

NEW TESTAMENT WOMEN IN MINISTRY

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Prior to developing the major content of this study there are certain affirmations, acknowledgements, and admissions that are foundational to the validity of this paper.

First, this study is based on a commitment to the full inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, and proceeds on the assumption that those involved in honest Biblical study are equally committed. Such a position embraces the concept that the Holy Scriptures are the final authority in the development of any theological or Biblical theme or position.

Second, there is an acknowledgement of indebtedness to the broad range of studies that have appeared in theological journals, textbooks, and religious magazines, the content of which studies has focused on the matter of female roles in ministry. This is not an academic paper designed to challenge or affirm material presented in such studies. This paper is solely Biblical in content, and conclusions drawn are on the part of the writer of this study.

Third, this study is an admission of the limitations of the human mind in perfectly discovering the depths of Biblical teaching. The fullness of Divine knowledge has not been disclosed; the finitude of the creature prevails.

Fourth, the format of this study is primarily a referencing of New Testament examples of women in ministry, an identification and clarification of ministry gifts, a brief review of New Testament language relating to ministry roles of women, and a summary suggesting some basic principles germane to the subject of this study.

I

EXAMPLES OF NEW TESTAMENT WOMEN IN MINISTRY

That the New Testament includes the record of women in ministry is without question or controversy. Many are the women involved in ministry, and varied are the types of ministry in which they found involvement. This study is not designed as an exhaustive treatment of every woman in the New Testament involved in ministry, nor of every focus of ministry within that broad range of ministries stated or, in some instances, implied by Biblical references. Rather, it is more of a summary of the various ministry gifts illustrated by the lives of women as recorded in the New Testament. Further, the ministry gifts identified may not include every New Testament woman whose life and service illustrate that particular gift.

The following list of ministry gifts may not parallel the precise terminology employed by some contemporary writers in their attempts to delineate the various Spirit-given gifts for service in the Kingdom of God. However, the language deployed into this study is easily understood and is documented by living examples of women in whose lives God was working to fulfill His eternal purposes.

The Gift of Hospitality. In any identification of women in the New Testament who possessed the gift of hospitality, quite certainly Mary and Martha of Bethany must be included. (See *Luke 10:38-41; John 11; 12:1-3*) Martha may well be known as “the queen of hospitality” in the New Testament, and that is illustrated well in John 12:2. Lydia, whom Paul met on his first journey into Philippi, is surely one in whom resided the gift of hospitality. Her gracious invitation to her following the river-bank prayer meeting is clearly an illustration of this Spirit-given gift. (See *Acts 16:15*)

The Gifts of Encouragement and Helps. What does it take to encourage someone? That question may be answered only by each individual person. However, some instances of obvious encouragement are recorded in the New Testament. It may well be that some of the women whom Jesus healed of evil spirits and infirmities, such as Mary of Magdala, Joanna, wife of Chuza, and Susanna along with many others, provided a rich resource of encouragement for Jesus. (See Luke 8:2-3) Paul identifies Damaris, who with others, became believers in the Savior and joined with Paul in his ministry; surely this was an encouragement. (See Acts 17:34) Paul names Mary of Rome, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis (See Romans 16:6, 12) whose labors in the Lord were obviously a resource of encouragement to Paul. The philanthropic ministry of Dorcas served to encourage the Apostle Peter along with those women from Joppa who were already becoming a recognized group who received support and rendered service in the neophyte church. (See Acts 9:36-43)

The Gifts of Mercy, Compassion and Comfort. In the light of so many contemporary studies attempting to delineate the characteristics of male and female responses to life situations, such as “right brain” and “left brain” concepts, perhaps it is not totally out of order to suggest that when it comes to the gifts of mercy, compassion and comfort, the Holy Spirit’s wisdom in granting this chiefly, if not most frequently, to women is clearly understandable. The New Testament records numerous instances of women expressing these gifts. Attention is given to such as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less, and Salome who followed Jesus and ministered to Him while He was in Galilee. (See Mark 15:40-41) The ministries of mercy, compassion and comfort are obvious in the reference to Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and the many others who **provided for Him (Jesus) from their substance.** (See Luke 8:3) Perhaps it is highly significant that the heart-strings of a woman were sensitive to a very special ministry to Jesus. It is Mary of Bethany who sacrificially anointed the feet of Jesus in symbolic compassion and mercy. (See John 12:3) The Lucan record of the vicious beating of Paul and Silas in Philippi culminates in a ministry of mercy and comfort extended to these valiant warriors of the faith in the home of and by the tenderness of Lydia. (See Acts 16:22-24; 40)

The Gifts of Teaching, Wisdom and Knowledge. Whatever the Apostle Paul included in his instructions regarding the prohibition of women speaking and teaching in the church (See 1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:12) is not the focus of this point in the study. That women were gifted by grace for teaching is clearly evident in the New Testament. It is beyond comprehension that one would imagine Euodia and Syntyche simply sitting the sidelines with affirming smiles while Paul proclaimed the glorious Gospel of Christ. Rather, it may well be assumed that they were vitally involved in the instructional and proclamational ministries of those predecessor missionary endeavors ascribed to Paul and his itinerant companions. His commendation is that they **labored with him (me) in the gospel.** (See Philippians 4:2-3) Perhaps foremost in exhibiting the Spirit-given gift of teaching is Priscilla, who along with her husband Aquila had left Italy and settled in Corinth. They tenderly and obviously non-officiously taught more perfectly the Scriptural truth about Jesus to the eloquent and fervent Apollos with all his brilliance and power, but who suffered severe limitations as a preacher of the Holy Scriptures. (See Acts 18:1-2; 24-26)

The Gifts of Evangelism and Missions. Let no one think it strange that these are identified as ministry gifts. In addition to more readily acceptable “gift ministries” of **encouragement and helps**, some of the New Testament women in ministry were obviously gifted by grace for special ministries in evangelism and missionary itinerancy. Included would be Demaris whom Luke includes in that list of people who believed the gospel message and very possibly lent ministry service to Paul’s commission. (See Acts 17:34) Others added to this list are Euodia and Syntyche from Philippi who labored with Paul in the Gospel; his

being a ministry of itinerant evangelism and missions as one who would understand these terms. (See *Philippians 4:2-3*) If asked, it is probable that the Apostle Paul would include such women as Phoebe, Mary of Rome, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis among those gifted by grace for committed and productive involvement in the ministries of evangelism and missions. (See *Romans 16:1, 6, 16*) So powerful is the ministry of Phoebe (*Romans 16:1-2*) that Paul employed a unique word to describe her ministry of helps. The word is προστάτις (*prostatis*) meaning literally, *one who stands in front of or before as a protector or champion*. Thus Phoebe may be thought of as a protectress of the character and ministry of the Apostle Paul.

The Gift of Prophecy (Preaching, Exhortation). One of the rife issues in theological and ecclesiastical circles is the matter of whether or not God gifts women for the ministry of preaching the Word of God. From a study of the New Testament it is uncertain as to why there is any question. If indeed the term **prophecy** and its verb cognate **prophesy** mean simply *to proclaim a divine message*, even in some cases including being *given to know events before and after*, and *one through whom God speaks*, then there is absolutely no doubt whatever that God has so gifted certain women just as He has so gifted certain men. Such women would be entitled in New Testament language to be known as **Prophetesses**. This ministry gift is associated most clearly with various New Testament women. One is Anna who stands in the line of prophets and prophetesses who heralded the coming of the Messiah. Of her the sacred record states that she was a προφήτις (*prophetis*), one to whom it was given to speak forth the message of God, based on divine wisdom and knowledge imparted by God Himself. As she gazed into the face of the Infant Jesus, she knew the past predictions regarding Him were true and now fulfilled. This elderly “Mother in Israel” had been married but seven years, and depending on the translation and interpretation, was 84 years old when the Infant Jesus was held in her arms. (Some translators and commentators suggest she had been widowed 84 years which would indicate her age to be well over 100 years.) (See *Luke 2:36-38*) Of significance is the inclusion of Mary, Mother of James the Less, Joanna, and Mary Magdalene, to whom the commission was given to announce the resurrection of Jesus. (See *Luke 24:10*) In any New Testament study focusing on women o whom the gift of prophecy was given, attention is drawn to the four virgin daughters of Philip the Evangelist, living in Caesarea. (See *Acts 21:8-9*) That they practiced this God-given gift of ministry is clearly stated in the words: “...four virgin daughters who prophesied.” (*Acts 21:9*) The gift to proclaim the divine message is, like any other gift, given by the Holy Spirit as He wills, and that without distinction as to gender, among other considerations.

The Gift of Administration. It may be a bit more difficult to delineate this gift from among those ascribed in the New Testament. However it is not without great significance that the New Testament includes references to house churches and names the **women** in whose homes such churches functioned. There were house churches in the homes of Lydia in Philippi (*Acts 16:15, 40*), and Priscilla (along with her husband Aquila) later living in Rome (*Romans 16:5*). That the “gift of administration” should be attached to these is not difficult to understand. It is unreasonable to think that it was simply a matter of “an open door.” Rather, to accomplish such a feat, especially in the day of extreme opposition and persecution, demanded a measure of administrative and organizational acumen, accounted for only by the belief that these were grace-gifted servants of Christ.

The Gifts of Prayer and Fasting. Let no one even consider that prayer and fasting are not ministry gifts. If they minister to no one except to God Himself, He has so considered them that the record of these having been given to some is included in the Holy Scriptures. Literally aglow with this gift is Anna, the Prophetess, of whom the sacred record states: **(She) did not depart from the temple, but served God**

with fasting and prayers night and day. (Luke 2:37) The prayer meeting in Jerusalem resulting in the miraculous release of Peter from prison included at least Mary, Mother of John Mark and the young lady named Rhoda. (See Acts 12:12-15) The prayer meeting on the river bank just outside the city of Philippi involved a number of women, including Lydia, the business woman who had moved from Thyatira. (See Acts 16:13-14)

The Gift of Godly Motherhood. To discount, or even pass over lightly this marvelous God-given gift is to render a travesty on the Scriptural account. Mary, the mother of Jesus is a primary Biblical example of a woman to whom was given the gifts vital to maintaining a Godly home, with its encouragement, instruction, discipline, mercy, helps, hospitality, wisdom, faith, administration, comfort, and prayer. The Lucan account, focusing so much on the humanity of Jesus, includes the record of **The Magnificat**, in which Mary expresses her heart before God. (See Luke 1:46-55) Her motherly concern for her Son appears in the Gospel accounts at such places as the Temple following the family participation in the Feast of the Passover (See Luke 2:48) and her heart-broken sobs she stood near His cross. (See John 19:25-27) Many Godly mothers appear throughout Scripture. One more will illustrate the significance of this ministry gift. It is highly unlikely that Timothy's Greek father would have been instrumental in instructing him in the Holy Scriptures. (See 2 Timothy 3:15) Rather, it is evident from Paul's letter to him that Timothy's understanding in spiritual matters came from the Godly heritage received through his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. (See 2 Timothy 1:5)

Many of these ministry gifts would find their intricate meanings absorbed into the greater concept of service. The word *διακονία* (*diakonia*) may well be thought to be inclusive in the greater context of the New Testament teaching on loving and obedient service rendered to God by His redeemed people, without distinction as to gender.

At least these gifts, then, are easily recognized and exemplified in the New Testament: **hospitality, encouragement and helps, mercy, compassion and comfort, teaching, wisdom and knowledge, evangelism and missions, preaching and exhortation, administration, prayer and fasting, and Godly motherhood.** Only the last ministry gift, Godly motherhood, is unavailable to men. Its counterpart, Godly fatherhood with all the Biblical responsibilities attached to it is, of course, available only to men. With emphasis it must be said that each of these ministry gifts is available to women as the Holy Spirit wills to give them, and as they are open to receive whatever gift(s) God has for them in their service in the Kingdom of God.

II

NEW TESTAMENT LANGUAGE RELATING TO MINISTRY ROLES OF WOMEN

Certain passages of Scripture and certain words used in those passages have been used by some as evidence that the Bible forbids women to be involved in ministry in the church. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 are among them. A careful reading of these passages of Scripture, along with 1 Timothy 3:2 and 12 in which Paul speaks to the matter of a bishop or deacon being the husband of only one wife needs to be completed before any kind judgment is made. These passages do not speak to the matter of women using ministry gifts given to them by the Holy Spirit. It is evident that if Paul intended that women are not allowed to speak (*including exhorting and preaching*), to teach and pray in the public worship experience, then the many references to women in ministry identified in Section I of this

study in which the concept of women in ministry is reified by living examples, need some serious explanation. An honest hermeneutical approach must admit to the practice of ministry gifts throughout the early history of the church. In this same vein of thought, an honest approach to church history validates the vital and productive contribution women have made in utilizing their Spirit-given ministry gifts.

To suggest that the Apostle Paul forbids women to speak, preach, teach and pray in public services of worship or in appropriate settings for the exercise of these ministry gifts, based on what some may desire as a literal interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:2 and 12, would, if such an interpretation bears integrity, demand that only married men who are monogamous be allowed to exercise such ministry gifts. The instruction of Paul in 1 Timothy 3:2 and 12 is that those who occupy the role, office or position of ***overseer be married to only one woman.***

The language of the New Testament does not prohibit women from exercising ministry gifts in their work in the Kingdom of God. For example, in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 it appears that Paul is prohibiting women from speaking while in church. Yet, when the context of 1 Corinthians 14 is taken into consideration, it becomes evident that Paul is focusing on the matter of the exercise of ministry gifts in the worship service and is expressing a concern that the spirit of true worship not be disturbed by the misuse of gifts.

In 1 Timothy 2:11-12 it appears on surface reading that Paul presents the argument that women are not to teach. Three words are important to an understanding of this passage. The first is διδάσκειν (*didaskhein*) which is the present infinitive, indicating an ongoing practice of teaching, and is connected immediately with the second word, ἀυθεντεῖν (*authentein*) which identifies the concept of the assumption of an authority over the ruling or presiding elder in the church, based on a self-instigated activity. The third word is ἡσυχία (*hesuchia*), a word that refers to demeanor or attitude, rather than to the act of speaking words. The word is one used to characterize the spirit or disposition of a person. The teaching of Paul seems to focus on women in the church refraining from causing disturbance during public worship, allowing a positive influence of internal tranquility to become pervasive, and thereby maintaining dignity in the exercise of whatever spiritual ministry gifts are present in that service of public worship. The call from the Apostle is for submission to the order of the service in which the members recognize the ministering gifts of each other, and the practice of these gifts under the controlling influence of the Spirit of God.

In Galatians 3:28 Paul teaches without question that in Christ there is no distinction between male and female. There are some who have used the Galatians passage to foster personal beliefs relating to the exercise of Spirit-given ministry gifts as well as identifiable roles or offices. What Paul is addressing is the issue of equality of gender in relationship to God. This passage does not indicate there are no distinctions between men and women. To suggest such is foolishness. And because there are recognizable "earth-side" distinctions between men and women, it is likewise evident from both the Scriptural record and general life experiences that there are distinguishable roles, positions and offices designated for each.

It is basic to any New Testament study on women in ministry in the church that there is maintained a distinction between a gift and an office. The Holy Spirit gives ministry gifts individually and as He wills, without distinction as to gender. This study has underscored that basic Biblical fact. However, roles,

positions, or offices are designated quite differently. There are three significant New Testament words that will help keep the student of Holy Scripture on track, and through a careful linguistic analysis avoid a sense of political correctness in the church's attempt to prove its relevance in the world.

The first word used to identify the person commonly known for ministerial leadership in the local church is ποιμήν (*poimen*) and in the Authorized or King James Version translated by the English word *shepherd* 17 of the 18 times it appears in the New Testament. The remaining use, in Ephesians 4:11, it is translated by the English word *pastor*. In Hebrews 13:20 and 1 Peter 2:25 it is used in reference to Jesus Christ, indicated by the word *Shepherd*. Metaphorically the word *shepherd* identifies a person who either assumes or is appointed to leadership over a group of believers. The word is gender specific, being a masculine noun. It may seem logical to assume that because it is of the masculine gender it follows that the person so identified in this role is always of the masculine gender. That argument may indeed have hermeneutical weight but it should be remembered that gender-based languages such as Greek do not always follow logical patterns. In other words, the *gender* of a word does not necessarily mean sexual identification. Related to the church, the word ποιμήν (*poimen*) is obviously a functional word, carrying the idea of the loving, tender care of one to whom the responsibility of the congregation of God's people has been committed.

The second word is πρεσβύτερος (*presbuteros*) and translated by the English word *elder*. This word appears 66 times in the Greek New Testament. It is translated *elder* 64 times, *old man* once (Acts 2:17) and *eldest* once (John 8:9). This noun, masculine in gender, indicates the man and the dignity of his office.

The third word is ἐπίσκοπος (*episkopos*) and translated by the English word *bishop*. This masculine noun is used five times in the New Testament. Four times it is translated by the English word *bishop* (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 2:25) and one time it is translated by the English word *overseer* (Acts 20:28). This masculine noun refers to the man and the function of his office.

The Apostle Paul uses these two words, πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος, in his ministry in Ephesus. In Acts 20:17 and 28 Paul addresses the leadership of the Church in Ephesus. In 20:17 he "*called for the elders of the church.*" The word here is πρεσβυτέρους (*presbuterous*), the plural form of the masculine noun. As he concluded his instructional address to these leaders he stated it was the *Holy Spirit* (who) *made you overseers.* (Acts 20:28) Therefore it appears that Paul blends these two terms, *elder* and *bishop* into one and the same office. The simple conclusion is that there were (*are*) not two distinct offices but that the word *elder* refers to the man and the dignity **OF** his office, while the latter to the duty, function, and responsibility of the man **IN** his office.

There is a good illustration of the fact that in gender-based languages there is not always a logical pattern. In 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul writes *The word is faithful: If anyone desires the office of a bishop, he desires a good work.* We must bear in mind that the noun *bishop* is masculine. At the same time, the noun *bishopric*, or *office of a bishop* is feminine. There is probably no consistently appealing reason for this gender distinction. But it does point to the fact that what may seem logical to a Greek speaking or reading person may not always appear logical to an English speaking or reading person.

Interestingly also, is the fact that in 1 Timothy 3:1 and 5 Paul uses a non-gender specific pronoun that can be applied to both men and women. There are some Biblical preachers/teachers who argue that the pronoun τις (*tis*) translated *anyone* should be translated as in reference to a man. While there is

some validity to that argument, one must exercise great care in making such an interpretive judgment. Yet, throughout 1 Timothy 1 and 3, the various adjectives and participles are all masculine in gender, but this is consistent with the fact that they are all in reference to and in grammatical agreement with the masculine antecedent noun, which in this case is *ἐπίσκοπος* (*episkopos*).

This writer contends that there are other compelling reasons to believe that the Apostle Paul in writing pastoral leadership instructions to Timothy is referring exclusively to men in the role of *bishop-elder* or *overseer*. In 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul states clearly and irrefutably that the Episcopal leader of the church, namely the *bishop/elder* must be a husband of one wife (*woman*.) The Greek text is clear and without controversy: δεῖ οὖν τὸν ἐπίσκοπον ἀνεπίλημπτον εἶναι, μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα. *Therefore the overseer (bishop/elder) must be irreproachable, (the) husband of one woman (wife.)* It is true that there are some who would attempt to disregard this strong argument. Yet, it is irrefutable that ἄνδρα means *man/husband*, and does not mean *a person*, suggesting that this could include the feminine gender.

A second logical compelling reason to believe the New Testament assigns the office of *bishop/elder* or *overseer* exclusively to men is that there is absolutely no record in the New Testament of women elders, nor is there any Biblical instruction that women are to be designated, appointed, set apart, ordained, or named to the role of *elder* in the church. The early church sensed the need to appoint and/or ordain *elders* to provide wise, tested, and spiritual leadership over the fledgling flock of God in each instance. Therefore nowhere in the New Testament are the terms *bishop, elder, or overseer* applied to women, either by example or by decree.

III

SUMMARY PRINCIPLES RELATING TO NEW TESTAMENT WOMEN IN MINISTRY

The cultural milieu of the New Testament period as well as that of today and of all time and in every place dare not be allowed to alter Biblical teaching. At the same time it is important to remember that Jesus broke down some cultural barriers that had stood in the way of women being considered in their rightful, God-given status. At the same time no divine revelation subsequent to the writing of the New Testament has been given by which God's equality in personhood and ministry gifts given without distinction as to gender may be altered. Therefore the following principles relating to women in ministry are herewith stated:

1. Relating to the spiritual relationship of people before God, there is no distinction as to gender.
2. There are clearly observable physical distinctions between men and women living on earth.
3. Ministry gifts are given individually by the Holy Spirit to whomsoever He wills and that without distinction as to gender.
4. There appears to be no prohibition for a woman who is gifted by grace for a specific ministry to exercise that gift.
5. There are roles, positions and offices in the work of the church which by practice as evidenced in the Biblical record of the church and lack of any divine instruction to the contrary are reserved for and filled only by men.
6. The exercise of ministry gifts is not dependent on the assumption of a role, position or office in the organizational structure of the church.

7. Ministry gifts must be exercised in the context of tranquility arising from within, and ever careful to characterize a kind of spirit and disposition exemplary of the life of Jesus Christ.
8. The exercise of ministry gifts is restricted only by the requirement to be non-disruptive and not to assume an authoritative place over the duly constituted leadership of the bishop/elder of the church.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

It is evident that God has bestowed ministry gifts on men and women alike throughout the history of the church. While this study was designated to highlight New Testament women in ministry, to look briefly at ministry gifts given by the Holy Spirit, and from these vantage points derive principles relating to the matter of women in ministry, a study of the Old Testament would serve only to support the conclusions that have been reached through this study. It would be productive in the work of the church if both men and women would simply recognize Spirit-given ministry gifts and provide for the exercise thereof, that ministry gifts are given individually by the Holy Spirit to whomever He wills, and that without distinction as to gender, and that the New Testament does make a gender distinction as to roles, positions, and offices to be recognized by and practiced in the church. It would be well if less time could be spent on any attempt to depreciate the exercise of ministry gifts by Godly women in the church, and more time in each member of the body of Christ living in the full commitment to exercise whatever ministry gifts God has given to him or to her in whatever role, position, or office may be the vehicle through which such ministry is to be expressed.