Paul Distilled by Gary W. Burnett

His Ministry and Message in Brief

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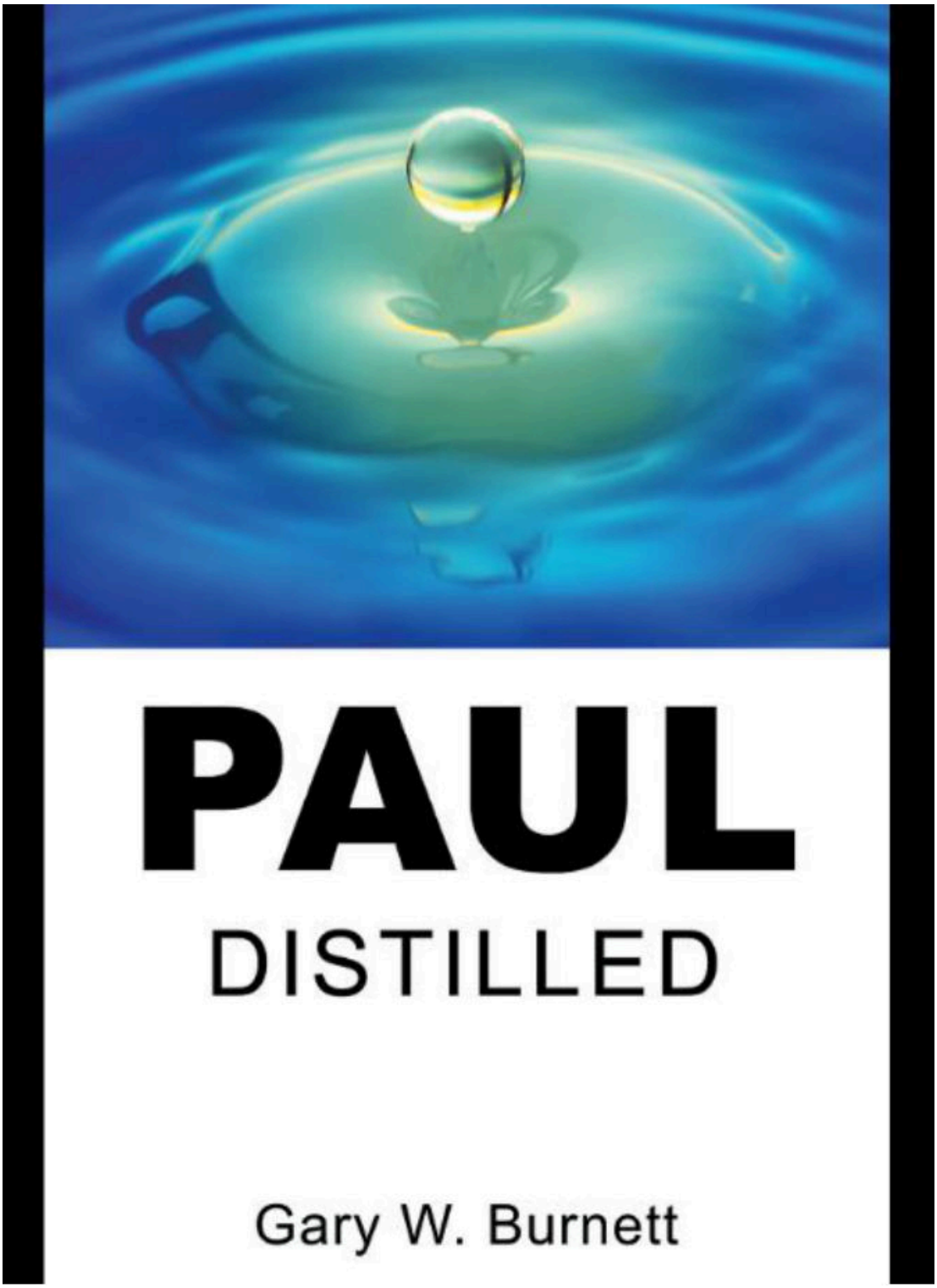

Here he introduces his book:

Paul Distilled by Gary W Burnett - YouTube

Here you will find a short and highly recommended summary of each chapter: Fitzroy Sunday Nights - YouTube

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Chapter 12: Paul's Women Leaders

Woman in the First Century

It was hugely important for Paul that the good news of Jesus the Messiah should be good news for everyone. God's gift of life, the new creation, was indiscriminate and broke down every human barrier. Paul's world was very hierarchical, and when he established communities of Jesus-followers, he had to make sure they understood the full impact of the gospel. Everybody, he told them, was the same in Christ, so these communities could no longer tolerate divisions based on: ethnicity—whether someone was a Jew or a Gentile; social and economic status—whether someone was a slave or free; or on gender—whether you were a man or woman.

In Paul's world, in both his native Judaism and more generally in the Hellenistic culture of the first century, women were very much second-class citizens. Misogyny was rife. Playwrights and philosophers denigrated women roundly—Euripides referred to women as "this creature of ruin," while Aristotle thought of a woman as "a deformed male." There were some exceptions, but women were generally treated as their husband's property, were not formally educated, and overall, not treated as full persons.

In Jewish tradition, there was generally a low view of women. The first century Jewish historian, Josephus, said that the woman was "in all things inferior to the man," and the Jewish philosopher, Philo, said that women were "imperfect and depraved by nature," irrational, and "not equal in honor with men." The second century Sirach said that "women give rise to shame," and the Testament of Reuben flatly states that "women are evil." In Jewish synagogues at this time, women were required simply to listen and forbidden to speak, and were not considered full participants in the assembly.

It was a man's world.

Paul and Women

Today, it often seems as if people feel that Paul was not that much different from the culture in which he lived with regards to women. Some think that Paul's view of women is simply outdated and of no relevance to the modern world, where we all know that men and women are equal. We need to forget Paul. He's just sexist, maybe even misogynist.

For others, Paul gets held up as showing that only men should be teachers and leaders in the church. Whole denominations to this day still bar women from leadership. For some, men and women are just complementary and not equal, and men are the ones who are to have authority in marriages and in church. But both these views of Paul misinterpret what we read in his letters and misunderstand the first century world. A careful reading of Paul's letters, actually, will lead us to a quite different conclusion.

Paul saw women and men as mutually dependent (1 Corinthians 11:11), as needing to submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21), and equal with respect to sexual relations within marriage (1 Corinthians 7:3). For Paul, all the gifts of the Spirit were available to everyone, regardless of gender, and everyone was to pursue spiritual gifts, especially prophecy, women as well as men. All Jesus-followers, female and male, were equally "in Christ," and were being transformed into Christ's image (2 Corinthians 3:18).

In addition, it is clear that Paul accepted women as ministry leaders. Women, as well as men, were his trusted partners and equals. He refers to women as "co-workers," as "contending at his side in the gospel," and as "true comrades." When we see Paul use these terms of women, as well as "deacon," "leader," "fellow worker in Christ Jesus," and, as we will shortly see, as "apostle," a picture of Paul emerges that is in stark contrast with the world in which he lived, and also with the way in which he is often portrayed today.

People who want to relegate women's roles in church usually point to two verses in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy which say that the women should keep silent in the churches and that a woman is not permitted to teach. Both these verses are usually plucked right out of their context and then flaunted as being the definitive view of Paul—and the Bible—on women in leadership. But, while it's important to take note of these verses, they are really not the place to start when we're thinking about Paul.

The Old Testament and Jesus

It's important to remember again that Paul was a Jew and well aware of his Jewish scriptures, where we find wonderful woman leaders like Miriam, Israel's prophetic national leader and music director; Deborah, another prophet who led her country with great success at the time of the judges; and

Huldah, whom King Josiah chose over all the male prophets. None of these, nor any of Israel's crowned queens, were ever criticized for their leadership roles on the grounds of being a woman.

Then we have the woman evangelist of Isaiah 40:9 who proclaims the good news of the coming of Yahweh's kingdom. The Hebrew here clearly identifies the preacher as a woman, all but lost in most of our English translations. Other women preachers are to the fore in Psalm 68:11: "The Lord announces the word, and the women who proclaim it are a mighty throng."

And, of course, we can't forget the prediction of the prophet Joel that God would pour out the Spirit so that "your daughters and sons will prophesy"—famously taken up by Peter in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, when he was explaining what was happening to the crowd. And way that the Psalms and Isaiah and Hosea and Deuteronomy all describe God as a mother.

Despite the negative evaluation of women by his peers, Paul knew his Bible and was well aware of the strong tradition of women leaders, prophets, and preachers that was his heritage.

And he was taught by Gamaliel, who was greatly revered and honored by his own and successive generations. From what we know, Gamaliel was unlike other rabbis in Pharisaic Judaism, who had a very low view of women. In his sayings preserved in the Mishnah, Gamaliel affirms women, treating them equally with men, promoting their welfare, and is never derogatory about them—all this in contrast to other rabbinic teachers who, as we have seen, were positively misogynistic.

And Paul also had the example of Jesus, who, unlike other teachers of his day, allowed women to sit at his feet in the place of learning. Jesus welcomed women followers, and encounters with women like the Samaritan at the well, where he broke several social conventions, attest to his positive acceptance of women. There were countless women who were touched by his healing hands, including many who would have been considered ritually unclean. In addition, Jesus appeared first after his resurrection to Mary Magdalene, thereby showing his respect for a woman's testimony, over against the general prevailing culture at the time. And the gospel writers were prepared to identify women as the first witnesses of the resurrection, even though a woman's word in court was generally not acceptable.

No doubt all this contributed to the way in which Paul thought of women. What we read of Paul in Acts and in his letters reveals a Paul who was counter cultural and *radical* in his affirmative of women. As far as Paul was concerned, both men and women were equally redeemed in Christ, were one in the body of Christ, were equally priests in God's kingdom, had the Spirit poured out liberally on them equally, and were both humbly and lovingly to serve one another and the world. The broad thrust of his theology speaks volumes regarding the equality of woman and men in the church.

And, think of 1 Thessalonians 2:7, where Paul depicts himself as a nursing mother. Not what you would expect if Paul was your typical male chauvinist protecting a fragile male ego!

Let's Start with Romans 16

To find out what Paul thought about women in leadership, the place we need to start is his big letter to the Romans. And we need to go to chapter 16. Which I guess most of us have generally just skipped over—it seems to be just a bunch of names, people Paul is greeting.

But this is a very interesting chapter indeed. Paul has never been to Rome, so in this letter where he wants to gain the Romans' support for the mission he has in mind to Spain, he's careful here to greet the people who are the leaders of the Roman house churches. The Roman church wasn't one big con-

gregation; rather, it was a number of little groups that met in people's homes, often cramped tenement apartments. And we can tell a great deal from looking at the names in chapter 16—some are slave names, some are Jewish names, and some are Gentile names.

And some of them are women's names. People like Prisca, Tryphaina, Tryphosa, Mary, Persis, and Julia. All leaders or joint leaders of little congregations of believers in Rome. In fact, over two thirds of the colleagues whom Paul praises for their Christian ministry here are women. But there are three women who stand out.

Phoebe

Firstly, Phoebe, who Paul says is a servant or deacon of the church which is at Cenchrea. Some translations have gone for deaconess—but there is no such word in Greek. When we look at the way Paul uses this word elsewhere, there really can be no doubt that Phoebe is a leader in the church in Corinth, which is where Paul was when he wrote the letter.

Now when we look carefully at the language and words that Paul uses in verses 1 and 2, from what we know of letters in this period, Phoebe is a person of some standing, and she's a leader in the Corinthian church, entrusted with taking Paul's very important letter to Rome.

Now, the usual practice at this time was that the person who took the letter read it out and interpreted it to the recipients. Isn't that interesting? Paul's letter to Romans was hugely important to him—he had not been there, but wanted to gain the support of these Christians for taking the good news to the west of the empire, and so he is very careful to explain his understanding of the gospel. Whom does he entrust his letter to? To Phoebe, this senior woman leader, and she takes it to Rome.

It gets more interesting—because it's likely that, according to normal practice, when she got to Rome, Phoebe would have gone around the various house churches reading out the letter (remember, because of literacy issues, people would have heard, rather than read the letter), and then sat with the groups, making sure they understood what Paul was getting at.

We could imagine Paul sitting with Phoebe back in Corinth, taking her through the letter, telling her how he wanted it read, what he wanted to stress, and what bits she'd probably have to explain.

So Phoebe—a church leader, entrusted by the apostle with explaining and teaching his letter to the Romans—doesn't fit at all what we've been told Paul thinks about women leaders and teachers.

Prisca

Prisca, or Priscilla as Luke calls her in Acts, was someone with whom Paul worked in the gospel, along with her husband, Aquila. Prisca is always mentioned before her husband, which was unusual in Greek and Hebrew culture, indicative of the significant, possibly more significant, role she played in the couple's ministry.

They are both—obviously including Prisca—highlighted by Luke as instructing Apollos, who became a major figure amongst the first followers of Jesus. So, already from Acts, we know that Prisca was a church leader and teacher, instructing men. By the time Paul wrote Romans, the pair had located in Rome and were leading a house church. Paul greets them warmly, again putting Prisca's name first.

Junia

But then there's Junia, who appears in verse 7.

> *Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.*

The older NIV and some translations give the name here as Junias, making out it was a man, but the name is Junia, which is a Latin feminine name, given to slaves or freedwomen. We have lots of examples of this woman's name from the literature of the time, and exactly none of a man's name, Junias.

Happily, there is no longer any argument about what the name is and the new NIV has changed to reading Junia. Junia was a woman, probably the wife of Andonicus.

The reason why, in the past, people tried to make Junia into a man were the words that follow where Paul says that this pair were "prominent among the apostles." So, in a male dominated church, the idea that a woman could be said to be an apostle didn't fit. So quite amazingly, if you look at the history of what happened, you'll find that male scholars literally changed the Greek to make what is clearly a woman's name to a male name, Junias. It's worth knowing a little of this history.

Biblical scholars use a composite text of the Greek New Testament—a version that is deemed most likely to reflect the original writing, after examining thousands of old manuscripts. In the Greek New Testament composite texts from the Reformation up until Nestle's edition of the Greek New Testament in 1927, the Junia of Romans 16 was a woman. But, at that point Nestle decided that the name had to be male and so suddenly "Junias" appeared and Junia became a footnote. Then fifty years later, the Greek text compiled by scholars dropped even the footnote. It was only in the 1990s that the correction was made and what all the early Greek manuscripts and scholars knew to be the case was made clear—Junia was a woman.

But even though everyone now agrees about this, there have been some who have been so uncomfortable about what Paul actually says in this verse—that Junia, a woman, was an apostle—that they have tried to change "prominent among the apostles" to "well known *to* the apostles." You get that in the ESV, for example. But, "prominent *among* the apostles" was the meaning of the phrase to all the early church fathers, who spoke Greek and knew very well how to translate a word!

Here's what Chrysostom in the fourth century had to say:

> *Even to be an apostle is great, but also to be prominent among them—consider how wonderful a song of honour that is. Glory be! How great the wisdom of this woman that she was even deemed worthy of the apostle's title.*

Junia was a woman and she was an apostle, a senior leader in the church in Paul's day.

So, if that's the case, along with Phoebe, Prisca, and the other women church leaders in Romans 16, then the conclusion is inevitable—women played a full role, as well as men, in leadership and teaching roles in the first Christian groups. That being the case, any other texts that we might think, at first glance, contradict Romans 16 have to be considered in the light of it. This, along with the witness of Acts, is the place to start.

Other Texts

The two texts mentioned earlier in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, then, begin to look like outliers, and there is much that could be said of the background to these verses that would make us draw back from making what Paul says here of universal application. It would be unusual for Bible-believing Christians to form a theological view simply based on two verses, without taking into consideration the strong witness of the rest of the New Testament. But, unfortunately, that is really what has happened.

If you'd like to look at this further, you'll find the most detailed examination of these two texts in Philip Payne's *Man and Woman: One in Christ*.

Briefly, Payne's meticulous examination of the text concludes that 1 Timothy 2: 8—15 needs to be read against Paul's purpose in the letter of countering false teaching which had greatly influenced some of the women in Ephesus, whose activities in spreading this needed to be curbed. Nothing in the passage supports "a universal prohibition of women teaching or having authority over men" or supports a view that "women are inherently unsuited to teach or exercise authority over men in spiritual or any other matters." Nor, he says, "does Paul universalize this particular prohibition for all churches and all times."

His investigation of 1 Corinthians 14: 34—35 is even more painstaking, and, along with other conservative scholars, he concludes, from evidence in early Greek manuscripts, that these verses are likely a scribal addition and unlikely to have been part of Paul's original letter.

There are very good reasons, then, not to take these two texts as normative or in any way as representative of what Paul thought about women being teachers and leaders in the church.

Women in Leadership

There are other passages in Paul's letters that need to be examined, if we are to come to a more comprehensive view of what Paul thought about women in the church and in family relationships. We've simply been concerned to redress the male-dominated perspective that has been prevalent in the church that has distorted what Paul has to say about women in ministry, teaching, and leadership.

The Romans 16 passage is crucial to keep in mind when reading anything that Paul has to say on the matter. 1 Corinthians 11 is important to bear in mind as well, where Paul assumes that women will be publicly prophesying in the church.

It begins to look like Paul's had a bad rap. It begins to look like women have been sorely mistreated over the centuries, and that the Christian church has missed out big time by not allowing women to follow a calling into Christian ministry.

Which is a stain on the history of the church. It's well past time for every Christian church, denomination, and group to make sure that women get the opportunity to play their full role as ministers of God's grace, word, and pastoral care.

We need to take seriously Paul's words: as far as he was concerned, there was neither slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female—we are all one in Christ. The division between male and female, along with the other two divisions Paul mentions here, is gone in the body of Christ. This is not just a comment on the fact that the spiritual standing of woman and men before God is the same—Paul's "for you are all one in Christ Jesus" in Galatians 3:18 has implications for the social reality of the Christian community. In a parallel verse in Colossians 3:11, it is clear from the verses before and after

that Paul sees the overturning of these sorts of divisions as having a practical outworking in the community life of the church.

And this brings us back to the big themes of the gospel that we've been thinking about. In Jesus, God has come to rescue and renew his world, and to make us fully human. That means there are no social, class or caste divisions between us. Nor can there be any racial or ethnic divisions, because each one of us, redeemed by Christ, is free to love and serve God in the way that God has called us. And exactly the same applies to women and men.

Paul would beg to differ—strongly—with any approach that puts women down, discriminates against them and says, you can't do this or that in the church. That is just so much part of the old order. There is a new creation.

We humbly serve the Lord Christ together, woman and man, as God gives us grace and strength.

Reflection

What has your experience been of how women have been treated in churches you've been associated with?

Does the story of Junia from Romans 16 surprise you? What implications are there from Paul counting Junia as one of the apostles?

Do you think that what Acts and Romans 16 says about women in leadership positions ought to be more influential than the 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy texts have been?

How can churches go about redressing the balance in terms of women and men in leadership?

Further Reading

Eldon Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle*, Fortress, 2005.

Scot McKnight, *Junia Is Not Alone*, Patheos Press, Kindle Edition, 2011.

Philip Barton Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, Zondervan Academic, 2009.