There Are Women Pastors in the New Testament

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For the umpteenth time, I've been asked *where* in the New Testament it says that women were pastors. Someone, who I'll refer to as T, wanted information. He said he wanted examples that are "rock solid," where it says "point blank" something like "'Susan was a preacher and teacher' in plain text." In reply to T, I rehashed points and arguments that I've shared many times before in conversations and in articles.

I wasn't intending on posting my reply as an article. However, after observing the online hoo-hah over the ordination of three female pastors at Saddleback Church on May 6, I've edited and expanded my reply to T and posted it here. (If you're interested, you can see the original conversation on my Facebook page here.)

Paul's Ministry Terminology

The apostle Paul doesn't identify anyone in his letters as a pastor, or as a local church elder or overseer. His favourite terms for fellow ministers are (in descending order): coworker, brother/ sister, *diakonos* ("minister/ deacon"), *apostolos* ("apostle/ missionary"), and labourer. He uses these terms for men such as Timothy and Silas, and for women such as Prisca, Euodia, Syntyche, Phoebe, Junia, Persis, Apphia, etc.

Furthermore, Paul often uses several terms to describe one minister. He was flexible with ministry terminology. He didn't use fixed titles, so there wasn't, for example, Pastor Silas or Pastor Phoebe.

If we're looking in the New Testament for individuals called "pastor," we won't find them. If, however, we look for people who *functioned* as pastors in local churches (which were mostly house churches), then we find women as well as men, and also couples (e.g., Nympha in Colossae, the Chosen Lady in Asia Minor).

The Example of the Ephesian Church

New Testament churches were not organised, and did not function, in much the same way as most of our churches today, and it's difficult to find identified, ordained ministers of local churches with official or fixed titles.

The church in Ephesus, for example, had overseers (*episkopoi*; possibly patrons, hosts and leaders of house churches),[1] male and female ministers (*diakonoi*; unspecified ministers), male and female elders (*presbyteroi*; some elders taught), and enrolled widows (which quickly became a church order).[2] But none of the people with these ministries or roles are identified or named. None of them!

Apart from three false teachers (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 1:15), the only people identified as ministers and members associated with the Ephesian church are Timothy, who was in Ephesus for a limited time acting as Paul's representative (cf. 2 Tim. 4:13, 21), Prisca and Aquila (2 Tim. 4:19), and the household of Onesiphorus (2 Tim. 1:16; 4:19).[3]

Prisca is arguably as clear an example of an NT church leader or pastor as you can get. I suggest one of the reasons she is not recognised by some as a church leader, apart from the fact that she is female, is because people don't understand how Paul spoke about ministers and ministry, and they don't understand how mid-first century churches operated and organised themselves.

Prisca in Ephesus, and later in Rome, was just as much a minister and leader as Stephanas in Corinth. In fact, she and her husband may have had more experience and more influence in ministry than Stephanas and his fellow ministers.

Preachers and Teachers

What about the terms "preacher" and "teacher"?

The only people called "preacher" (*kērux*) in the NT are Paul and Noah. The word "preacher" is used differently in the NT from how the word is used by many Christians today. This article, here, looks at "preaching" words, both nouns and verbs, in the NT. These words are typically used in the context of proclaiming the gospel message to people who haven't heard it before.

The only people called "teacher" (*didaskalos*) in the context of the church are Paul (a few times) and the named leaders in Syrian Antioch who are referred to as "prophets and teachers": Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, and Saul (as he was known then) (Acts 13:1). In 1 Tim 2:7 and in 2 Tim 1:11, Paul calls himself by three terms: preacher, apostle, and teacher.

"Teaching" verbs are used for various people in Acts including Peter and John, Paul and Barnabas, and Apollos who was corrected by Priscilla and Aquila. That Apollos (an eloquent and educated man who was teaching in Ephesus) was corrected by Priscilla and Aquila, and that this was recorded in a positive manner in Acts 18, surely tells us something about the significance of the ministry of this couple.

Paul uses "teaching" verbs occasionally in his letters for himself and Timothy, etc. And a "teaching" verb (as well as the noun "prophet") is used in Revelation 2:20 for Jezebel of Thyatira. Her example shows that women were church leaders. However, she is an example of a bad leader and an errant teacher. (She was given time to repent of her immorality.)

It's important to note that in his general instructions about ministry, Paul never says that the ministry of teacher/ teaching, or of pastor, is off-limits to women. See Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:28, and Ephesians 4:11. And in 1 Corinthians 14:26 and Colossians 3:16, Paul encourages participation in ministry, including bringing a teaching.

Terminology and Authority

T wanted a clear statement such as "Susan was a preacher and teacher." In fact, we do have a clear statement from Paul about a female minister. Among other things, he says that Phoebe was "*diakonos* of the church at Cenchrea" (Rom. 16:1-2). Unlike what some detractors say about the word *diakonos*, Paul typically used the word for Christian ministers, including himself: Phoebe was minister of the church at Cenchrea.[4]

The problem isn't that there are no women in the NT who ministered as pastors, there are. The problem for some is that Paul, the other letter writers, and the author of Acts, use different terminology for ministers than what most of us are familiar with. And sometimes these authors don't

use any term for someone who is clearly a minister (e.g., Stephen in Acts 6:1ff and Stephanas in 1 Cor. 16:15-18).

Furthermore, many Christians are stuck on the idea that women can't be church leaders because of a faulty notion of authority. The authority to minister, however, is not an authority over fellow believers, but an authorisation and giftedness from God to function in a certain ministry. Genuine Christian ministry is not about exercising authority over people but about humbly serving them.

Final Thoughts

The church in Jerusalem seems to have been led by men, and also the church in Syrian Antioch. So some may choose to follow that "model." But as we move north and west from Syria, the names of more and more women ministers pop up, especially in verses about churches in Macedonian and Roman cities. I have no doubt that Phoebe, Prisca, Nympha, and women like them, were influential leaders in their churches.

In one passage, Romans 16:1-16, Paul mentions ten women, seven of whom he describes in some way as ministers: Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis. These women were not *called* pastors, just as no man in the NT is *called* a pastor of a church, but at least a few of these, and other NT women, functioned as pastors; they were responsible for the spiritual and physical wellbeing of members in their congregations. There is a biblical case for men *and* women as church leaders and pastors.

Notes

1. *Episkopoi* is sometimes translated as "bishops." At this early stage of the church, however, these Ephesian *episkopoi* cannot have been bishops with oversight of several congregations in a city or parish.
2. These ministry roles are mentioned in 1 Timothy 3 and 5.
3. Paul also mentions sending Tychicus to Ephesus (Eph. 6:21; 2 Tim. 4:12).
4. Paul was consistent with how he used the word *diakonos*. He typically used the word for an agent with a sacred commission. These *diakonoi* include Paul himself (Rom. 15:25; 1 Cor. 3:5; Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23, etc), Timothy (1 Tim. 4:6), Epaphras (Col. 1:7), Tychicus (Eph. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7-9), Apollos (1 Cor. 3:5), Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), and even Jesus Christ (Rom. 15:8). The *diakonos* in Romans 13:4, though not a Christian minister, is also an agent of God with a sacred mission. Note Paul's description of false apostles as agents (*diakonoi*) of Satan with a diabolic commission (2 Cor 11:13-15). And in Galatians 2:17 Paul asks the rhetorical question of whether Jesus is a *diakonos*, acting as an agent, of sin. These are every occurrence of *diakonos* in Paul's letters. Not once does he [use] the word for ordinary servants.