

Wynkoop Center Bible Studies on Women in Ministry

UNIT 1: The Creation Mandate		UNIT 3: New Testament Women in Public Leadership	
The Crown of Creation	Gen. 1:26-31	Anna	Luke 2:22, 36-40
The First Human, Almost	Gen. 2:1-17	Woman at the Well	John 4:1-42
The Human Race Completed	Gen. 2:18-25	Jesus' Women Associates	Luke 8:1-3; 23:55–24:11;
Broken Fellowship	Gen. 3:1-13		John 20:1-2, 11-18
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Esther	Esther 2:5-11, 16-23; 4:13–5:8; 7:1–8:6; 9:29-32	I Suffer Not a Woman	1 Tim. 2:8-15
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Credits and Notices

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Anna—Exposition

Scripture Focus

Luke 2:22, 36-40

Exposition by Michael Pasquarello

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Once was sent to serve an old, downtown congregation that had been in long-term decline, although in its early years of ministry it had been one of the strongest churches in the city. But over the course of a generation, from the early '60s to the early '90s, its members suffered through a constant decrease in membership, activity, vitality, and hope. So when I arrived to assume my pastoral responsibilities, I was greeted by a mostly older group of people, with a sprinkling of younger adults and a small number of children and youth. It was a challenging, yet not atypical situation, since many congregations are in similar circumstances. This is often not the fault of church members, but the result of changing neighborhoods and people on the move.

Perhaps the greatest challenge was the task of encouraging the congregation to see themselves with the “eyes” or a vision provided by Scripture rather than the world. To see ourselves as the world saw us would have meant we were a washed up, has-been, useless, dying, old church; especially in comparison with younger, growing, energetic, highly visible, and richly supported congregations in the suburbs!

Each year the older members of the congregation—a good-sized group—had a Christmas dinner in December. As the pastor, I was invited to give a devotional from Scripture. For my first such talk I chose the story of Anna from Luke 2:36-40. Let me tell you why I felt this faithful Jewish woman, who

saw and acknowledged Jesus as a baby in the Temple, was an important exemplar for our congregation, and might also be such a person for you.

The story of Anna—whom Luke identifies as a prophet, as one who proclaimed the Word of God—is remarkable; not so much because she, in herself, was a remarkable woman, although I think she was. Rather, her faithfulness directs our attention to a remarkable God, the One revealed in the story of Israel and Jesus Christ. Like many of the characters in Luke’s Gospel, Anna appears, at least on the surface, to be an unlikely character. Yet if we see Anna in light of Jesus, the central character of the Gospel, we can begin to see the significance of her prophetic words when she was led to recognize Jesus and to speak of Him to those who were ready to hear.

It is not just coincidence that Anna was in the Temple on the day Mary and Joseph presented Jesus to be circumcised and named according to the Law of Moses. Being at the Temple, living in God’s presence, characterized Anna’s whole way of life, her devotion to God, her constancy in prayer, her steadfast obedience to God’s will for Israel, her continued hope that God would act to fulfill the covenant promises to Israel, on behalf of all the nations of the world, to bring the peace and justice of God’s salvation.

She must have been a woman of great patience, not only for living so many years after the death of her husband, but for her

continued devotion and service to God, even in the midst of terribly disappointing times for the people of Israel. Conditions were not good; God's people were held captive and oppressed by the Roman Empire, stripped of their dignity, and left with little means to ensure a better or different future. That is, unless God were to act.

And this is precisely the Good News we celebrate each Christmas: the birth of God's Son to a young Jewish peasant woman named Mary. The God of Israel can be trusted to save. In Jesus, God acted to redeem Israel and to save the nations of the world. And who was one of the first to see these glories? An old widow who gave herself to prayer and fasting, fixing her hope in God to set things right.

Because Anna's life was centered on the worship of God, which was Israel's true vocation, her eyes were opened to see, to recognize, and to acknowledge at that very moment when Jesus was presented to the Lord in an act of worship and consecration by Mary and Joseph. After 84 years at the Temple, after a lifetime of prayer, fasting, waiting, and hoping God would be faithful to redeem Israel, Anna was enabled to see God's salvation in the form of Jesus. She was moved from prayer and fasting to praise and witness. What an unlikely character to fill this prophetic role! Perhaps we need to rethink how God acts to call and empower those who serve in ministry. Let me share a true story of an "Anna" I have been privileged to know.

I remember Miss Fannie well. She was 80 years old when I became her pastor. Her

husband had died from a sudden heart attack almost 50 years before, leaving her with four small children in the midst of the Great Depression. Trusting God, Miss Fannie took her children and moved to another state, where she worked as a house mother in an orphanage, remaining there until her youngest child had finished high school, since this was the only means she could find to support her family. She eventually returned to her hometown where she worked in a small country store until retirement. Throughout the years she remained a devoted Christian, always grateful for God's provision, always

looking for signs of God's salvation at work in her life, the church, and those around her.

Who was one of the first to see these glories? An old widow who gave herself to prayer and fasting, fixing her hope in God to set things right.

When I first met Miss Fannie, she was still keeping the nursery at our church, something she had done for over 30 years. Her ministry made her something like Anna for that small congregation; she was the one who welcomed a generation of children whose parents brought them and presented them to the Lord to be taught and nurtured in the Christian faith. And when she was no longer able to attend church, I would visit Miss Fannie at her daughter's home, and she would talk with me about God, her life, Scripture, and many other things. I discovered that in this process of Christian conversation, she was teaching me the Word of God, sharing from a depth of wisdom that was the fruit of a lifetime of devotion to God, and from many years of prayer, patience, and disciplined love, and most important, from her hope that God has been and still is faithful to keep the promises

on which our faith and the world's salvation stand or fall. And no matter how bad Miss Fannie's condition was, she always praised God for her many blessings throughout a lifetime sustained by God's goodness.

Like Anna, Miss Fannie was a prophet; she spoke the Word of God to me, and to many others. She preached with her whole life, with her words, but also by her very way of being and living, because she had "seen" God's salvation in Jesus Christ. My hope is that God will continue to raise up many more like Anna

in our time. As Dr. Carol Rotz writes in her exegesis of this passage,

She was at the church every time the doors were opened.

She was a prayer warrior.

She observed the old-fashioned practice of fasting.

She was an elderly widow from the north.

She proclaimed the Word of the Lord.

She was at the right place at the right time.

And she saw Jesus, the answer to her prayers.

Anna—Study Guide

Study Guide by Stefanie and Mark Hendrickson
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Notes for the Leader

A small group setting or class can use the following questions to guide the discussion of the biblical passage and exposition. Allow participants time to answer for themselves, making room for all group members in the discussion.

Discussion Questions

1. Make a list of qualities and characteristics that describe you. What would you say is a central theme in your life?
2. Make a list of qualities and characteristics that describe Anna, the prophet. What would you say is a central theme in Anna's life?
3. The writer of the Exposition section says Anna lived in "devotion to God," constantly in prayer, steadfast in obedience to God's will, and hopeful about God's good work for Israel. Is it possible to live this way? Why or why not?
4. How does Anna's central focus on worshipping God make her devoted life possible? What would living a life focused on worshipping God look like today? Describe one person you know who lives a life focused on worshipping God. How have they influenced your Christian journey?
5. What is a prophet? How does Anna fulfill this role? Why do you think God called Anna to this role?
6. Do you have an example of an "Anna," called to ministry despite differences in qualifications (age, gender, social status,

and so on)? What has God done for others through this person?

7. What is the role of faithfulness in a prophet's life?
8. How can you function as a prophet, someone who points others to God, in your life?
9. Make a list of people you know who can use someone faithful and grace-filled in their lives. Ask God to help you be faithful to Him and in turn share His love and grace with them.

Anna—Commentary

**Commentary by Carol Rotz
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She was at the church every time the doors were open.

She was a prayer warrior.

She observed the old-fashioned practice of fasting.

She was an elderly widow from the north.

She lived a life of service in the church.

She proclaimed the Word of the Lord.

She was at the right place at the right time.

And she saw Jesus, the answer to her prayers.

Does this sound like anyone you know? She is Anna. This fascinating woman of God is mentioned only once in the New Testament, almost in passing. Yet the five verses devoted to her in Luke 2:36-40 reveal much about her, about Judaism, and about God's plan for Israel and for us.

Luke places Anna's timely appearance in the temple within the prescribed Mosaic sequence of circumcision, naming, purification, presentation, and consecration.¹

And when the days of their cleansing were completed according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (v. 22²)

According to the Law of Moses, a woman who had given birth to a son was considered ceremonially impure for 40 days.³ Leviticus 12:1-4 stipulates that after seven days the baby be circumcised and named.⁴ The mother did not leave the house for another 33 days of

secondary impurity. Then, by means of offerings, she could enter the temple again to worship. So Mary and Joseph went to the temple.

Interestingly, Luke speaks of *their*⁵ purification although the law relates only to the mother. Is the implication that Joseph too was unclean? Or that Jesus was unclean? These options are unlikely. The emphasis of Luke's account is on a devout family following Mosaic law. As the family head, it was Joseph's responsibility to provide the sacrifice and fulfill the requirements of the law. So, they brought two turtledoves or two pigeons (2:24), the offering of a poor person.⁶

The cleansing sacrifice was to be offered on the fortieth day at the Nicanor Gate on the east of the Court of Women. Women who lived far from the temple did not need to attend the purification ceremony in person, but Mary and Joseph came to the temple for two ceremonies: Mary's purification and the presentation of her firstborn. It was to Jesus' presentation and consecration that Anna bore witness.

Anna joined Simeon to represent the best of expectant Israel who testified to Jesus' central place in God's redemptive plan. Luke carefully established the credibility of both witnesses. Their great age (2:26, 29, 37), exemplary piety (2:25-27, 36-37), anticipation of redemption (2:25, 38) and responses of praise to God (2:28, 38) authenticated their prophetic testimonies (2:25, 37).

And there was Anna, a prophet, a daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. She was very old, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage and then as a widow for eighty-four years. She never left the temple, but served there night and day with fasting and prayer. (vv. 36-37)

Anna (the Greek form of Hannah) means “grace, favor, supplication, prayer for favor” and aptly describes her lifestyle in the temple. It brings to mind pious Hannah, who prayed in the temple, received a son of promise, and then presented that son to the Lord to serve the high priest (1 Sam. 1:1–2:21).⁷ Another famous Anna is the wife of Tobit in the apocryphal book of the same name. She was an independent woman and a devoted wife and mother. Luke’s Anna was the epitome of devout Jewish womanhood, with a special calling and anointing.

Anna was a prophet, the only woman in the New Testament to receive that title.⁸ Jezebel of Thyatira called herself a prophet but led the people of God astray (Rev. 2:20). Because of the revelation imparted by the Spirit, biblical prophets may have had special knowledge of the past and future and of a person’s heart, but essentially the prophet was a proclaimer of God’s Word. Anna fulfilled her prophetic role in recognizing Jesus and speaking of Him to those ready to hear.

She was a daughter of Phanuel, an otherwise unknown Israelite. An alternate spelling of his name, Peniel, is reminiscent of the place where

Jacob wrestled with an Angel at the river Jabbok. Jacob named the place Peniel because he saw God face to face and yet lived (Gen. 32:30). So, Anna the prophet was the daughter of one called “the face of God.” Whether or not there is any importance to this allusion, it establishes her heritage as a daughter of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This connection is further established by her tribal affiliation.

Anna was from *the tribe of Asher*, one of the northern tribes who settled in the area of Galilee. Asher, whose name means “happy” or “good fortune,” was Jacob’s eighth son, the second son of Leah’s handmaid Zilpah. While this family tree and the underlying symbolism

of her parental and tribal names help to establish her credibility, they also raise questions. She was the only Jewish character in the New Testament not from the tribes of Benjamin, Levi, or Judah. She was from a northern tribe, one of the “lost tribes” who intermarried with the Assyrians and

practiced syncretistic worship. Her piety and continuous worship in the temple was in contrast to this heritage. Perhaps Luke, whose Gospel is noted for its emphasis on the inclusion of Gentiles, emphasized Anna’s tribal affiliation to make a point. Luke partnered her with Simeon, a Jew and presumably a native of Jerusalem (in Judah, in southern Israel). He could represent salvation moving out from Jerusalem. Anna, a member of a northern tribe returned to Jerusalem from the Diaspora, could

Simeon and Anna are the third “couple” in Luke’s Gospel. Joseph and Mary came to the temple. John the Baptist’s parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, are emphasized. Comparing and contrasting these “couples” is an interesting study. For example, Simeon’s words are extensively quoted, but Anna’s testimony is not. This contrasts with Zechariah’s literal speechlessness and Elizabeth’s eloquent hymn of praise.

represent the ingathering of *all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem*. The implication is that all are included in the messianic hope.

Another of Anna's credentials was that *she was very old*. After seven years of marriage, her husband died. The text can be understood to say she then lived as a widow "until she was 84." But it is grammatically better to understand that the 84 years came after the death of her husband. If she married at age 14, as was usual for a first-century Jewish woman, lived with her husband for seven years, and then lived 84 years as a widow, she would have been 105 years old when she saw the baby Jesus in the temple. This incredible age equals that of the apocryphal hero, Judith, who was also a pious widow.⁹ It may have additional symbolic meaning. One hundred five is a multiple of seven, the number of perfection, the number of days in a week. So she lived two "weeks" of years ($2 \times 7 = 14$) as a virgin,¹⁰ one "week" of years (1×7) as a married woman, and then twelve "weeks" of years as a widow ($7 \times 12 = 84$). These multiples of seven could intimate perfection of womanhood. Whatever her exact age, she was very old, and of course in that culture, age was honored. Her great age emphasized her wisdom and gave assurance that her words would be heard.

In addition to her age, her long years of widowhood contributed to her authority. According to 1 Timothy 5:3-16, "a widow indeed" is above reproach, over 60, the wife of only one man, having a reputation for good works. Such a woman is not to be pitied but emulated. Anna lived such a life for 84 years, during which time *she never left the temple*. This probably did not mean she lived on the temple grounds, although it is not impossible she lived

in the Court of Women. More likely, the statement is hyperbolic for her constant presence in the temple.

The Galilean prophet, Anna, was continually at the temple, devoting herself to *fasting and prayer*. Fasting constitutes a form of protest, an assertion that all is not well. Her fasting may have been motivated by her own widowhood as a sign of mourning. In light of the honorific status of the devout widow, however, the mourning was more likely for Israel. It was probably an eschatological longing for the restoration of Israel. Her prayer, then, would have been an expression of her hope in God to set things right. Her fasting and prayer continued night and day. Again this emphasizes the constancy of her lifestyle rather than literal, 24/7 activity. Her faithful fasting and prayer constituted her service or worship in the temple.¹¹

At that very moment she came and began praising God and speaking about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. (v. 38)

After the extended introduction of Anna, Luke's account of her actions is abrupt and brief. Her timely appearance *at that very moment* is literally, "at the very hour." This simply may be an Aramaism for "immediately." It could indicate her arrival just as Simeon spoke his prophetic words. She may have been in the Court of Women, then saw Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, heard Simeon's proclamation, and became convinced the child was the Messiah. Or, her emergence may have been more providential. The timely appearance of a prophetess provided an independent

confirmation of Jesus as the child of promise, God's Messiah, for whom Simeon waited.

The immediacy of Anna's coming is coupled with her reaction of praise and witness. After praying and fasting in the temple for 84 years, her prayers were answered. Responding with enthusiasm, she *began praising God and speaking about the child*. Both verbs are in the Greek imperfect tense, which indicates continued action in the past. In other words, she kept on thanking God and telling people. The word translated *praising* indicates publicly praising or thanking. Coupled with her witness, this fulfilled her prophetic role as a continued lifestyle. Simeon was ready to die after seeing God's salvation. Anna's service and worship were transformed from fasting and prayer to praise and witness.

Notes

¹ Only Luke includes these details of the fulfillment of Mosaic Law surrounding the birth of a firstborn son.

² All Scripture quotations in the Commentary section are the author's own translation from the original languages.

³ Interestingly, the purification period a daughter's birth was doubled to 80 days.

⁴ Luke records this in v. 21.

⁵ Some manuscripts change "their" to "her" to resolve the issue.

⁶ Lev. 12:8 allows this substitution for those who could not afford the year-old lamb stipulated in Lev. 12:6.

⁷ Many comparisons and contrasts between Luke's Anna and 1 Samuel's Hannah are beyond the scope of this commentary. Another

interesting study is Hannah's song (1 Sam. 2:1-10) and Mary's hymn of praise (Lk. 1:46-55).

⁸ Some women in the early church had the spirit of prophecy. It was promised in Acts 2:17; said of the four daughters of Philip in Acts 21:9; and assumed as a common practice in 1 Cor. 11:5. In the Old Testament the term "prophetess" is applied to Moses' sister, Miriam (Exod. 15:20); Deborah (Judg. 4:4); Huldah (2 Kings 11:14); Noadiah (Neh. 6:14); and by Isaiah to his wife (Isa. 8:3).

⁹ In the apocryphal Book of Judith, Judith single-handedly defeated the Assyrians.

¹⁰ *After her marriage* is literally "from her virginity."

¹¹ The Greek verb *lattro* sometimes is used to indicate the cultic ministry of praise and prayer or generalized worship. In Luke 1:74 Zachariah yearned for the time when Israel would be able to serve/worship God without interference from enemies, without fear, in holiness and righteousness.

For Further Reading

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The Woman at the Well—Exposition

Scripture Focus
John 4:1-42

Exposition by Allison Southerland
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Take a moment to remember some of your earliest fond memories. Recall what it was like to be free to create and imagine. Did you ever dream about what you would be when you grew up? You probably had incredible dreams for your future! Maybe you pictured yourself as a graceful ballerina, a major league baseball player, a brain surgeon, or a firefighter who saves lives. Do you remember those carefree days of kindergarten when your life was much less complex? As we grow up, we slowly discover that life is more than just what we make of it. Plenty of events in our lives happen against our choosing. Real life is never cut and dry, never black and white. In fact, real life is downright messy.

If you can't relate from personal experience, try to imagine your life as already "messy" before you even entered it. That kind of life reflects the life of the woman at the well. We don't even know her name. She was a nobody. She had every possible strike against her. She was a Samaritan, a half-breed according to the Jews, and she was despised even by those in her own community. She was a woman, and was therefore uneducated. She had no husband, and therefore no place in society. She was an outcast, and a sinner.

She spent time trying to avoid those who would make her life even more difficult, which is why in this scene, we encounter her at the well in the middle of the day. At least she could draw water alone, avoiding the embarrassment and glaring eyes of the other women. Her life sure hadn't turned out like

she had expected. Although we don't know much about this woman, it's likely she didn't have childhood dreams of being a social outcast. It's much more likely that in her situation, she had no childhood dreams at all.

But Jesus didn't seem to notice her lack of self-esteem or her downcast spirit. Or maybe He noticed, but he chose to ignore those limitations. Much to her surprise, He crossed cultural boundaries and entered her messy life. This was a woman who was the definition of an unlikely character. She was unlikely to be talked to, accepted, or valued. And she was certainly the most unlikely character to be chosen to bring the gospel back to her people. And yet, when Jesus saw her, He saw much more than who she was at that moment. He saw who she could become. He saw her as more than the lonely, ruined woman at the well. He saw and valued her as a person, and as an important messenger.

Many times God chooses to work through unlikely people, people without a place in life. Have you ever noticed that often we have to come to the end of ourselves and our expectations before we are able to accept God and His plan of redemption? The lack of our own agenda can be a wonderful starting point for God's direction in our life. Because the woman at the well had long since been at the end of herself when she met Jesus, she was fully ready to accept His changes. Instead of living in satisfaction or complacency, life had humbled her, even neglected her in such a way

that Jesus was the only one with the power to redeem her past and her future. Her downtrodden and outcast lifestyle was what allowed her this transformational, one-on-one confrontation with Jesus. And because she had no agenda of her own she was fully able to appreciate the experience. When Jesus presented a new, positive plan, she embraced His words of promise. She was grateful for a purpose because, up until now, she had not been able to determine a purpose for her life. Others with greater power and authority encountered Jesus but rejected His message. But this woman, in her lowly position, was able to hear Him and accept His grace.

We quickly read the story of the woman at the well and think about all of the things she was lacking. We see her in much the same way as the people of her time looked at her. Starting life with a blank slate perhaps would have been an advantage for someone who started out with so many social handicaps. She had too many things piled against her to be normal, much less successful. Ironically, most of what others viewed as a handicap actually worked in her favor. Since her childhood there was nothing for her, no plans, no aspirations, no future of any magnitude, and yet Jesus was able to use her circumstances and lack of self-

esteem to meet with her in a special way. The woman at the well came with a life as empty as her dry water bucket. Her only expectation was to fill her empty bucket with water. But when she left boasting the message of Jesus, she left her empty bucket behind, along with her expectations. Yet, she was more fulfilled than ever before. Jesus gave her living water indeed—He gave her a life worth living. He gave her a purpose. She became a vessel who carried living water to others.

At times, it's possible that our own plans and ideas get in the way of God's call in our life. If your life hasn't turned out at all like you had planned, if reality has revealed a complex, messy world, maybe it's time you abandoned your expectations and allowed God to direct you. We must admit we cannot make the journey alone. An undesirable past is not an obstacle for God, but rather an invitation to do a great work. He is perfectly capable of taking and molding the lives of empty people into exactly who He would have them be. We should remember God always dreams bigger dreams for us than we can dream for ourselves. He sees beyond the brokenness of the past and the present. He sees the hope of the future. In fact, He is the hope of our future. He calls us to embrace His grace, His forgiveness, and His constant fellowship.

The Woman at the Well—Study Guide

Study Guide by Stefanie and Mark Hendrickson
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Notes for the Leader

A small group setting or class can use the following questions to guide the discussion of the biblical passage and exposition. Allow participants time to answer for themselves, making room for all group members in the discussion.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of people does society find unacceptable? Why are those people unacceptable?
2. What people does the church find unacceptable? Why?
3. Think about the time you realized you needed a relationship with God. What were you thinking, feeling, and doing at that time?
4. Look at the woman in our passage. What was going on in her life when she met Jesus? What part did this play in her interaction with Jesus? How are we similar or different from this woman?
5. What does Jesus' approach to this woman teach us about God's love and grace? In what ways can we imitate Jesus?
6. What characteristics and qualities of this woman would have made it difficult for her to attend your church? What might she have thought about attending church before meeting Jesus?
7. After meeting Jesus, what did the woman at the well do? What was her reaction to Jesus' grace?
8. What is our reaction to God's grace? How is it similar or different from this woman's reaction?
9. Sometimes our own plans get in the way of God's plan of grace. How do you see that happening in your life? In your community? In your church?
10. How can you open your arms wide to embrace the grace of God? What will change about your life and church? What might stay the same?

The Woman at the Well—Commentary

Commentary by David Neale
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Setting the Scene: The Courageous and Clever Woman at the Well

The woman who arrived at the well in the sweltering heat of midday had experienced a lifetime of pain and rejection. She was burdened within and without, and had little hope for a better life. Her encounter with Jesus changed her life inwardly *and* in relation to her Samaritan community.

Nicodemus, a leader in Jerusalem, came to Jesus at night in John 3:1-10. That story creates a contrast with the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in 4:1-42. Nicodemus was at the top of the religious power structure of Judaism, and the woman was at the bottom in her own Samaritan world. Both people engaged in conversation with Jesus about personal spirituality in the context of their own life. One was a religious expert, a member of the leading council of the nation of Jews. The other was a woman despised, not just by the men of Samaria and Judea, but even by the women of her own city. By placing one story after the other, John showed the relevance of the gospel to people at all levels of society, irrespective of education, social position, religious orientation, or gender.

Even though Nicodemus was a “leader of the Jews” (3:1¹) he could not comprehend Jesus’ portrayal of life in the Spirit. High religious office did not guarantee an understanding of the truth. The nameless woman of Samaria engaged in a theological conversation of similar profundity, yet she was able to embrace the truth Jesus brought to her,

proclaiming Him as Messiah to her community (4:39). In this narrative, high position and low understanding are contrasted with low position and high understanding.

This juxtaposition of the religiously literate with the “sinner” is a common theme in all the Gospels. The religious expert is always male, and the sinner is often a woman. This story of the brave woman of Samaria contained revolutionary truth that cut across all barriers of education, class, and gender.

There was hostility for disadvantaged women in the cultural milieu of Samaria. The Samaritan woman experienced excommunication because of her failed relationships with men, but also *because she was a woman*. Her exclusion from the society of the village was heartless and brutal, and Jesus’ openness in the context of these realities showed radical compassion. His words were a challenge to an entire cultural paradigm, opening access to God from the Sanhedrin to the dusty wells of Samaria.

A Significant Place for a Conversation about God

As our story opens Jesus was traveling north from Judea to Galilee and stopped to rest mid-way in Samaria. The southern province of Judea was the heartland of the Jewish nation, while Galilee was a comparatively backward province to the north. Samaria lay in between these two regions, and was considered a renegade province despised by traditional Jews. As is often the case in

social and religious conflict, the reasons for this sectarian strife were complex.

Following the death of Solomon in the ninth century B.C., his kingdom split in two. The northern kingdom was called Israel and the southern kingdom was Judea. The northern kingdom's capital, Samaria, eventually fell to the Assyrians in the time of Isaiah (721 B.C.). It became a center for a syncretistic form of Judaism that opposed the temple-based Judaism of the south (Ezra 4:1-5; 2 Kings 17:24-34). At one time Samaria even had its own temple and priesthood. Thus, it was a significant setting for a conversation that dealt with ethnicity, religion, and gender problems (cf. Luke 9:51-56 and 10:29-37; a narrative aside in John 4:9 notes pointedly, "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans").

Two ancient roads crisscrossed Samaria, and the intersection of these roads was the scene of many significant Old Testament events (see textbox). Jesus traveled the north/south road on this occasion, but there was also an important route to the sea traveling east and west. This site was near modern Nablus in the West Bank, and was known in ancient times as Shechem, of which Sychar in John 4:5 may be a variant. Many

centuries after the experiences of Abraham, Jacob, and Joshua on this site, a pivotal truth of Jesus' ministry was about to be revealed to a remarkably resilient woman.

The well of Jacob referred to in this text (v. 6) is not mentioned in the Old Testament, but it is identified here in John as the scene of this meeting. The well is an authentic biblical site and is over 100 feet deep, cut through rock at its lower levels. Its waters still flow and a visit to this well today would mean standing where Jesus and the Samaritan woman actually met.

Shechem (near modern Nablus) stood at the base of two great mountains: Ebal and Gerizim. In OT history these mountains represented the blessing or curse that attended faithfulness or disobedience to God. It was a powerfully symbolic location for both Jews and Samaritans. The former site of the Samaritan temple, Mt. Gerizim was still revered in Jesus' day by Samaritans as the proper location for worship of God. This is where Abraham received the promise of the land (Gen. 12:6). Joshua gathered the people of Israel there 400 years later and challenged them to renew their covenant with Yahweh, "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15). Now 1,200 years later, Jesus brought a new covenant of life to the shadow of Mt. Gerizim and Jacob's well.

A Fiery Conversation in the Heat of the Day

The traditions of the day discouraged public talk between men and women, and even more so with a despised foreigner. Jesus set these traditions aside to have a genuine conversation about God with this nameless woman. She had come to the well in the heat of the day to avoid

the self-righteous women of her village. When a Jewish traveler asked her for water, the Samaritan woman bridled with anger and resentment. Perhaps she was offended that one her people considered a heretic should ask her to serve him. Was it not enough she was an outcast in her own village? Should she also be made to wait on her country's enemy? Her response was laced with bitterness and sarcasm: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink

of me, a woman of Samaria?" (v. 9). Jesus' response is the heart of this passage: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (v. 10).

The woman understood her social context, was plenty smart, and ready for an argument. She responded aggressively and astutely: "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep.

Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" (vv. 11-12). Far from overwhelmed by this rabbi, the woman pushed back at another male who thought he knew what was best for her without understanding her pain and suffering. The verbal joust was underway as Jesus responded, "Everyone

who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (v. 14).

While Nicodemus seemed genuinely uncomprehending in John 3, this woman displayed a more astute intellect. One commentator has noted, "Characteristically in John, the male disciples are passively present;

they fail in persistence; they leave the tomb upon finding it empty; and they fail to speak their minds to Jesus."² It is often the women who are the quickest to grasp the message of Jesus in the Gospels. Still, most interpreters have presented this woman as simply not understanding Jesus' meaning as He spoke about "living water."

There was a marvelous double meaning to the phrase. On the one hand it alluded to the

Water was the lifeblood of ancient communities and wells were crucial to survival. The story of Isaac reclaiming wells his father Abraham had dug is worth reviewing (Gen. 26:17-22). There were always competing claims to wells between nomadic tribes, and Isaac persisted in digging wells until he was left in peace by his neighbors. While not mentioned in the Old Testament, the well of Jacob remained in constant use in antiquity, and still runs deep and pure today. The well has "living water" or spring-based water, as opposed to the tepid cisterns in which water from rainfall was gathered. Here Jesus looked beyond the physical meaning of wells and water to the deeper issue of life with God through His Spirit.

freshness of spring water, which the woman seemed to grasp when she rephrased Jesus' words slightly in the Greek. She perhaps thought He meant spring water, not cistern water, which was stale and unwholesome. Her next comment was filled with sarcasm, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water" (v. 15). The subtext was, "and have tiresome conversations with arrogant Jewish men I'd

prefer to avoid!" Far from being another weak, uncomprehending foil, like Nicodemus, this woman was a good debater. To suggest she was simply hoping Jesus could relieve her from the necessity of drawing water each day underestimates her character and could be patriarchal stereotyping. Literarily, it seems Nicodemus was thoroughly upstaged by our heroine.

Sexual politics were also an issue at the well that day. Some commentators have described the woman as engaging in flirtation or innuendo. The symbolism of well and water did have sexual dimensions. For example, meetings between men and women at wells were a common device in the patriarchal stories about betrothal (Abraham's servant and Rebekah, Gen. 24; Jacob and Rachel, Gen. 29:1-14; Moses and Zipporah, Exod. 2:15-22).³ Also, there was "rich biblical language of well, spring, fountain and living water as terms implying sexual congress" (cf. Prov. 5:15-18; Song 4:15; Jer. 2:13).⁴ This incident resonated with gender issues, as the next conversation about her sexual history confirms. The realism of the account is remarkable. But notably, Jesus and the woman moved beyond these potential issues to a sublime conversation about spirituality and the coming of the Messiah.

A World of Trouble with Men

Our Samaritan woman cleverly tried to duck Jesus' inquiry about her marital status (v. 16), and for good reason. Divorce or the death of a husband could expose a woman to terrible hardship in this culture, and she had more than her share of troubles. It isn't clear whether her husbands had died or divorced her. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 contemplated a similar situation in which a woman was divorced repeatedly. While the legitimate bases for divorce in the Old Testament were debated in Jesus' day, Deuteronomy described one of the grounds for divorce as the woman doing something "objectionable" (24:1), or having a man who simply "dislikes her" (24:3). Some ancient interpreters felt the passage in Deuteronomy referred to a sexual offence,

while others thought it was failure to bear children or observe ritual laws on menstruation. One Jewish *halakhah* (law) even said Samaritan women were unclean from birth because they were born menstruating! In any case, the woman was legally disadvantaged in divorce matters and had few rights. If this woman had been divorced several times it may have been through little fault of her own.

If she lost her husband(s) through death rather than divorce, the Samaritan woman may have been subject to levirate laws, which sought to perpetuate the line of the deceased man (see Deut. 25:5-10). In these laws the brother of the deceased man had an obligation to take the widow in marriage if no male offspring had yet been produced. To add to her unhappy circumstances, the woman of Samaria now lived with a man who was unwilling to marry her (v. 18). This live-in arrangement may have been her only alternative to a life of prostitution or destitution, since the social economy made little provision for such an unfortunate woman. With this kind of cultural prejudice, her life was likely a desperate struggle for survival.

Was she an immoral woman, as the fact that she was living out of wedlock might suggest? Feminist interpreters have objected to this characterization as another attempt to "delegitimize" the woman. It is unfair to characterize the woman as immoral if she was just trying to get by in a culture where she had few life options. Perhaps she just had all the hard breaks and was doing the best she could under the circumstances.

Jesus was aware of the constraints under which she lived and sought to speak to her as a

full human being. This is where we see the compassionate and gracious love of Jesus that day—He was an intelligent interpreter of social stigmas and sought to bring her spiritual freedom. It was through a suffering woman Jesus chose to reveal to Samaria His identity as the Messiah. For this reason alone, the passage is of radical social importance to the biblical message. Heretics, women, and foreigners—these were now welcome in Jesus’ new flock.

Where You Worship No Longer Matters

The topic of temple worship was important to this story because of the long-standing dispute between Judea and Samaria on the matter. The woman raised the subject as a point of disagreement between her people and the Jews. Jesus told the woman a temple’s location, be it Jerusalem or Gerizim, made no difference at all in the worship of God. This radical position must have astonished the woman, since tensions on this issue were centuries old. Verse 23 is one of Jesus’ most revolutionary statements: “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (vv. 23-24). The assertion that temples were irrelevant ran counter to all Jews and Samaritans believed about God. With this comment Jesus granted access to God for all peoples everywhere, be they men or women, Jew or non-Jew, respected or despised in society.

Come and See This Man!

For the issue of women in ministry an important feature of this story is the woman’s role in bringing truth to her community. A more unlikely messenger of salvation could not be imagined for this cultural setting. An ethnically and religiously despised woman, a virtual outcast in her own culture, and ritually impure to Jews, became the key messenger of salvation to her Samaritan community!

She ran to tell her village: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” (v. 29). The language here captures the uncertain nature of her comment. It was as full of incredulity as it was full of hope. In her estimation, only the Messiah could make such sweeping claims to revolutionary truth—which is remarkably astute. There is a great deal to admire in her doubt as well as in her hope. She was honest and refreshing, a suitable role model for us all.

Sowing and Reaping

These verses contain a conversation between Jesus and His disciples which offered oblique words about the hidden purpose of God in the process of sowing and reaping. Those who sow are part of a larger purpose in God’s world, and cannot always comprehend the significance of their role in the whole.

Because of the Woman’s Testimony

Finally, we learn many Samaritans believed in Jesus “because of the woman’s testimony” (v. 39). In the last verse of the story the crowd turned to the woman and affirmed her proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah. It is a passage that holds out the promise of a

profound experience of ministry for those who find themselves on the margins of society. In today's church a woman cannot be assured of enlightened views on women in ministry, and so there is a great deal in the experience of the Samaritan woman that women in ministry can appropriate. God will use whomever He chooses to work His will—and the woman from Samaria found her place in history by taking the news of her encounter with Jesus of Nazareth to the heart of her village. She was not weak-minded or bowed by her difficult life. She used her wits to navigate a life of hardship, and faced her difficulties with courage and fiery determination.

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Notes

¹ All Scripture quotations in the Commentary section are from the NRSV.

² Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans, eds., *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 599.

³ See Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman, III, eds, *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 940-941.

⁴ *Ibid.*

For Further Reading

Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel According to John, I-XII*. Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1966.

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Wynkoop Center Bible Studies on Women in Ministry

UNIT 1: The Creation Mandate	UNIT 3: New Testament Women in Public Leadership
The Crown of Creation	Gen. 1:26-31
The First Human, Almost	Gen. 2:1-17
The Human Race Completed	Gen. 2:18-25
Broken Fellowship	Gen. 3:1-13
Facing the Consequences	Gen. 3:14-24
UNIT 2: Old Testament Women in Public Leadership	
Miriam	Exod. 2:1-10; 15:19-21; Num. 12:1-16; 20:1; Mic. 6:4
Deborah	Judg. 4:1-10, 14; 5:1-3
Huldah	2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chron. 34:22-28
Esther	Esther 2:5-11, 16-23; 4:13—5:8; 7:1—8:6; 9:29-32
Jehosheba	2 Kings 11:1-21; 2 Chron. 22:10-12
UNIT 4: Difficult Passages in the New Testament	
Anna	Luke 2:22, 36-40
Woman at the Well	John 4:1-42
Jesus' Women Associates	Luke 8:1-3; 23:55—24:11; John 20:1-2, 11-18
Lydia	Acts 16:11-15, 40
Priscilla	Acts 18:1-3, 18, 24-26; Rom. 16:3-4; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19
Paul's Women Associates	Rom. 16:1-16; Phil. 4:2-3; Col. 4:15
The Creation Order Understood	1 Cor. 11:2-16
Keeping Order in Public Worship	1 Cor. 14:26-36
Mutual Submission among Christians	Eph. 5:21-33; 1 Pet. 3:1-7
I Suffer Not a Woman	1 Tim. 2:8-15
The New Testament Understanding of Women	Gal. 3:23-29

Credits and Notices

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Jesus' Women Associates—Exposition

Scripture Focus

Luke 8:1-3; 23:55–24:11; John 20:1-2, 11-18

Exposition by Daryl Smith

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As the only son of a traditional U.S. family, I felt certain of the male and female roles in a family—or in the church for that matter. One huge role for the husband and father was “breadwinner.” Early in my marriage I worked multiple jobs and long hours to keep the bills paid. However when I started seminary, I was unable to win enough ‘bread’ in my part-time jobs to keep the bills paid and food on the table. I soon discovered that Carolyn brought home checks larger than mine. How embarrassing for the supposed head of the home. Fortunately, that was just at the time I was discovering a biblical marriage-partnership view of relationships. And with that new partnership came great freedom that included finances. We could discuss the family needs, both bring home our checks, put them together, and trust God to meet those needs.

Jesus' Self-understanding

With an eternal perspective, Jesus could live above the tradition of His day. One primary example was at what we call the Last Supper. Jesus stripped off His robe, picked up a bucket, a pitcher of water, and a towel, and proceeded to wash His disciples' feet. John begins this Passover event with a preamble of Jesus' self-understanding: “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God” (John 13:3, TNIV). In other words, because Jesus knew His power source, His mission focus, and what lay ahead in the

future, He was free to take on the servant's task of foot washing.

Yet, instead of this event standing out as one isolated example in a three-year ministry—a late-term perspective come to life when facing His betrayal, trial, and crucifixion—this was a summary event of the way Jesus lived life on the daily road. It was never surprising to follow Jesus into “risky places” with lepers, Sabbath-breakers, Roman officers, the demon-possessed, the poor, tax collectors, and even women. He had nothing to lose in reputation since His reputation was built on God's kingdom values instead of those espoused by His contemporary religious authorities.

Jesus Couldn't Help Himself

Jesus regularly called people back to the partnership model of creation, by treating women and men with equal worth and respect. He stared down men bent on stoning (John 8:3ff.), celebrated when perfume was spilled (Mark 14:3ff.) and proclaimed two-mite women truly godly (Mark 12:41-44). He couldn't help himself. He could do nothing less. As God, He had been there when the Trinity agreed to create humans. He planted the divine image within them. He was there at the surgical bifurcation of the original human into woman and man. He had walked in the garden with the newly created partners. He grieved when the humans walked away on their solo sinful path—painfully watching as the woman was named Eve, reducing her from her place of dignity to that of a functionary

child-bearer. He watched as humans continued to raise up kings, killing one another for power and control, across the generations. He finally entered human time and space with a cross-laden invitation to come back home.

Thus, His entire ministry looked like God's kingdom. Both women and men kept His company. Unlike any man of His time, He accepted financial support and companionship from female followers. He allowed and encouraged them into leadership. He responded harshly when men attempted to force women back into their traditional roles.

A New Value Declared

In one small but amazingly significant event, Jesus stopped a self-demeaning woman in her tracks. "As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, 'Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.' He replied, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it'" (Luke 11:27-28, TNIV). This woman was so taken by Jesus' teaching that she couldn't contain herself. She reached back into her tradition to pull out the greatest affirmation she could imagine. But she could only reach back to Eve, the de-valuing point for all women. She knew of Old Testament women like Leah (see Gen. 29:31ff.), who had cried to God for children to relieve their shame and to gain their husband's love.

Instead of accepting her praise, Jesus gently reprimanded her. In essence He said, "Woman, you've not reached back far enough. Before Eve, back at creation, there was a Man and Woman—the original 'adam' (Gen. 1:27; 5:1-2)—who lived in equal partnership. Before you were given value for your ability to birth and nurse there were humans who were valued for

who they were. From this point on you (and all women with you) are free of this wrong-headed notion. Your value comes through my life alive in you."

It should be added that when women are set free, men also are set free. Free to live in Kingdom values, to let God be God, instead of trying to play a role men are not created to perform.

The Ultimate Declaration and Affirmation

So then, as if to put a blazing, halogen exclamation-point on His entire ministry and the future for the Church, Jesus chose an obedient, faithful, faith-filled woman as the first witness to His resurrection and igniter of the celebration. And although the men couldn't believe their ears and many have attempted to defame her name since, Mary never doubted. Her voice resounds across the centuries, "I have seen the Lord."

Living in Controversy

Of course, Jesus was never far from controversy. Neither is anyone who chooses to color outside the sinful lines. And the controversy continues today for any who would proclaim the equality of all humans—and freedom *from* all oppressors and *for* all oppressors.

Yet, just as John proclaimed Jesus' self-understanding at His pre-crucifixion dinner, Jesus-followers are assured of the same Spirit's power. We are born with the same eternal mission and we can be certain of our future with God. So, we are free to risk it all, to live and proclaim the kingdom of God, which is at hand. And we continue to look expectantly toward the Kingdom's coming in fullness.

Jesus' Women Associates—Study Guide

Study Guide by Stefanie and Mark Hendrickson
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Notes for the Leader

A small group setting or class can use the following questions to guide the discussion of the biblical passage and exposition. Allow participants time to answer for themselves, making room for all group members in the discussion.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think the “traditional American family” looks like?
2. How does the “traditional American family” fit what families look like in today’s society? Are these two similar or different? Why?
3. What does God’s design for a family look like (check out the creation story in Unit 1)? How does the “traditional American family” fit into what God designed families to be? Are they similar or different? Why?
4. Describe tradition. What are good components of tradition? What are obstructive components of tradition?
5. What enabled Jesus to live beyond the traditions of His day? Do we have access to the same things? Why or why not?
6. If we lived beyond the “traditions” of our society, how would our lives be the same or different?
7. One of the aspects of Jesus’ “non-traditional” life was His daily life—He lived with eternal perspectives and grace every day. Why is this daily life relevant? Have you incorporated the kingdom of God in your daily life? How?
8. How does the kingdom of God, lived daily, change lives? How does it change “traditions”? How does it create the healthy relationships God designed?
9. Jesus—part of the Trinity—treated women and men as worth equal respect. How does our relationship with God inform our relationships with others, both men and women?
10. After noting Jesus’ equal respect of men and women, the writer of the Exposition section says, “His entire ministry looked like God’s kingdom.” What do you think God’s kingdom looks like? What do you think Jesus taught us it looks like?
11. Based on your understanding of the kingdom of God, how have you lived in the Kingdom? How have you lived in your church, adding to it, in the kingdom of God?
12. Talking about tradition and the kingdom of God can sometimes stir up uncomfortable discussion and controversy.

Dr. Smith states in the Exposition section,

*Jesus was never far from controversy.
Neither is anyone who chooses to color
outside the sinful lines. And the controversy
continues today for any who would proclaim
the equality of all humans—and freedom
FROM all oppressors and FOR all
oppressors.*

How has your Christian faith stirred up controversy? How is your life different from the “traditions” of the world?

Jesus' Women Associates—Commentary

Commentary by John Stanley
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These texts establish women as travelers with Jesus, as deacons and apostles, and introduce the central role of Mary Magdalene as the first apostle.

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ²as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources. (Luke 8:1-3¹)

This short passage raises four issues concerning Jesus' women associates.

Contrary to the pattern in Jewish culture, women accompanied Jesus and financially supported His preaching journey to Jerusalem. Luke 8:1-3 states that women traveled with Jesus and Luke 23:55 mentions "the women who had come with him from Galilee followed" Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb of Jesus. This verse implies the women were present on the whole journey to Jerusalem. Also, rather than leave the crucified Jesus, they were faithfully present at the tomb, in contrast to the male apostles, who deserted Jesus.

In 1898 Jennie Fowler Willing noted, "Mary has been wronged all through the centuries by the assumption that she was the woman of the bad life of whom Luke wrote"² in Luke 7:36-50. Early holiness women did not make the mistake Pope Gregory I made. They identified Mary, not as a sinful woman, but as the one whom all four Gospel writers record as the first witness of the empty tomb and resurrection, along with Jesus' mother.

In the Gospel of Luke these women are comparable to the deacons in Acts, which Luke also wrote. The word *diakonoun* in Luke 8:3 sets up the parallel to Acts. The NRSV translated the Greek verb *diakonoun*, as "provided for them." The same root word is translated as "serve/served" in Mark 10:45 and Luke 22:27. Luke used the noun form of *diakonia* in Acts 6:4 describing "the twelve" who "will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." Luke 8:1-3 presents these women as paralleling in the ministry of Jesus, the deacons of the church in Acts. As the deacons in Acts oversaw the financial needs of the emerging church, these women provided for the financial needs of Jesus' ministry. Luke 8:1-3, an often-overlooked text, is important because it shows that women traveled with and financially supported Jesus. For Jesus to have women traveling with Him went against the cultural standards of the time. Without the women's financial support, Jesus' traveling ministry would have been difficult.

Who was Mary Magdalene? Luke 8:2 indicates she "had been cured of evil spirits . . . and seven demons." Also, Magdala was her hometown, hence the name Mary Magdalene. Although the New Testament mentions Mary Magdalene 14 times, a

mistake exists in church tradition regarding her identity. Pope Gregory I (A.D. 540-604) combined the Mary Magdalene of Luke 8:2 with the sinful woman of Luke 7:36-50, the woman of Bethany who anointed Jesus in Mark 14:3-9, and the anointing Mary whom John identified as the sister of Lazarus in John 12:1-8. Although popular church tradition often has followed Gregory's mistaken identity of Mary Magdalene as a sinner who anointed Jesus three times, it is better to follow the Bible than church tradition regarding the identity of Mary Magdalene. Luke identified Mary Magdalene as one whom Jesus healed, not as a sinner, especially not a prostitute as Pope Gregory I declared her.

This is the only time the Gospels mention Susanna; the use of her specific name gives credibility to Luke's reference to the "many others" whose names Luke did not record, possibly because of the limitations of space. Or perhaps there were so many women traveling with Jesus that early Christians took the presence of women for granted.

The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. ⁵⁶Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment. ¹But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here,

but has risen. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. (Luke 23:55—24:11)

Repetition indicates significance in the Bible. Four times—in Luke 8:2-3; 23:49; 23:55 and 24:10—Luke mentions the faithful women. They were at the beginning of Jesus' travels, at the cross, at the tomb and at the resurrection. Luke 24:10 records Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James (and Jesus), and other women as present at the empty tomb. They were initially perplexed (24:4), as Mary, the mother of Jesus was "perplexed" when Gabriel informed her she was to give birth to the Christ child (1:29). However, they moved from perplexity to proclamation as "they remembered his words" in Jesus' earlier predictions of His death and resurrection (9:22; 18:31-33). Thus, they told this good news "to the eleven and all the rest" to whom "these words seemed . . . an idle tale, and they did not believe them." According to Luke, the women not only faithfully accompanied Jesus on His travels and were present at the cross and tomb, but they believed the message of the resurrection while the male apostles, including Peter, did not believe the resurrection proclamation.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb

and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:1-2, 11-18)

In John's resurrection account Mary Magdalene fulfills the qualifications for being an apostle. According to Acts 1:21-22, an apostle was one who had been with Jesus and was "a witness with us to his resurrection." Mary met those two conditions. As covered

earlier, Mary Magdalene spent time with Jesus and financed His ministry. She was the apostle to the apostles because she was the first to see the risen Jesus and to proclaim, "I have seen the Lord."

John contrasted her actions and belief with those of Peter, "the other disciple," and Thomas. After discovering the empty tomb she informed Peter and the beloved disciple. Then the two male disciples went home instead of sharing the good news of the resurrection as Mary did. Mary Magdalene "stood weeping outside the tomb." Two angels asked her, "Why are you weeping?" She replied that she assumed the body of Jesus had been stolen. Then she saw Jesus but, "she did not know that it was Jesus." Jesus repeated the angel's question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Assuming the unrecognized Jesus to be a gardener, she asked Him where the body of Jesus was. Then Jesus called her by name and she recognized Jesus. Jesus commissioned her

John clearly states Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the Risen Lord, which was the task of an apostle. No wonder some circles of early Christianity revered Mary Magdalene as the first apostle. Augustine, a church bishop around A.D. 400, called Mary Magdalene "the apostle to the apostles."

to go and announce His ascension to God. Her announcement to the disciples that "I have seen the Lord" was the first witness to and proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John. She

believed solely on the basis of what she saw and heard, contrary to Thomas, who needed to touch Jesus in order to believe. As Jennie Fowler Willing noted, "Unlike Thomas, the doubter, she had faith strong enough to receive Him without tactile evidence."³

Women were not valued as valid witnesses in parts of early Judaism. If the Gospel writers

wanted to make the miracle of the resurrection more credible to their readers they would have had men be the primary characters in the resurrection accounts. However, all four Gospels have Mary Magdalene as the first witness to the empty tomb (Mark. 16:7; Matt. 28:1-8; Luke 24:1-2; John 20:1-2), and in three Gospels she is the first to proclaim Jesus as risen (Matt. 28:9-10; Luke 24:9-10; John 20:18). The presence and proclamation of Mary, as a woman, went against the customs of the day and became arguments for the authenticity of the resurrection. The church today needs to remember the biblical witness of women as leaders in the ministry of Jesus and the early church.

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Notes

¹ All Scripture quotations in the Commentary section are from the NRSV.

² Jennie Fowler Willing, "Mary of Magdala: Part I," *Guide to Holiness* CIII (October 1898), 118.

³ *Ibid.*

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Wynkoop Center Bible Studies on Women in Ministry

UNIT 1: The Creation Mandate		UNIT 3: New Testament Women in Public Leadership	
The Crown of Creation	Gen. 1:26-31	Anna	Luke 2:22, 36-40
The First Human, Almost	Gen. 2:1-17	Woman at the Well	John 4:1-42
The Human Race Completed	Gen. 2:18-25	Jesus' Women Associates	Luke 8:1-3; 23:55–24:11;
Broken Fellowship	Gen. 3:1-13		John 20:1-2, 11-18
Facing the Consequences	Gen. 3:14-24	Lydia	Acts 16:11-15, 40
		Priscilla	Acts 18:1-3, 18, 24-26; Rom. 16:3-4; 1 Cor. 16:19;
			2 Tim. 4:19
		Paul's Women Associates	Rom. 16:1-16; Phil. 4:2-3;
			Col. 4:15
UNIT 2: Old Testament Women in Public Leadership		UNIT 4: Difficult Passages in the New Testament	
Miriam	Exod. 2:1-10; 15:19-21; Num. 12:1-16; 20:1;	The Creation Order Understood	1 Cor. 11:2-16
	Mic. 6:4	Keeping Order in Public Worship	1 Cor. 14:26-36
Deborah	Judg. 4:1-10, 14; 5:1-3	Mutual Submission among Christians	Eph. 5:21-33;
Huldah	2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chron. 34:22-28		1 Pet. 3:1-7
Esther	Esther 2:5-11, 16-23; 4:13–5:8; 7:1–8:6; 9:29-32	I Suffer Not a Woman	1 Tim. 2:8-15
Jehosheba	2 Kings 11:1-21; 2 Chron. 22:10-12	The New Testament Understanding of Women	Gal. 3:23-29

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Lydia—Exposition

Scripture Focus

Acts 16:11-15, 40

Exposition by Julia Roat-Abla

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Today, celebrating ambitious and influential women holds a certain appeal. Oprah Winfrey and Martha Stewart are just two examples of prominent businesswomen who encourage the independent, entrepreneurial spirit traditionally reserved for the rough-and-ready cowboy businessman. Look through any woman's magazine and you'll find at least one article relating the story of a female entrepreneur who, through determination and ingenuity, now runs a successful business.

When we read about the founding of the church in Philippi and particularly the story of Lydia, it is fairly easy to associate the same enterprising spirit with this Roman-world businesswoman. We don't actually know what her marriage situation was—whether she was widowed or simply a freedwoman. She was clearly a businesswoman with experience and social standing. Nevertheless, the household she oversaw, the primary realm of the woman, was the locus for this church plant. This was important, because Lydia's influence extended across both worlds.

Indeed, not only were a group of women the founders of this church, Lydia especially stands out as a driving force. She certainly made an impression upon Paul and his missionary team. In fact, we find Paul returning to the Philippian church, and Lydia's household specifically, after a series of harrowing adventures along his journey, for reprieve and fellowship later in Acts.

The prayers, hospitality, and faithfulness of Lydia were vitally important to the Philippian

church. They are vital to the local church today. Lydia undoubtedly played a central role in establishing them as characteristics of this church. And as more women take central leadership roles in churches today, as lay leaders, pastors, and church planters, these characteristics deserve the emphasis Lydia gave them.

Prayer

One of the most noticeable absences in this passage is the presence of men. Even if men were present in the early gatherings of the Philippian church, we don't read of it here. Women received the acknowledgment for the church-planting efforts. While 10 men were required for the establishment of a synagogue (a place of prayer) in a community, Lydia was the one who made prayer the priority in her household and in the fledgling church.

It was providential that the women of this region enjoyed relative freedom during this time. This gave Lydia and members of her household the opportunity to encounter this new faith. Although Lydia was recognized as a "worshipper of God" (v. 14, NRSV) we cannot assume she was Jewish or even a convert to the Jewish faith. There was something, however, that compelled her to gather outside the city gate. By the time Paul and his team had arrived, this group of women, led by Lydia, was familiar with the faith of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Prayer joined these women of Lydia together. While their prayers were most likely

said according to Jewish and early Christian structures, and therefore would be unfamiliar to our ears, they formed the core of this church's identity and vision.

It may be difficult to estimate the centrality of prayer to the life of a church. It seems it is always there, but perhaps it takes a perfunctory role in our worship and our service: it is but one thing among many other things. It is reserved for the "prayer warriors" who are put on call for the most urgent of requests of intercession. It is a private matter, depending on the preferences of the individual pray-er and not on our understanding of it as an exercise in unity.

Prayer is in fact the indispensable core of Christian leadership and it is the central Christian act that defines who we are as a people. As William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas wrote, "Learning to pray is the way Christians discover how to speak. The primary language of the church is the way of prayer — because in prayer the practice and the language are inseparable."¹

Hospitality

Hospitality is revealed in a wide range of things, such as hosting an event or receiving people into one's home. It may be overlooked as frivolous or superficial. But Christian hospitality is more than teacups and tablecloths. It is concerned with more than just the acts of planning or running an event or opening the door and showing guests to their rooms. It gets caught up in the details. It requires conversation. It involves small things

that demonstrate time and effort put into making someone feel accepted. It is an intentional kindness to strangers that communicates welcome, peace, and the love of Christ.

While it should not be considered exclusively the realm of women, hospitality was indeed a significant extension of Lydia's leadership within the Philippian church. The household would have been Lydia's first domain. The commentator points out the significance of Lydia's offer of hospitality in opening her house to the traveling missionaries. To welcome them into her home indicated she was also offering them her provision and protection while they remained in the city. They were now under her care and association and could enjoy her notoriety within the town.

To welcome them into her home indicated Lydia was also offering them her provision and protection while they remained in the city. They were now under her care and association and could enjoy her notoriety within the town.

But hospitality was not exclusive to the household. Lydia's hospitality extended throughout the Philippian church as well. Her offer of hospitality was a verification of who she had become in Christ—and who everyone who lived within her household had become. Without it, there was no proof behind her claims. This was the immediate fruit of a Spirit-led life.

If you've ever had visitors in your home, you probably know there are customs, traditions, and habits that identify and separate them from you. It is not that easy to make a person, particularly a foreigner or a stranger, feel really comfortable. They do not know your routine, your values. You do not

know theirs. Yet you share your home, your meals, and your lives as a gift.

Lydia provides an excellent model for bringing an entire household together to care for Paul and his traveling companions. Her hospitality was not simply an act of charity. It was a key that unlocked the possibilities of a growing faith community.

How does a church today extend this same gift? True hospitality seems to be a critical aspect of a vibrant church. Lydia carried the welcoming spirit of her household over into the church. And the church grew.

Faithfulness

In all this we see most clearly Lydia's faithfulness. Lydia's life and ministry bore fruit in others because she displayed such wholehearted commitment. We see a consistency and commitment to the faith and to the faith community that would lead to the baptism of her entire household. Furthermore, her loyalty to the local church was a strong demonstration of faithfulness to all the believers. Her influence as a trusted leader undoubtedly grew as she consistently demonstrated her faithfulness within and around the community.

Faithfulness is a hard fruit, perhaps because it requires that extra measure of discipline we cannot find so easily within ourselves. Faithfulness is not just a feeling. It begins with obedience. It is carried out with humility. It calls us to servitude. And while it is lived out through our relationships and actions, it should not be mistaken for "playing church."

Do we support our church and those who minister there with our mouths? Or do we passively try to sabotage others' efforts

because we think we can do it better? Do we support and equip others for ministry, or do we just complain that no one is ever there to help? Are we really available with our time, money, and effort, or do we just pay lip service to our responsibilities?

Faithfulness is hard, but it is so very important because its evidence is so widespread. Lydia's faithfulness was not recognized just among the local believers. The commentator notes that upon Paul and Silas' return to Philippi, they went to see Lydia herself. As important and beloved as the church and her household may have been, Lydia held a tremendous amount of respect individually from the missionaries. The apostles returned her hospitality and faithfulness with personal loyalty and a well-known affection toward the Philippian church.

Lydia's faithful acts of financial support and spiritual leadership through prayer and hospitality provided this infant church the essentials it needed to flourish. Lydia was not known to preach or teach, yet her faithfulness to her faith community is renowned. Our behavior still communicates more than we could ever say. Faithfulness realizes what our hearts have already received and what our mouths have already confessed. It is the foundation of a believing community's strength and growth.

Conclusion

Lydia's place in the church in Philippi, among the saints of the whole church, is impressive. Even as women struggle today to gain validation and recognition for their call to ministry, Lydia enjoyed respect and real influence among the apostles and believers of

the early church. Prayer, hospitality, and faithfulness were defining characteristics of Lydia's ministry in Philippi. We can hold her life up as a model to women today who play active roles in the life of their own local churches.

Notes

¹*Where Resident Aliens Live: Exercises for Christian Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 42.

Lydia—Study Guide

Study Guide by Stefanie and Mark Hendrickson
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Notes for the Leader

A small group setting or class can use the following questions to guide the discussion of the biblical passage and exposition. Allow participants time to answer for themselves, making room for all group members in the discussion.

Discussion Questions

1. Create a list of some of today's prominent, successful women in business, medicine, education, and politics. How have these women influenced today's society? In what ways have they made positive changes in our community, country, and world?
2. How would you describe Lydia based on your reading of the passage in Acts? How was she similar or different from the women in your first list?
3. In what ways did Lydia have a positive influence on the Church?
4. How did the restriction of requiring 10 men to form a synagogue (a place of worship) impact the development of the Philippian church?
5. In what ways did God, through grace and love, work beyond this restriction in order to share grace and love with others, like Lydia? Does God still work this way in our world? Why or why not?
6. What role did prayer play in the development and growth of the Philippian church? Why does it matter that prayer was a part of this?
7. What part does prayer play in your life? In your church? How can you embrace prayer? In what ways do you think prayer will affect your life, community, and church?
8. Define faithfulness? What do you think faithfulness looks like in your daily life? What does faithfulness look like for your church in your community?
9. How are faithfulness and discipline related? How have you incorporated

discipline in your Christian journey? Share about the faithfulness you've experienced in your life.

10. How does Lydia embrace hospitality? In what ways can you use Lydia as a model for hospitality? In what ways do you already embrace hospitality?

Lydia—Commentary

Commentary by Richard Thompson
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Some would argue these verses begin the account of the greatest and most difficult years of Paul's ministry. As the gospel was moving into Macedonia, Luke remarkably focuses our attention on the conversion of three unlikely persons: a woman, a slave, and a Gentile. These three persons represent the divergence of the new faith from the old. In Lydia, we find a woman who exemplifies leadership and faith in her response to the gospel.

Translation¹

After we put out to sea from Troas, we sailed a straight course to Samothrace, and on the next day to Neapolis. ¹²From that place we went to Philippi, which is a city of the first district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We were spending some days in this city. ¹³On the Sabbath day, we went outside of the gate beside the river, where we were expecting a place of prayer to be. And after sitting down, we began to speak to the women who came together. ¹⁴A certain woman by the name of Lydia was listening; she was a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira and a worshipper of God. It was her heart that the Lord opened to pay attention to what was being spoken by Paul. ¹⁵After she was baptized along with her household, she urged us by saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, enter my household and stay." And she compelled us.

⁴⁰*After they left the prison, they went to Lydia. After they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters, they departed.*

Commentary

This scene was set in motion by the events in verses 6-10. On two occasions, Paul and his traveling ministry party were prevented from ministering in specific areas of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Luke interpreted these "closed doors" as divine intervention, offering no specifics. We are told Paul and his colleagues ended up in Troas, a seaport city in northwest Asia Minor. Paul's vision of the Macedonian man took place here, with its compelling message to proclaim the gospel in Macedonia.

Verse 11

The ministry party set out in earnest. The verb "put out to sea" appears frequently in Luke's descriptions of Paul's journeys (see 18:21; 20:3; 27:4, 12, 21; 28:11). The main verb of the sentence, "sailed a straight course," is not a nautical term. While the term was often used in this manner, it literally refers to running a straight course or race by not drifting to one side or another.

Luke described the first two legs of the trip briefly. Both legs were roughly the same distance. The destination of the first leg was Samothrace, a mountainous island at the northern extremity of the Aegean Sea, close to the mainland. Homer mentioned the island (*Iliad* 13.12), stating that Poseidon (the Greek god of the sea) surveyed the city of Troy from the tallest mountain here. With no harbor on the island, the travelers probably spent the night on the ship. The next day took them to

Neapolis, about the same distance as the previous day's travels. Neapolis was the port for Philippi, an inland city about 10 miles northwest.

Verse 12

Both the context and the expression "from that place" suggest Paul's team made the 10-mile trip from Neapolis to Philippi the following day. Luke described the city of Philippi in two distinct ways. First, Philippi was "a city of the first district of Macedonia." There are significant textual problems with the wording here. Many translations follow

variant readings which state that Philippi was the "leading city of the district of Macedonia" (NRSV; cf. NIV: "leading city of that district of

Macedonia"). While the former reading is most likely the original one, the latter is preferred.

Grammatically, the adjective "first" or "leading" refers to "district," not "city."

Historically, Philippi was neither the leading city nor the capital city of Macedonia.

However, in 169 B.C., Macedonia had been divided by the Romans into four districts (see Livy 45.29, for the same word translated "district" here).

The second description of Philippi is that it was "a Roman colony," both an idea and a term borrowed from Latin. Originally, Philippi was a small gold-mining town, named after Philip II of Macedonia, father of Alexander the Great. Its importance grew due to its location along the Via Egnatia, the main road between Asia and the west. Octavian established the city as a Roman colony in 31 B.C. The colonies

originally functioned as settlements of Roman citizens in conquered territories, to control the local population in those areas. Rome often gave colonial land to discharged soldiers. These colonies were typically known for the private ownership of land and local governmental administration, like Rome itself.

On the surface, the mention of the party "spending some days in this city" seems peculiar. The verbal construction itself suggests two things not readily seen in translation. First, the emphasis is on the ongoing nature of what happened. In other words, the duration of the delay is placed

before the reader to see.

Second, the verb translated "spending" literally means "to rub between," "to spend time," or even "to waste

time." This verb implies someone or something delayed Paul and his partners. They may have been waiting for the Sabbath. However, Luke did not offer any hints about what may have caused the delay.

They expected to find "a place of prayer" there, outside the city, since religions and cults Romans viewed suspiciously were not permitted in the city itself. It may also have been near the river for ceremonial washings.

Verse 13

On the Sabbath, the party "went outside of the gate beside the river." This probably refers to a gate about a mile west of the city. Beyond the gate is the Gangites river. They expected to find "a place of prayer" there, outside the city, since religions and cults Romans viewed suspiciously were not permitted in the city itself. It may also have been near the river for ceremonial washings.

Many explain "a place of prayer" as a Jewish meeting spot for prayer and worship when there was no synagogue building in a

city. Most add there was a requirement of 10 Jewish males in a given locale for the institution of a synagogue. However, Jewish writings often use “place of prayer” and “synagogue” synonymously. Luke does favor the term “synagogue” when referring to a building, but the phrase “into the place of prayer” (16:16) may be interpreted as describing an entrance into a building. What commentators fail to note here is that prayer is a significant emphasis in Acts (e.g., see 1:12-14; 2:42; 3:1f; 4:23-31; 13:1-3). The Lukan use of this word may help the reader to anticipate God’s working.

Luke does not say whether the party found what they were looking for. Most interpreters assume Paul and the others found the women mentioned at the “place of prayer.” Most view the absence of any Philippian men in the account as evidence that this was not a synagogue meeting. However, this silence may not mean there were no Jewish males. It could mean the women held prominent roles in the synagogue. Many Macedonian women enjoyed considerable freedom and influence in their day. Nonetheless, the literal wording mentions nothing about *where* the women “came together.” Maybe this meeting should not be associated with a place of prayer or a synagogue at all. It may have occurred apart from or outside that location.

What *is* noteworthy is these women gathered with Paul and his group. Two verbs indicate in extreme brevity what happened in the meeting. First, the verb “sitting down” indicates either the posture associated with teaching or simply the informality of the gathering. Second, the verb translated “began to speak” is a term Luke typically used to refer

to the proclamation of the gospel. In other words, Paul and the others began to share the gospel with this group of women. Ironically, while a vision of a Macedonian man precipitated Paul’s journey to Philippi, we find no Macedonian male in this first scene in that region!

Verse 14

Luke singled out one woman for introduction, whom he identified as Lydia. She hailed from Thyatira, a city in the region of Lydia in Asia Minor and specifically from the region of Lydia. Thus, her name may mean simply “the one from Lydia.” This may indicate she was a freedwoman, a freed female slave, but women of higher class and status also used such names. Luke also identified Lydia as “a dealer in purple cloth,” which probably refers to the lucrative trade of this commodity for which the city of Thyatira was famous. It is probable that persons involved in this business were wealthy, as the mention of Lydia’s household in the next verse also implies. A Greek inscription from Philippi mentions women actively involved in this business. Thus, what Luke described here certainly was plausible.

In addition to Lydia’s status and position, Luke described her in religious ways. First, the description “worshipper of God” means she was neither a Jewish descendent nor a Jewish convert. Rather, Lydia attended Jewish meetings as one attracted to the teachings and ethic associated with the God of the Jewish people. Second, Luke stated simply that Lydia “was listening” to what Paul and the others proclaimed. The verb tense focuses on the continuous nature of her listening. While she

may have listened to preaching on more than one occasion, the duration and concentration of that listening is stressed here. Third, Luke described Lydia's conversion. The verb "opened" is a compound word that implies God *completely* opened her heart. The verb "pay attention" literally means "to hold to oneself" or "to embrace." Lydia's embrace of the gospel ("what was being spoken by Paul," the same verb used in verse 13 to refer to proclamation) was the result of God's work.

Verse 15

At some point after Lydia's conversion, she was baptized with "her household," including servants and dependents who lived in her house. Typically, households were not identified by a married woman's name. Thus, Lydia was probably widowed or divorced. Lydia's wealth possibly came from her husband, but it likely came from her business dealings.

Lydia challenged them to examine her life. If they refused her hospitality, they questioned her conversion.

One should note Luke mentioned nothing about the household in his descriptions of the meeting(s) between Paul's ministry group and Lydia. Luke often associated salvation with *both* the householder *and* the household (e.g., see 11:14; 16:30-34; 18:8), offering no explanation; therefore, one may conclude the leader's faith was influential in everyone's conversion. That would be the case with Lydia. Her faith and leadership resulted in the baptism of her dependents. The text leaves unanswered how that may have happened.

Luke presented Lydia's offer of hospitality as a sign of her conversion. Most interpret the offer as an invitation to stay at her house. However, the word here, commonly translated

"house" (NIV) or "home" (NRSV), is the same one referring to the household above. Thus, they refer to the same thing. Lydia offered "household status" to the traveling evangelists. In other words, *Lydia* would be responsible for *their* provision and protection. These men would depend upon this hospitable woman. Note that she did not ask them. Rather, their judgment implies what they had already seen in her *would* result in their acceptance of her offer. The issue was not about her being "a believer" (NIV); the issue was about her *faithfulness*. Lydia challenged them to examine her life. If they refused her hospitality, they questioned her conversion.

Lydia's offer was convincing. The verb "compelled" is often associated with power and forcefulness. Luke used the term to describe the compulsion behind the request

that Jesus stay with the two disciples in Emmaus (Luke 24:29). Here, it implies the

force of Lydia's offer *and* her faithful life overpowered the others. By her actions, Lydia used her status and social position to give credibility to these Christians.

Verse 40

After recounting the conversion of a slave girl, the imprisonment of Paul and Silas, and their release from prison, Luke wrapped up his account of Paul's ministry in Philippi with a simple note. Two things stand out. First, they "went to Lydia." Most translations interpret this as their return to Lydia's *house*. However, Luke's wording emphasizes Paul and Silas going to see *Lydia*, not going to her house *per se*. This suggests something about

her status and role among the believers. Second, they met with “the brothers and sisters.” To this point, Luke had stated nothing about *men* among the converts. Some conclude this is merely a formula Luke habitually used for the believers. However, these men may have belonged to Lydia’s household or even the jailer’s household (16:31-34). The sentence construction suggests these believers are probably to be associated with Lydia. Thus, Lydia’s conversion, ministry, and leadership gave rise to a fledgling church in Philippi.

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¹Unless otherwise marked, all Scripture quotations in the Commentary section are the author’s own translation from the original languages.

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Wynkoop Center Bible Studies on Women in Ministry

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Credits and Notices

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Priscilla—Exposition

Scripture Focus

**Acts 18:1-3, 18, 24-26; Romans 16:3-4;
1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19**

Exposition by Rick Williamson

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Priscilla entered the biblical story somewhat quietly. Luke introduced her and her husband, Aquila, in Acts 18:2-3, saying Paul “found” them in Corinth after an order by the emperor Claudius had forced them out of Rome. Introducing someone briefly, then later expanding his or her role is a technique used by Luke. Saul of Tarsus entered the narrative as a keeper of the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen (Acts 7:58), yet he became the most prominent individual in the second half of Acts. Despite her quiet entrance, Priscilla became an important personality. She partnered with her husband, with the Apostle Paul, and with others, as she partnered with God. She proved to be a flexible partner, willing to minister in a variety of roles and a number of locations.

A Partner with Her Husband

Priscilla appears in four chapters of the New Testament (Acts 18; Rom. 16; 1 Cor. 16; and 2 Tim. 4). Her name occurs six times. She is always mentioned along with her husband, Aquila. When the pair first appears in Acts, his name is given first: “a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla” (Acts 18:2¹). The same order appears in 1 Corinthians 16:19 (“Aquila and Prisca”). But quickly in Acts, Priscilla assumes the primary place, “Priscilla and Aquila” (Acts 18:18, and again in 18:26). Paul twice placed her in the more prominent position (Rom. 16:3; 2 Tim. 4:19). While this

devoted couple is always presented as a team, it appears the leadership role may have shifted some, and over time, Priscilla assumed the principal place in Luke’s and Paul’s thinking, due very likely to her more prominent role in various ministry assignments.

A modern example of such a minister was the Rev. Naomi Downs. This pioneering home-mission pastor, energetic and gifted preacher, teacher, and organizer established the Church of the Nazarene in Nashville, Indiana. Like Priscilla, she was gifted with obvious leadership abilities. At the same time, she always proceeded in her pastoral assignments in partnership with her quieter husband, who was a layperson. Whether the people of the church referred to them as “Brother and Sister Downs,” or “Sister and Brother Downs,” or to her as “Pastor” or “Reverend,” her significant ministry was always a partnership. Had it not been for her sanctified church-planting commitment to a small southern Indiana town, this writer might never have found his way to the Lord, and certainly not to a lifetime of ministry in the Church of the Nazarene. She dug out a small but devoted Nazarene congregation that sought out my family, loved us, prayed for us before we had the good sense to pray for ourselves, and drew us into the kingdom of God.

A Partner with the Apostle Paul

Priscilla's involvement with the Apostle Paul began when she and her husband provided a temporary home for Paul (Acts 18:3). They ministered Christian hospitality to him in Corinth, and worked alongside him at tentmaking. No doubt Priscilla and her husband were often in attendance "every sabbath . . . in the synagogue" when Paul would make his case for Christ, attempting to convince both "Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18:4).

This couple soon proved so valuable that Paul apparently asked them to join him in ministry, and took them along as he headed east. Upon reaching Ephesus "he left them there" to help establish the Christian mission (Acts 18:18-19). They were entrusted with leadership roles in Ephesus, providing spiritual guidance and carrying pastoral responsibilities. The central role they played in the developing faith soon

unfolded. When "a Jew named Apollos" arrived in town and impressed many with his eloquence, his passion for the truth, and his command of the Scriptures, Priscilla and Aquila took him into private session and "explained the Way of God to him more accurately" (Acts 18:24-26). Priscilla played a key role in providing advanced theological education to Apollos. Her mentoring relationship led Apollos to wider ministry in Achaia.

That Paul considered her a co-worker in ministry becomes quite clear in the Roman letter, where Paul called Priscilla ("Prisca") and her husband people "who work with me in Christ Jesus" (16:3). This working alongside

Paul was no small thing. Indeed, Paul said graphically, they "risked their necks for my life" (16:4), perhaps a reference to the riot in Ephesus (see Acts 19:23ff.). Being a co-worker was risky business! This status included being the host home for a "church in their house" (1 Corinthians 16:19). Priscilla and Aquila modeled ministry with a welcoming space to gather, warm hospitality, and pastoral leadership. This significant woman served in varied ministry roles in partnership with the great Apostle Paul.

I experienced lavish portions of hospitality from one particular family in my first pastoral assignment. Jo Fiscus opened her home to any and all. People of all ages and conditions, all races and all faiths, found a welcome in the Fiscus home and at their table. While not a licensed minister herself, Jo was always a friend of pastors. Countless pastors received

Priscilla's story travels over a great deal of geography. When it came to serving the Lord, she was ready to go, and ready to stay.

respite at the farmhouse, lovely meals, and "anonymous" cash gifts. Clothing and gasoline and food for the freezer

flowed from Jo's home. She also taught. Jo knew the Bible well, taught it with love and conviction, and had Scripture and scriptural principles at the ready, because they were deeply imbedded in her heart. When I was away for a vacation week, the people of the church were quite happy for Jo to fill the pulpit. She was the featured speaker at numerous Sunday services in many churches, as well as luncheons, banquets, church and school programs. Like Priscilla, she demonstrated Christian hospitality as well as serving as a minister of the Word.

A Partner Who Was Flexible

Priscilla was one who worked for the advance of the gospel in many ways. She was flexible concerning her role, and flexible concerning her locale. People who are flexible about their assignment are a Godsend. Priscilla's sanctified servant's heart enabled her to be effective in all kinds of roles. She expressed hospitality readily, sharing her home, her food, and her life. She was a student of Scripture, so much so that she could advance the theological education of a newer minister and assist him in launching into wider preaching ministry. Priscilla also took pastoral responsibilities, as hers became the home where Christians gathered regularly.

Priscilla's story travels over a great deal of geography. When it came to serving the Lord, she was ready to go, and ready to stay. When circumstances in Rome pushed them out of the capital city, she made a home, a career, and a ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:2-3). Maybe she would have been willing to remain there. After all, the disruption of leaving Rome and settling 600 miles to the east in Corinth was enough for

anyone. But along came Paul, who, convinced of her value in ministry for the young Christian movement, asked her to uproot once again, and move another 200 miles east, across the Aegean Sea, to help establish the work in Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19). Paul's greetings to the couple in the Roman letter may mean they later moved back to the capital city (16:3-4), another major move.

Closing Reflection

Partnership is a rich word. The Greek word in the New Testament, often translated "fellowship" or "partnership," is *koinonia*. The root of the word means that which is shared, or in common. To be a partner is to be of common mind and heart, to enter into the life of another. Partnership with God always leads to a stronger partnering with people. Priscilla is a role model of Christian *koinonia*. She was a partner in the highest biblical sense.

Notes

¹ All Scripture quotations in the Exposition section are from the NRSV.

Priscilla—Study Guide

Study Guide by Stefanie and Mark Hendrickson
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Notes for the Leader

A small group setting or class can use the following questions to guide the discussion of the biblical passage and exposition. Allow participants time to answer for themselves, making room for all group members in the discussion.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think the spouse of a pastor often ministers alongside his or her spouse? Why do you think this is the case?
2. What is the benefit of a couple who minister together, like Priscilla and Aquila? If you are married, do you serve the church

- together (whether as clergy or laity)? Why or why not?
3. How have you been influenced in your Christian journey by a ministry couple? How can groups, whether related or not, be effective in ministry? What benefits are there for whole communities to do ministry instead of one or two people?
 4. Describe what you think hospitality is. Is hospitality something our society practices often and well? Why or why not? Who is to be the recipient of hospitality?
 5. How often do you engage in practicing hospitality? As a Christian, what resources do you have to pull from to help you be a hospitable person?
 6. When Priscilla and Aquila were in Ephesus, what skills, habits, and practices did they have to develop prior to their leadership? During their leadership?
 7. According to Paul (16:4), Priscilla and Aquila “risked their necks for my life.” What challenges do ministers (male and female) face? What challenges do lay leaders face? What are some ways both groups can be supported?
 8. Describe a job or time you had to be flexible. Was it easy to be graceful and flexible? Why or why not?
 9. How can God’s grace help us be flexible in our lives? How can *we* be avenues of God’s grace to others facing challenges?
 10. Priscilla and Aquila had to be flexible and ready to say “yes” no matter what God asked—they moved from Rome to Corinth, over 600 miles away. Have you had a time when you were asked to do something that required courage and grace? What was your response?
 11. How is the story of Priscilla and Aquila an example of God’s faithfulness and faithfulness of ministers?

Priscilla—Commentary

Commentary by Robert Wall
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The student should read the Bible sequentially. Even as the New Testament presumes its reader already knows the Old Testament story of Israel (see Matt. 1:1-17) and the Book of Acts presumes its reader already knows the gospel story of Jesus (Acts 1:1), so also the Pauline letters presume their reader already knows the story of Paul narrated by Acts. Even the passing greetings to otherwise faceless people one typically finds in the benedictions of Paul's letters are known by their characterization in Acts, thereby making readers more alert to the important roles they performed in Paul's mission to the nations. One such character is Priscilla, whom Paul greeted along with her husband, Aquila, in Romans 16:3-5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, and 2 Timothy 4:19.

Evidently Priscilla and her husband, Aquila, were Italian Jews forced to leave Rome in A.D. 49 by imperial edict (see below) and had since returned from the mission field to establish a Christian congregation in Rome. Paul greeted them there as those "who work with me in Christ Jesus"¹ who "risked their necks for my life." He then invited "all the churches of the Gentiles" to join him in "thanking" them, finally then greeting the congregation who met "in their house" for worship. When taken together, the four succinct phrases that comprise Paul's epistolary greeting to them admit his personal debt to Priscilla and Aquila and acknowledge their importance to his Gentile mission. While

his greeting discloses few specific details, it nonetheless impresses readers with the couple's evident importance to Paul's Gentile mission and implies their importance to the future of the church he founded. For this reason alone, their prior mention in Acts 18 becomes important reading, enabling us to fill in the gaps of Paul's benedictory commentary on Priscilla and Aquila's importance to him.

Acts 18:1-4: "Co-workers in Christ Jesus"

The metropolitan city of Corinth was 50 miles west of Athens (see Acts 17:16-34), and its rival in reputation. While not Athens' equal as a cultural center, the Corinth visited by Paul was capital of Roman Achaia and a leading commercial center of the Empire. This story in Acts provides the interested reader with several details of the everyday conditions of Paul's urban mission. For example, we find out Paul worked by day in the leather shop of Priscilla and Aquila to sustain himself financially (18:2-3). While Paul's crusade was still centered in the city's Jewish synagogue, where he taught as a rabbi, there is indication of a transition to another venue—namely, a "household" of Gentiles attached to the synagogue (18:4-8). Paul's previous visits to important European cities were short-term, either because of political pressure or lack of success. He spent a longer period of time in Corinth to establish a community of believers there (18:11).

Luke's reference to Caesar Claudius' edict for "all Jews to leave Rome" (18:2) is an important chronological marker in Acts. Most place the date at A.D. 49 and follow the Roman historian Suetonius, who chronicled Claudius' career and wrote that his expulsion of Jews from Rome was "because of their constant disturbances at the instigation of *Chrestus* (= Christ)."² While it is unlikely an emperor would expel Rome's entire Jewish community, numbering 40,000 people in Claudius' day, it is likely those sent packing would include the most active participants in those "constant disturbances" and among these were probably believers. Aquila and Priscilla were among them, probably arriving in Corinth from Rome around A.D. 50, already with a mature faith honed by suffering and leadership. Their presence in Corinth implies an established Christian community already existed in both Corinth and Rome before Paul's arrival in each city.

Upon arriving in Corinth from Athens, Paul's reasons for searching out Aquila and Priscilla were twofold: they shared the same faith and the same trade, "by trade they were tentmakers" (18:3). The social world of this phrase in Acts layers it with important nuances. Paul was a member of a trade guild, which provided a context of financial support and friendship. R. Hock has argued Paul's trade would have occupied him through most of the day. At least in those cities where he spent a considerable amount of time, such as Corinth, he no doubt spent more hours in his workshop than in the city's *agora* preaching the gospel.³ The lack of

social esteem given to the city's working class would have been sharply qualified by Paul's own Jewish sensibilities, since working creatively with one's hands to pay the bills is an important value of the teacher of Israel (see 1 Cor. 4:12; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:6-8).

Paul's weekly schedule included long days working alongside Priscilla and Aquila in their tentmaking shop, then they worshiped alongside each other every Sabbath, when Paul "would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks" (18:4). The reader can recover relevant details of Paul's Sabbath ministry from earlier episodes to fill in the gaps of this summary (see 13:14-47; 17:2-3, 10-11, 17).

With the arrival of Silas and Timothy from Macedonia (see 17:15; 1 Cor. 16:10-11; 2 Cor. 1:19), however, Paul "was occupied with proclaiming the word . . . that the Messiah was Jesus" (18:5). The verbal idea implies a shift in Paul's "occupation" from tentmaking to evangelism, perhaps afforded by funds brought by Silas and Timothy from the Macedonian congregations (Phil. 4:15; 2 Cor. 11:9). This text not only repeats the core content of his synagogue discussions with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks every Sabbath, but now the central feature of his daily teaching to the Corinthians.

Acts 18:24-28: "To whom all the congregations of Gentiles give thanks"

Because of their close working relationship reflected in Acts, readers assume Paul's pattern of ministry in Corinth was

The story of Priscilla's Ephesian mission testifies to her importance in forging a Christian faith that more clearly distinguishes its beliefs and practices from those of other religious options.

subsequently followed by Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus, where they assumed Paul's teaching ministry after he departed for Jerusalem. Noting this, the reader also assumes these co-workers also shared in Paul's frustration with unrepentant Jews and his move toward Gentiles (18:6). Paul's response is an important theme in Acts, where he continually found "God-fearing" Gentiles—who had not yet converted to Judaism but who sought after Israel's God by worshiping at their neighborhood synagogue—were often more responsive to Paul's message than their Jewish mentors (13:42-47; 28:23-28). Yet he did not turn completely from his ministry to Jews. The earlier episode tells us he enjoyed stunning successes among the Jews, including the conversion of two "officials of the synagogue," Crispus (18:8) and Sosthenes (18:17). In point of fact, to avoid internal conflict with other Jewish teachers Paul shifted the venue of his teaching ministry from the synagogue to a "house next door" (18:7) where "many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers" (18:8). Given the continuity between Paul's and Priscilla and Aquila's ministries in Acts, this pronounced theme may help us explain in turn why Paul reported that congregations of *Gentiles* gave thanks for his two colleagues (Rom. 16:4; 1 Cor. 16:19).

Acts tells us nothing of the circumstances that prompted Paul to conclude his Corinthian mission and sail for Roman Syria—to Jerusalem and Antioch (18:18-23). Nor are we told why Priscilla and Aquila would close their tentmaking business in Corinth to accompany him. The fact that they stayed there for a considerable time indicates a measure of peace resulted from Gallio's verdict (18:12-17) and

allowed them time to establish the church there. In any case, Paul left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus (18:19) to await their encounter with Apollos (18:24-28). Although Paul was ambivalent about his return trip (18:21), the reader is soon to learn he returned to Ephesus (19:1) and in the meantime Priscilla and Aquila helped prepare the city for his triumphant Ephesian mission.

Significantly, their teaching ministry in Paul's absence concerned the Holy Spirit. The subsequent story of Paul's Ephesian mission testifies to the importance of getting clear on the role the Spirit performs in Christian discipleship (19:1-7), especially given the current threats to the church's theological purity (19:8-10), including various pagan worship practices (19:11-41). As the Word of God was carried into pagan places, the problems of Christian theological formation became more pronounced. Believers such as Apollos were not fully initiated into "the Way of God" (v. 26) because their theological misunderstanding located them outside the messianic community led by the Spirit. Simply put, then, the story of Priscilla's Ephesian mission testifies to her importance in forging a Christian faith that more clearly distinguishes its beliefs and practices from those of other religious options.

While Paul was revisiting the circuit of earlier missions (18:23), significant ministry was taking place elsewhere in Ephesus (18:24), where he had earlier left Priscilla and Aquila (18:19). This narrative vignette in Acts concerns their recruitment of Apollos to help Paul in Corinth, where Paul had planted a vigorous Christian congregation (see 18:1-17; above). Apollos' credentials to do so were quite

impressive on paper: he was a Jew from Alexandria, a man who was good with words and had a thorough (literally “powerful”) knowledge of the Scriptures (18:24). The combination of these elements suggests a solid background in teacher preparation.

Alexandria in North Africa (Egypt), second in influence only to Rome, was not only a leading center of commerce and learning with a renowned library, but housed one of the most important communities of Diaspora Jews in the Empire. The great rabbinic scholar Philo was from Alexandria, and Apollos well may have studied Scripture with him at his school. In fact, the unusual predicate adjective *logios*, translated “eloquent,” expresses a characteristic of the educated person, since the talent for public speaking is routinely combined with learning in Greco-Roman literature. In Acts, however, the prophet’s rhetorical competence is the result of Spirit filling (4:8), sometimes even explicitly disconnected from learning (4:13). Luke’s reference to Apollos’ eloquence, then, must be considered an ironic feature of his résumé since he had not yet received the Spirit of prophecy (18:28).

This same irony extends to his thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. The reader should presume Apollos knew Scripture because he went to a yeshiva in Alexandria and received his advanced degree in Jewish exegesis. While these individual talents can produce competent teaching, without the filling of the Holy Spirit even the educated person will be unable to interpret Scripture in the elevated ways of the prophet (2:4).

Acts tells its readers nothing about the church in Alexandria, its origins, teaching, or practices. In Luke’s narrative world interest is posited only in Apollos, who hailed from Alexandria and was important because of his association with Paul’s Corinthian mission. The initial impression his arrival in Ephesus made was that there were important differences between believers formed by Pauline theology (Priscilla and Aquila) and those who were not (Apollos); these differences needed ameliorating, or they would have an impact on the effectiveness and content of one’s teaching ministry.

Acts tells us Apollos arrived in Ephesus “with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately (*akribōs*) the things concerning Jesus” (18:25). In light of Luke’s clipped comment that Apollos “knew only the baptism of John” it seems unlikely the source of his “burning enthusiasm” (*zeō tō pneumati*) was the Holy Spirit or that he was a traveling

charismatic; rather, this was a feature of his rhetorical eloquence—he spoke with a lively (*zeō*) spirit (*pneumatic*) and attracted a following at Ephesus for this reason.

The reader does well to wonder what was the content of Apollos’ orthodoxy if he had only experienced John’s baptism (whatever that may entail) but not yet the Spirit’s (and all this entails according to Acts). The reader is told nothing of what Apollos lacked in his theological education, although his teaching ministry was synagogue-based and probably did not concern his Jewish religious practices. The relevant issue is probably theological, and

The change in the order of names, “Priscilla and Aquila,” is suggestive and signals Priscilla’s role as the more prominent theological mentor on Paul’s team.

the reader should assume he lacked instruction concerning the doctrine of the Spirit's baptism, since Apollos only knew John's baptism (18:25) and the "way of the Lord" also acquired from disciples of the Baptist (Luke 3:4). This vague reference anticipates and is glossed by the subsequent story of Paul's encounter with the "twelve disciples" of Ephesus (19:1-4). The implication is that Apollos had been initiated into Christian discipleship by John's baptism and he had learned only the first lessons of Jesus, perhaps only to the time of the Baptist's martyrdom before the Cross and the empty tomb. Without doubt, Apollos' Christian catechesis did not include lessons from the Book of Acts! He believed Jesus was Messiah but had not yet heard of His triumph or of His Spirit's Pentecostal power; therefore, his knowledge and experience of the living Jesus was incomplete and the full effectiveness of his teaching was only in its beginning stages.

It was necessary that Priscilla and Aquila "took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately (*akribesteron*)" (18:26). Many scholars, myself included, think the change in the order of names, "Priscilla and Aquila," is suggestive and signals Priscilla's role as the more prominent theological mentor on Paul's team. This point is confirmed, although ironically, by the Western version of Acts, which reverses the pair *back* to "Aquila and Priscilla" (18:2). In any case, while Apollos' information about Jesus was "accurate" (18:25), it was not accurate enough, as suggested by Luke's use of the comparative form of "accurately" (18:25). He received prior instruction in the "way of the Lord" but not in the "Way of God." "The Way" is used in Acts only in the story of Paul's mission (9:2; 19:9;

22:4; 24:14, 22), which strongly suggests this was the name given congregations formed by the beliefs and practices of his mission to the nations. The implied point is surely that Apollos' theological formation (if not his religious practices) remained incomplete because he had not been properly schooled in Pauline teaching.

If this is so, what effects did Priscilla and Aquila's mentoring have on Apollos? First, there was a corporate result since "the believers [in Ephesus] encouraged him and wrote to the disciples [in Achaia] to welcome him" (18:27). Evidently, the group of new believers cultivated through Priscilla and Aquila's synagogue-based mission recognized his vocation and gifts. Their favorable impression of him is signaled by the use of "encouraged" (*protreptomai*) in verse 27, which connotes the confirmation of a newly instructed teacher, and by the writing of a letter of introduction, which implies an act of friendship and support.

Then upon his arrival Apollos "greatly helped" in the catechesis of new believers and "powerfully refuted the Jews in public" from the Scriptures (v. 28). The repetition of an idiom used earlier of Paul's teaching in the synagogue (17:2-3) would suggest Apollos' own instruction was now completed and he had been brought into agreement with Pauline teaching. Moreover, the powerful refutation of opponents suggests Apollos' Spirit-filling. Especially if the reader rereads this text in light of the next story of Paul's encounter with the Ephesian "disciples," Apollos' catechesis leading to baptism issued in the Pentecostal filling of the Spirit and concurrent power gains for Christian ministry. The location of Apollos'

public ministry in Corinth (19:1) was no longer the synagogue, since Paul left it for Titius' house (18:6), or the courtroom, since Gallio had closed that door (18:12-17); therefore, he must have been contesting unrepentant Jews in the town square. There his "eloquence," coupled with his keen knowledge of Scriptures learned in Alexandria ("showing by the scriptures"), and of Pauline theology learned from Priscilla ("that Jesus is Messiah"), funded an *apologia* that utterly routed those who contested the gospel!

A Concluding Reflection

When approaching any story in Acts, the student must be keenly alert to the special role it performs within the New Testament. Besides narrating the triumphant progress of the gospel following the departure of the risen Jesus, Acts provides portraits of the Lord's apostolic successors, along with other early Christian leaders such as Priscilla, into whose Spirit-filled hands God entrusted the Kingdom work in the Lord's absence. Within the New Testament, these portraits introduce the letters that follow, vesting these writings with even greater authority and meaning, based upon insight their readers gain from Acts about their authors and first audiences.

In particular, one who reads Acts before studying the Pauline letters does so with certain impressions in mind. For example, Acts confirms the importance of Paul for the church's future; his message is formative of faith, for the Jew first and also for the Gentile. But Acts also makes clear Paul headed a

missionary organization that included numerous associates, without whose assistance the impact of his work would have been diminished. Passing references to these colleagues fill the pages of Acts; on occasion, the narrator even paused to tell the story of Paul's more prominent associates in more detail. Priscilla, whose story is told in Acts 18, is one such person.

From a canonical perspective, this story of Priscilla's ministry in Acts introduces the reader to those famous (infamous to some!) passages within the Pauline collection that instruct Christian women to submit as good wives and mothers (Eph. 5:21-24; 1 Cor. 7:34-35), to remain silent as good students (1 Tim. 2:9-12; 1 Cor. 14:34), and to circumscribe their prophetic ministry by head coverings that symbolize patriarchal claims on their lives (1 Cor. 11:2-10). Indeed, the relevant relationships of Christian women—to Pauline tradition, to familial obligations and the workplace, and to the local congregation and its male teachers—are all subtexts of Priscilla's story in Acts. While both the meaning and the methodology of Pauline teaching about women sometimes

While both the meaning and the methodology of Pauline teaching about women sometimes may be obscure, the portrait of Priscilla in Acts 18 produces a fresh angle of vision toward the troublesome epistolary texts that follow.

may be obscure, the portrait of Priscilla in Acts 18 produces a fresh angle of vision toward the troublesome epistolary texts that

follow. That is, rather than de-canonizing disagreeable biblical texts or resorting to creative attempts at damage control, the reader who considers the full canonical form of the church's Scriptures is inclined to resist the absolute influence of any one of these troublesome texts as a moral norm.

Not only does the story of Priscilla provide an important “check-and-balance” in the history of interpreting Pauline teaching about women in ministry, it coheres more naturally with the gospel witness of Jesus’ healthy relations with His women disciples. Priscilla’s story also underwrites Paul’s great statement in Galatians 3:28 that trumps all other Pauline teaching about women. “There is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” So, yes, Christian women can form equitable partnerships with their husbands in both the workplace (18:2) and the local congregation (18:26), even taking the lead in these efforts (18:18); and, yes, women teachers can instruct their male colleagues more accurately in the way of the Lord (18:26). The consequence of women in Christian ministry is a more robust performance of God’s Word in the world (18:27-28).

Notes

¹ All Scripture quotations in the Commentary section are from the NRSV.

² *Claudius* 25.4. This edict was rescinded with the arrival of the next emperor in A.D. 54, which dates Paul’s Corinthian mission sometime in the early ‘50s.

³ *Social Context of Paul’s Ministry* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

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Wynkoop Center Bible Studies on Women in Ministry

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Credits and Notices

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Paul's Women Associates—Exposition

Scripture Focus

Romans 16:1-16; Philippians 4:2-3; Colossians 4:15

Exposition by Roberta Mosier-Peterson

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Imagine a sharply dressed man, aged 40, entering a coffee shop in an eclectic, artistic neighborhood. The barista, decorated from head to toe with tattoos and piercings, greets him with a smile and, "How can I help you?" Her demeanor and posture are friendly, until he answers her question, "I would like an application for employment." She immediately crosses her arms over her chest and says with a smirk, "That position has been filled." His head turns as his hand points to the sign in the window. "Yeah, we should take that down," she responds.

"Help Wanted" signs do not display the whole truth. The whole truth, though it may be an unwritten code and known only implicitly by most who encounter it, is that only those who "fit" the stereotype should apply. Equal opportunity works in theory, but not necessarily in practice.

Such is the dilemma of women in the church. It seems as though the "help wanted" sign is displayed and yet, many woman are turned away due to the implicit rules that women do not "fit" in church leadership. Even within denominations that today ordain women, at various levels of church leadership women are given the message that the positions already have been filled. Some women have called this the "stained-glass ceiling," meaning even within these denominations, there are just certain leadership positions for which they are considered unfit by those doing the hiring.

Paul is often blamed for restricting women in church leadership. Yet, as Anderson suggests in our exegesis portion, getting to know Paul a little better will help us sort through the questions about gender sometimes used to disqualify women from certain types of leadership.

In Romans 16:1-16, Paul named many women who were his associates in various sorts of ministries. Phoebe was a deacon of the church at Cenchreae and a benefactor of Paul's ministry. Prisca worked with Paul, risking her life for him. Mary is noted for her hard work. Junia was imprisoned with Paul and is noted as being among the apostles. Other women are mentioned as workers: Tryphaena and Tryphosa, and Persis. Rufus' mother is given respect as though she were also Paul's mother.

An acquaintance of mine, the minister at a growing congregation, is considering a move. In the process, he has had to request references from colleagues in ministry and laypeople from his church. Unlike most folks in similar circumstances, he did not waive his right to view his references. This makes it possible for him to read everything that is being said about him on those forms.

Paul also wrote a recommendation for a colleague in the ministry and trusted her enough to allow her to read what he wrote about her. Then, she had the privilege and responsibility of delivering the letter herself. Her work in the ministry must have been exemplary and her character unquestionable. It

must have been awfully humbling to be trusted with that responsibility. The Roman church obviously received this letter due to her work. With such a glowing recommendation from Paul, the Christians in Rome had no problem welcoming and respecting Phoebe.

In Romans 15, Paul sent his regrets about not being able to visit Rome. Phoebe, having been sent to deliver this letter, became Paul's proxy. It is possible she assumed a teaching role as the one who understood Paul. Who better than Phoebe to help them understand this letter?

Junia and Andronicus are mentioned (16:7) as "my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was" (NRSV). Paul knew these two very well also. They were in prison with him, meaning they were doing similar ministry activities as Paul. They were preaching, teaching, and upsetting the status quo. Paul said they were respected "in" or "among" the apostles. He acknowledged Junia as one among many apostles and commended her to the Christians in Rome.

It is amazing that Paul mentioned women as co-workers in the same fashion (with the same words) he used for notable personalities such as Timothy, Luke, and Mark. Women were noted for their hard work without qualification. This actually suggests Paul was in the practice of empowering women. It seems he encouraged all who were called and sent by the Holy Spirit, to perform their work in the ministry. It appears he advocated freedom for

all to serve in whatever capacity they were called and gifted.

In Philippians 4:2-3, Paul urged two women to get along: Euodia and Syntyche. He requested help from the Christians at Philippi, saying *they had struggled beside him*, as co-workers struggle together to get a project completed or as members of a volleyball team work together to win a match. The work of the gospel is difficult and is best done in teams. Teamwork in ministry requires humility, cooperation, understanding, and most importantly Holy Spirit power.

In the early days of the church, the good news of Jesus was taken throughout the Near East. It seems rather unremarkable to us that this happened. Remember though, that we can connect with people on different continents with merely the push of a button. Obviously, in the ancient world, this was not the case.

Travel was expensive. Mass communication was non-existent. Word of mouth was the way the Good News traveled. Given these factors, it is out-right phenomenal

that the church grew at the rate it did. It was the work of the Holy Spirit: calling, equipping, and sending people willing to do the hard work of ministry.

Anderson's question, "What actual roles did they (women) assume in the context of his (Paul's) mission?" is quite easy to answer (see Commentary section). Clearly, women were colleagues of Paul, meaning they seemed to do the same sorts of things he and the other apostles of the early church did. From this we

Can we rediscover the remarkable way the gospel spreads when restrictions on service are based not on a person's gender or any other external obstacle, but upon the calling and empowering of the Holy Spirit?

can be certain they were teaching, preaching, taking care of those in need, and offering their homes as meeting places. Women were Paul's co-workers, commended for their hard work. They were given glowing references in various types of ministries. Women were given titles such as deacon and apostle.

Perhaps most of our churches are filled with people who have not pursued the work of ministry or leadership within the church

because they do not see themselves "fitting" into the stereotypical role of the ministry. Can we rediscover the remarkable way the gospel spreads when restrictions on service are based not on a person's gender or any other external obstacle, but upon the calling and empowering of the Holy Spirit?

The question circles again: Whom does the Holy Spirit call? Whom does the Holy Spirit equip? Whom does the Holy Spirit send?

Paul's Women Associates—Study Guide

Study Guide by Stefanie and Mark Hendrickson
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Notes for the Leader

A small group setting or class can use the following questions to guide the discussion of the biblical passage and exposition. Allow participants time to answer for themselves, making room for all group members in the discussion.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever experienced prejudice or closed doors because of some personal characteristic or quality? Why were you denied that particular opportunity? How did that make you feel?
2. Have you ever denied someone an opportunity because of his or her personal characteristics or qualities (ethnicity, social class, hygiene, language, dress, and so on)? Why or why not?
3. Describe the idea of a "glass ceiling" in the workplace. Have you or someone you know

run into a "glass ceiling"? What does a "stained glass ceiling" look like?

4. Can you name some of Paul's female associates in ministry? What do you know about these women?
5. What do you think it looked like for Paul to empower the women who ministered with him? How did this influence the decision to have Phoebe carry his letter to the Romans?
6. What roles did the women Paul mentions assume in the ministry? How would they be accepted today?
7. What roles do women called by God fill today in ministry? How does that fit the scripture passage we are studying?
8. Describe "ministry." Whose responsibility is ministry in church? How does this fit Jesus' great commission to reach all people?

Paul's Women Associates—Commentary

Commentary by Garwood Anderson
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The looks on their faces—the grimaces, wincing, and sighs—at the mere mention of the name “Paul” tell a story I cannot easily ignore. The words of the Apostle have so often exasperated a good number of my students aspiring to ordained Christian ministry. Paul is “that guy who doesn’t think I should be a pastor.” While some are tempted to adopt a coping strategy of working their way *around* Paul (maybe almost subconsciously pitting him in a losing battle with Jesus), I insist they must work *through* Paul. One of the best places to start is by getting to know him a little better. What was Paul’s regard for women? What actual roles did they assume in the context of his mission? To just such questions we now turn, and if you are anything like many of my students, the answers may surprise you.

Romans 16:1-16¹

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, ²so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. ³Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, ⁴and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. . . . ⁶Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. ⁷Greet 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. . . . ¹²Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and

Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. ¹³Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also. . . .

¹⁵Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister. . .

Paul greeted 26 individuals in this passage, of whom nine were women (underlined above). One hardly could claim women were invisible to Paul. But much more significant is what Paul said *about* them, for these greetings are not just cordial formalities, but commendations in their own right. Only two of the nine women, Julia and the sister of Nereus, are merely greeted without an explicit word of praise.

Paul knew four of them in terms of their “hard work”: Mary (v. 5), Tryphaena and Tryphosa (probably listed together as sisters), and Persis (v. 12). The nature of this work is not spelled out—it would have been well known to the readers—but there is some indication it consisted of more than manual labor behind the scenes. Paul customarily used “hard work” (Greek *kopaō*) in contexts explicitly referring to ministry endeavors (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:16; Gal. 4:11; Phil. 2:16; Col. 1:29; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17). Furthermore, the expression “in the Lord” (v. 12) carries the sense of labor “in the Christian cause.” Thus the greetings of these four women should be taken as a direct commendation of their activity in Christian ministry.

Another woman, the mother of Rufus, was dear enough to Paul that he thought of her as his own mother (v. 13), an affection most

probably born of some previous interactions in the context of Paul's mission.

The three women about whom we are given the most information are Phoebe, Prisca, and Junia. Since Prisca (i.e., "Priscilla" in Acts; here Paul used the nickname) was the subject of the preceding study (see Session Five), we will turn our attention to Phoebe and Junia.

Phoebe, a Deacon and Patron (vv. 1-2)

Phoebe is here commended to the Christians in Rome, for she would be bearing Paul's letter to the Romans from the port city Cenchreae near Corinth (cf. Tychicus, Col. 4:7-8). The Roman world had no postal service, but certain classes of people were highly mobile, most notably merchants, and a trusted delegate would usually have

delivered correspondence in person. That Phoebe is called a *benefactor* (or "patron," Greek *prostatis*), suggests she was a woman of some means who personally supported the Christian mission in general and Paul in particular. Her travel to Rome may have coincided with business affairs or may have been for the exclusive purpose of representing Paul before the Roman church.

Phoebe also is called a "deacon" (preferable to "deaconess"; the Greek *diakonos* is masculine in form, whereas the title of "deaconess" is a later church development). Whether this was a particular office in the church or a more

generic description of her servanthood is debated. "Deacon," "minister," and "servant" are all possible translations given Paul's usage elsewhere, but that the description is related to a particular church ("*diakanos* of the church that is at Cenchreae") favors the view that this title indicates a defined leadership function. The point of Paul's commendation was that this sister in Christ was notable for deeds done, fully worthy of their respect.

Junia, an Apostle? (v. 7)

Surely the most debated, and probably the most significant text in this chapter for our purposes is verse 7. The first of three questions we will consider is: was Junia(s) a woman? The answer is beyond doubt, as indeed it was for

the first millennium of Christian history:² Junia is a woman. Although the issues involved are complex, the evidence in favor of the feminine reading of the name (Junia is feminine; Junias is masculine) is entirely unambiguous.³ Only the assumption that Paul could not have regarded a woman as an apostle caused later interpreters to conjecture the possibility that Junia

might be Junias (allegedly a contraction of Junianus). Not a single Greek manuscript of the New Testament supports the claim, nor is the masculine name Junias attested in any ancient source, whereas the feminine Junia (a Latin name) is well known. In the face of this

Paul's Friends in Rome

This series of personal greetings (Rom. 16:3-16) is by far the most extensive list of its kind in the New Testament. Apparently for some Christian scribes the greetings no longer seemed necessary, so Romans is found in some manuscripts without chapter 16. We can be thankful indeed the majority did not follow suit. For scholars interested in the social context of early Christianity, this chapter has proven invaluable, providing evidence for the composition of the early Christian movement, not least the prominent roles of women in Paul's ministry.

overwhelming evidence, that Junia was a woman is now conceded even by scholars of a decidedly traditionalist bent.

Second, are Andronicus and Junia to be counted as *prominent among* or “well known to” the apostles? In the former case they are counted as apostles (so NRSV and most translations); in the latter they are not. A solid majority of scholars understands the grammar of the verse to be inclusive of Andronicus and Junia *among* the apostles. Indeed, one might ask whether such a question even would have occurred to anyone were it not for the fact that Junia was a woman.

The third question is this: in what sense should the term “apostles” be taken? Is it a defined body of pioneering Christians responsible for founding the Christian movement (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 2:20), or a less-specific term describing itinerating representatives or missionaries (cf. Phil. 2:25; 2 Cor. 8:23)? In any case, there can be no question these two were active leaders in the Christian mission from its earliest days. After all, they were imprisoned with Paul, no doubt specifically as a result of their missionary activity. But the context favors the former, more specific use of the term “apostle.” Every other reference in Paul to the plural “apostles” preceded by the article (“the”), as here, refers to a more or less defined body of early Christian missionary leaders, of which Paul himself was the *final* member (1 Cor. 15:8).⁴ This, in fact, may be the reason Paul stressed that these two preceded him in the Christian faith, to show they were among “those who were apostles before me” (Gal. 1:17), perhaps even as witnesses of the resurrected Christ (1 Cor. 15:6-8; 9:1; cf. Acts 1:22).

In summary, Junia unquestionably was a woman and should be numbered among a defined body of early Christian leaders known to Paul as “the apostles.”

Philippians 4:2-3

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Speaking in athletic metaphor, Paul described Euodia and Syntyche as women who “have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel,” counting them with Clement among his “co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.”⁵ As his “co-workers” (Greek *synergoi*), Paul numbered these women among such notable New Testament figures as Timothy (Rom. 16:21; 1 Thess. 3:2), Titus (2 Cor. 8:23), Mark (Col. 4:10-11; Philem. 24), Luke (Philem. 24), and others (Rom. 16:3; Phil. 2:25). Although we know less about these two women than we might wish, it is apparent they carried enough influence within the Philippian church that their apparent disagreement (4:2) was in need of immediate resolution, capturing the attention of the imprisoned Paul hundreds of miles away. Individualized directives in the body of a letter are not the norm for Paul, so it is fair to assume the stature of these women dear to Paul was such that the community’s well-being was at stake.

Colossians 4:15

Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

Nympha is singled out in the greeting of Laodicean believers as the host of “the church in her house.” Early copies of the Greek text are divided on whether “Nympha” is the name of a woman or a man (it comes down to the placement of accent marks). It seems most probable the feminine reading is original, an indirect testimony to Nympha’s leadership function; likely, the alteration to the masculine reflects the “common sense” bias of later copyists against women in such roles. Quite probably Phoebe served in a similar capacity in Cenchreae (Rom. 16:2) and possibly Chloe in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11). The context of these references and those to male (co-)hosts of household churches (Acts 18:7; Rom. 16:3, 23; 1 Cor. 16:15-16; Philem. 1:1) suggests this was not only a role of hospitality but of some kind of leadership, or, indeed, the two are intimately related (1 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7-8).

Conclusion

What are we to make of this impressive evidence of women leading, supporting, and co-laboring in the Pauline mission? Traditionalist accounts of the same evidence

tend to make two sorts of general claims: (1) It is not necessary to assume these women were in positions of leadership or authority. As we have seen, when applied to men in the New Testament, descriptors such as “deacon,” “apostle,” “co-worker” imply just that. Why should the same presumption not be granted

An Early Commentary on Junia
One of the earlier comments on Romans 16:7 is from John Chrysostom, writing near the turn of the fifth century: “Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle” (Ep. ad Rom. 31.2). Although Chrysostom apparently considered it unusual for a woman to be counted an “apostle,” he felt no compulsion to deny what he regarded as the plain sense of the text. Instead, rather charmingly he assumed she must have been an extraordinary woman! How different might the history of women in the church have been if others had followed his example?

to women? (2) These *ad hoc* references to women in prominent roles are neither prescriptive in function nor the sort of sustained arguments as the texts which expressly limit women’s roles. The latter commands and prohibitions, it is said, must form the context for interpreting these merely passing references. But much can be said on behalf of the opposite assumption: because these references to prominent

women are made without qualification or any apparent need for justification, they comprise a striking picture of early Christian social reality and ministry practices. The seemingly more restrictive passages must be understood in view of this decidedly counter-cultural picture (see Unit Four).

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise marked, all Scripture quotations in the Commentary section are from the NRSV.

² The single exception is the fourth-century monk, Epiphanius, who assumed Junia(s) was a man. Surely this was without any basis other

than that he found it surprising for a woman to be included among the apostles. Notably, he also regarded Prisca (Rom. 16:2-3) as a man against all New Testament evidence to the contrary!

³The definitive survey of the question is now to be found Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia; The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005).

⁴See P. W. Barnett, "Apostle," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 45-50.

⁵By the way, the fact that this direct address to *two women* is introduced in v. 1 with the reference to "brothers" is a sure indication that the gender-inclusive translation ("brothers and sisters"), here and elsewhere, is not merely an accession to political correctness, as is so often charged.

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