyone, Mary included, as a disciple also affirmed their potential to become a teacher as well.

⁶ N.T. Wright, Men, Women and the Church, St John’s College, Durham, September 4, 2004. (<https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/womens-service-in-the-church-the-biblical-basis/>)

Jesus used his status to elevate women to a status that had previously been unimaginable to them. Taking Jesus seriously means that we take seriously the conclusion: Everything that it means to be a disciple is fully applied to everyone who follows Jesus. And that includes women too.

Mary Magdalene

Mentioned at least a dozen times in the Gospels, even if she had not been present at the resurrection, Mary Magdalene emerges as an important figure in the life of Jesus. She was among the women who travelled with Jesus, investing her personal wealth in his ministry. While the designation, “apostle to the Apostles” may possibly have been in use centuries earlier, we know with certainty that Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) is the reason we know this honorary title today.

Note the three privileges given to Mary Magdalene. First, she had the privilege of being a prophet because she was worthy enough to see the angels, for a prophet is an intermediary between angels and the people. Second, she had the dignity or rank of an angel insofar as she looked upon Christ, on whom the angels desire to look. Third, she had the office of an apostle; indeed, she was an apostle to the apostles insofar as it was her task to announce our Lord's resurrection to the disciples. Thus, just as it was a woman who was the first to announce the words of death, so it was a woman who would be the first to announce the words of life.⁷

She was the first to behold and quite literally hold Jesus after the Resurrection (John 20:11-18). She was the first to preach the message of the Resurrection. It's important that we acknowledge that this is not a word game or exercise in semantics. It is not defined by the historical and cultural expressions that we've experienced. It's understandable that we think of preaching as something that is done at a scheduled time, in a church service, after much time of study, by a pastor with some level of qualification or endorsement.

Natural though it may be to use those familiar experiences as lenses through which we understand what preaching is, the opposite is in order. It's the words employed in Scripture, and their inflexible definitions that should be the lens by which we evaluate our understanding of preaching. Preaching is simply proclamation.

Mary preached. She made public proclamation. As evidenced by Jesus' actions and command to Mary, it was the sovereign decree of God that, “it was a woman who would be the first to announce words of life.”

The Women at Pentecost

Though the events of Pentecost transpired after the Ascension, they naturally flow out of Jesus' interaction with his disciples, both before and after the Resurrection. Luke ensures that his readers understand that women were present when the Holy Spirit arrived.

They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. (Acts 1:14)

⁷ Aquinas, In Ioannem Evangelistam Expositio 20.3 §2519. (<https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/John20.htm>)

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1-4)

Immediately upon being filled with the Holy Spirit, they all went out and preached to the people. Some were empowered to preach and/or prophesy in the native languages of the crowd. This was a disorienting scene. Naturally, many looked for a natural explanation and attempted to dismiss the disciples as being drunk. It is key that we observe what Peter said in defense of this moment. He immediately quoted the prophet Joel.

*Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: " 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. **Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.** I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' (Acts 2:14-21)*

One of the confirming signs of being in last days, one of the signs that validated the substance of what was preached was the inclusion of women as prophets. This was a multigenerational, multicultural, egalitarian, gospel proclamation-fest. If the inclusion of women as full participants was part of what validated the launch of the church, how could their partial inclusion be God's design for the ongoing function of the church?

Priscilla

The second person listed in Romans 16 is Priscilla, sometimes called Prisca. She was the wife of Aquila. They were well traveled, highly trusted companions of Paul. They are mentioned six times in total, four of those times she is mentioned before her husband. This was highly unusual for a woman to be named first.

In Acts 18 we learn that the couple was Jewish, were tent makers by trade, who left Rome under the order of Claudius. They travelled with Paul to Corinth and later to Ephesus. While in Ephesus, it appears that Priscilla and Aquila take on a leadership role among the believers in Ephesus. This is where they met Apollos. Together, they both taught him.

When Priscilla and Aquila heard him [Apollos], they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. (Acts 18:26)

It's important that we don't imagine our own experiences with home and read that back into the New Testament account. Homes were a combination of very private and very public environments. Homes were centers of business, public meetings, and religious gatherings. It would be misguided to assume

that they instructed him privately and somehow stretch that into an application of 1950s America-era gender roles, in which a woman dutifully protects a man's sense of masculinity.

Rather, this would have been the most logical and hospitable location for instruction to take place. Furthermore, Paul made clear that Priscilla and Aquila hosted churches in their homes. There is no reason to assume that this was a private session of instruction between three people. It is just as reasonable, perhaps more so, to conclude that Apollos joined with the congregation, being disciplined, under the leadership of both Priscilla and Aquila. In most instances, except when context indicates otherwise, when a home is referenced in the New Testament, we should think church (house church) instead of private residence.

Let's take note that this couple was endorsed by Paul to lead and teach in Ephesus, the same city in which Timothy was leading when he received two letters from Paul, which contained the difficult to interpret verses about women not teaching or assuming authority. Clearly, Paul had endorsed Priscilla teaching Apollos in this very place. As will be demonstrated below, Paul expected that all believers, men and women alike, would submit to Priscilla.

Householders: Nympha, Chloe, and Lydia

In addition to Priscilla, there are other women identified as having a church in their home: Nympha (Colossians 4:15), Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11), and Lydia (Acts 16:11-40). The detail that unites these three and distinguishes them from Priscilla is that no men or husbands are mentioned. It appears that they were the sole managers of their respective households. Gordon Fee describes the relationship between householders and the churches they hosted.

The householder would naturally serve as the leader of the house church. That is, by the very sociology of things, it would never have occurred to them that person from outside the household would come in and lead what was understood as simply an extension of the household. To put it plainly, the church is not likely to gather in a person's house unless the householder also functioned as its natural leader. Thus Lydia would have held the same role in the church in her house as she did as a master of the household.⁸

When local churches received these letters from Paul, or heard Luke's account read to their own assembly, would their esteem for these women have increased? How likely is it that they would have naturally viewed them as leaders—wise, dependable, and trusted by an Apostle? If it was Paul's intent to safeguard the church from women in leadership, why was he so casual in how he referenced and honored them? At the very least they should give us pause before insisting that women cannot be included as overseers in a local church.

If men were written about in the way these women were written about, scholars and historians would quickly assert that they were overseers. This, in fact, happened. There was a time when scholars believed Nympha was a man. Commentaries produced during that period naturally concluded she (thinking she was a he) was a leader and overseer. Is that a quirk of history? Or is that an example of how easy it is for presuppositions to shape our conclusions? This undoubtedly cuts both ways. It is our task to wrestle these tendencies all the way down to ground with rigorous study and risky questions.

⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *Listening to the Spirit of the Text*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000) p. 73 (From Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, p. 104)

Junia

Junia has been the object of much furor. Though it was doubted for a time, there is no longer any doubt that Junia was indeed a woman.

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. (Romans 16:7)

The grammar of Romans 16:7 allows for two readings. It is possible that she was an apostle. It is also possible that she was well known among, as in, by the apostles. With the understanding that apostle means sent one, it is more than likely that there was a contingent of men and women who served as vocational missionaries, but were tagged with the label, apostles. Perhaps this is what Paul was trying to convey. John Chrysostom and a host of other early Christian leaders affirmed a more egalitarian understanding of Junia's status. He affirmed that she was in fact an apostle, while he himself was not affirming of women's inclusion in leadership.

It was the greatest of honors to be counted a fellow prisoner of Paul's.... Think what great praise it was to be considered of note among the apostles. These two were of note because of their works and achievements. Think how great the devotion of this woman Junia must have been, that she should be worthy to be called an apostle! But even here Paul does not stop his praise, for they were Christians before he was.⁹

What is not questioned is that both Junia and Andronicus were trusted partners in ministry, esteemed and widely known. They were perhaps some of the longest standing followers of Jesus. Regardless of their apostleship status, they were known by and beloved by the Apostles. And yet, more interesting than these credentials is the fact that they were both imprisoned with Paul. This is hardly noteworthy for Andronicus. But for Junia, this is where the real mystery lies.

Prisons were the domain of men. It was extremely rare for women to be incarcerated. In the patriarchal society of first century Rome, women were sent home to their fathers or husbands to be disciplined. Junia's imprisonment more than implies that she was guilty of a more serious crime. If a woman was imprisoned, she was jailed in the same facility as men. In such conditions, women were sexually vulnerable to fellow inmates, guards, and anyone in a position of power. Her incarceration is more than an interesting detail included by Paul. Junia risked much and perhaps paid much as coworker in ministry.

When we look at "higher crimes" in Roman law, we can rule out things that Paul would never commend and these leaders would never do: robbery, theft, murder, and so on. When we eliminate, as well, other crimes that would result in execution (like treason), we are left with a couple of legitimate possibilities—namely civil disturbance and starting a riot...In order for Junia to have been rounded up for questioning and confinement, she had to have been out and about

⁹ John Chrysostom, <https://catenabile.com/com/584b75339ac03ecd4b8e53a8>

in public. Had she been operating only privately among women, I doubt this would have gotten the attention of Roman authorities.¹⁰

We don't know the exact reason for her arrest and imprisonment. We do know that it was ministry related. It is highly unlikely that association with Paul or Andronicus was sufficient to warrant incarceration. The facts of Roman judicial practice suggest that she was engaged in public preaching that was deemed riotous.

Phoebe

The epistle to the Roman church, Paul's magnum opus was carried by Phoebe. Described as a deacon and a benefactor, she was a leader of many. Fulfilling this task required that she traveled more than 600 miles from her home. It's unlikely that she traveled alone. Paul could have entrusted the letter to any able-bodied man. Yet, he chose her.

As a "benefactor of many" she will be used to handling the competing demands placed upon her by a variety of relationships. We can see that she is the perfect person to represent Paul in Rome, to help the church in Rome receive Paul's call to unity in Jesus the Risen Messiah, and to facilitate the "greet one another" which Paul commands as the first concrete expression of the welcome to which he calls the church — especially given the large number of women involved in Gospel work in Rome (Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, and others mentioned in 16:3-16).¹¹

The role of letter carrier is especially relevant. The person in this role was expected to represent the writer, read the letter with all the inflections and intonations of the writer, and answer questions that the recipients may have.

The letter carrier served to extend and clarify the message so that it was properly contextualized and interpreted in the intended manner by the recipient...[The letter carrier] was thought to be a trusted friend or an associate/agent who could accurately and faithfully relay the oral component of the message. In such cases it even seems that at times the letter carrier acted not just as an intermediary between the sender and recipient but that he was invested with authority to carry on and extend the dialogue and in a way vicariously stood in for the sender who could not be physically present.¹²

The facts of history and the norms of first century cultural strongly imply that Phoebe was the first person to expound on Romans.

Paul Urged All Believers to Submit to Women in Leadership

Understandably, those in favor of women's restriction have asked those on the other side to provide a single example of a woman who was identified as an elder/overseer/pastor. That would be helpful.

¹⁰ Nijay K. Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2023) pp. 149, 152

¹¹ Peter Head, "Who Carried the Epistles," <https://tyndalehouse.com/explore/articles/who-carried-the-epistles/>

¹² Lincoln Blumwell, "The Message and the Medium: Some Observations on Epistolary Communication in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 10 (2014): 24-67, at 57 and 64. (From Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, p. 122)

One New Testament precedent would effectively end the debate. Is it possible that not just a single female church leader, but several have been hiding in plain sight? There is an easy to miss sentence, at the end of the final chapter of 1 Corinthians 16 that may be the smoking gun for the case of women's unrestricted inclusion in leadership.

You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the Lord's people. I urge you, brothers and sisters, to submit to such people and to everyone who joins in the and labors at it. (1 Corinthians 16:15-16)

We don't have to guess or wonder about who it was to whom Paul wanted all believers to submit. Below are just some of the coworkers and laborers who are specifically named by Paul.

- **Priscilla**
- Aquila
- **Mary**
- Andronicus
- **Junia**
- Urbanus
- **Tryphaena**
- **Tryphosa**
- **Persis**
- Timothy

The highlighted names are women, who Paul commends as coworkers and co-laborers.

1. Paul urged that all believers submit to all coworkers who labor in ministry.
2. Whoever Paul identifies as a coworker who labors in ministry should be submitted to by all believers.
3. Paul identified numerous women as coworkers who labor in ministry.
4. Paul urged that all believers submit to numerous women who labor in ministry.
5. Therefore, Paul urged that men submit to women who labor in ministry.

Most, if not all those who affirm some level of restriction on women's leadership also welcome and applaud women's participation in ministry. Many, if not all would describe their inclusion as indispensable to the Great Commission. The purpose of this brief survey is to highlight that many New Testament women were more than participants who engaged in ministry. They led in ministry. They led congregations in ministry. Paul's urging to submit to all who labor is no less serious than what he intended to communicate in 1 Timothy 2:12.

Q9: How do we know the difference between a tension and a contradiction?

(For those who want a better understanding of how we reconcile this with passages that some understand to restrict women's' inclusion, see our sermons on [1 Timothy 2:11-15](#) and [1 Timothy 3](#).)

There are tensions that are difficult to resolve and there are mysteries that can't be solved. That must be acknowledged. Tensions and mysteries, however, should not be used as cover to preserve contradictions. Tension and mystery are labels that should only be reserved for truth claims that are difficult to understand and explain yet are not mutually exclusive.

God is one in being and three in persons. That is a mystery. A contradiction would be God is one in person and three in persons. How is it that God can be one being and three in persons? Theologians

and philosophers are helpful to a point. It is a mystery but not an affirmation of mutually exclusive claims.

Contradictions are truth claims that are mutually exclusive. When two claims are mutually exclusive, either one is wrong, or both are wrong. They can't both be correct. Claiming that God forbids that women teach or have authority over men, while also affirming that God ordained that women serve as civic leaders, military leaders, and spiritual leaders in the Old Testament, preach to men and prophesy to men in both testaments, teaching them about and calling them to faith in Jesus in the New Testament—that is a contradiction.

Working through all the biblical examples of women in leadership and the passages that many have understood to restrict women from leadership takes work and that work takes time. This is no easy task that isn't to be taken lightly.

While we affirm the full inclusion of women in leadership, without restriction, we continue to affirm that intelligent, goodhearted, Jesus loving people are going to see it differently. Not only are people going to fall on both sides of this issue, there's also a continuum of nuance on both sides. Whatever understanding that you believe is best, you are fully welcome and fully wanted at Autumn Ridge Church.

Q9: What resources are recommended for further study?

Books

- [Tell Her Story](#) by Nijay Gupta
- [Nobody's Mother](#) by Sandra Glahn
- [Why Can't Women Do That?](#) by Philip B. Payne
- [Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian](#) by Michelle Lee Barnewall
- [Men and Women in the Church](#) by Sarah Sumner
- [Two Views on Women In Ministry](#), edited by Stanley N. Gundry and James R. Beck

Websites and Podcasts

- terranwilliams.com
- margmowczko.com
- [Ask NT Wright Anything](#)
- [Theology in the Raw: Episode 1111 with Andrew Bartlett](#)

Videos

- NT Wright: [Biblical Basis for Women's Service in the Church](#)
- Ben Witherington III: [Women and Their Roles in the New Testament](#)