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Jessie Rogers

Women in Church  
Leadership Roles  
– Biblical  
Perspectives

# Women in Church Leadership Roles – Biblical Perspectives<sup>1</sup>

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There are a few ways to approach the question of what light Scripture sheds on women in leadership in the Church. Perhaps the most obvious and straightforward is to look for precedent in the early Church, as reflected in the earliest extant Christian documents, the letters of St Paul. The assumption behind this is that biblical precedent should inform current practice. This is undoubtedly true, but it is not enough. If there is precedent, that would undermine any current argument against women's leadership, particularly since today's world is less patriarchal than that of the first century – in patches anyway. But lack of precedent would not rule against including women in church leadership today, since the Church's application of the Gospel grows and develops through time, as the Holy Spirit guides her into all truth.<sup>2</sup> An ordained Christian priesthood is one example of such innovation. A second, richer, and ultimately more valid approach is to reflect on the ecclesiology implicit in the New Testament. Here I intend to reflect on a core metaphor for the Church and the roles of her members, the Body of Christ. Biblical images such as this allow us to grasp the truth that is embodied in different ways in the Church's history. And finally, a third approach is to feed the Christian imagination through prayerful reflection on biblical stories. I will take each of these approaches in turn, concluding with the Old Testament story of Miriam as a powerful but nuanced example of a woman leader.

## I. PRECEDENT: ROMANS 16

The Pauline epistles actually point to a rich precedent for women in leadership roles in the earliest Christian communities. The concluding greetings appended to the letter to the Romans (Rom 16:1-16) are instructive. Although there is debate around whether

1 This is a summary of a presentation made to a Limerick diocesan working group on the role of women in leadership in the Church, 9 May 2018.

2 See *Amoris Laetitia* #3.

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this list of greetings was originally part of the letter, there is consensus that it is an early letter of recommendation that goes back to St Paul.<sup>3</sup> In it we find a list of various co-workers and fellow believers known to Paul. Of the list of twenty-six names, nine are female.<sup>4</sup> Sixteen of those named are further specified in terms of role or relationship. This list, which is not an apology for female leadership but an exhortation to greet and welcome real people who played roles in the early Christian communities, opens a window onto the actual practice of the Church in the middle of the first century.

First mentioned is Phoebe, called a deacon, whom the recipients are told to welcome and to give any help she requests (Rom 16:1-2). The translation ‘deaconess’ in some versions is disingenuous, because the masculine form of the word is used here. That she is authorised by Paul to claim whatever assistance she needs points to a ministry that Paul envisions for her among the Roman Christians. She has acted as a patron or benefactor, and is praised for already exercising her ministry in a way that had benefited many people, including Paul.

We know something of the married couple Prisca and Aquila, who host a house church and are called Paul’s co-workers, from the Acts of the Apostles where we read that they instructed in the faith Apollos, a great preacher (Acts 18:26). The designation ‘co-worker’ is not used by Paul for all Christians, as ‘saint’ is, but is reserved for those who ministered alongside him, and indicates a leadership position.<sup>5</sup> That Prisca is named before her husband, both here and in Acts, points to her prominence.

The next couple that Paul names, Andronicus and Junia, are called outstanding apostles (Rom 16:7). In the history of interpretation, the feminine Junia morphed into a masculine form in some later translations, but it is in fact a woman’s name.<sup>6</sup> Others have called into doubt the designation ‘apostle’, preferring to read the Greek as suggesting that this couple are noteworthy “in the eyes of” and not “among” the apostles.<sup>7</sup> But history is on the side of the latter interpretation, with the Fathers, including John Chrysostom, in no

3 Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans. A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 2004), 376.

4 While some of these are easily recognised as masculine or feminine, it is also easier to distinguish male and female names in the Greek because the associated verbs and adjectives are gendered.

5 Witherington, *Romans*, 385.

6 See John Thorley, “Junia, a woman apostle,” *Novum Testamentum* 38/1 (1996), 18-29 for historical and linguistic proof.

7 See Burer and Wallace, “Was Junia Really an Apostle?” *New Testament Studies* 47 (2001): 76-91.

doubt that Junia was a female apostle.<sup>8</sup> That she was ‘in Christ’ before Paul means she was part of the earliest Christian movement. Her work for Christ had attracted the attention of the authorities since she had been imprisoned for her faith.

Mary is named as someone who has worked hard for the Roman Christians (Rom 16:6). It is notable that the verb translated ‘to work hard’ is only used of women in this passage! The same thing is said of Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Rom 16:11). These women bear slave names.<sup>9</sup> Those whom Paul holds up for recognition are not limited to people of high social status. Persis is another hard worker in the Lord (Rom 16:12). Paul makes it clear that women have given him great support in his ministry. He counts Persis as a friend and describes Rufus’ mother as like a mother to him too (Rom 16:13). It is not only as fellow-workers, but also in terms of human relationships that the women in Paul’s circle make a powerful contribution. The other women mentioned in this chapter - Julia and Nereus’s sister (Rom 16:15), and also the unnamed members of households - are not designated further, but are testament to the easy way in which the contribution of both men and women to the life of the early Church are acknowledged by Paul.

We could go elsewhere in Paul’s letters to find further mention of women in leadership: Apphia (Philemon 1), Chloe (1 Cor 1:11), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2-3). But this snapshot of the early Church in Romans 16 is enough to see women as apostles and deacons, as co-workers, teachers, missionaries, proclaimers of the Gospel, benefactors and hard workers, exercising authority and deserving of recognition.

## II. ECCLESIOLOGY: 1 CORINTHIANS 12

We turn now to an ecclesiological metaphor: the Church as the Body of Christ. Writing to a fractured community in Corinth to encourage unity in diversity, St Paul images the mystical body of Christ / the Church as a single human body made up of diverse limbs and organs. He begins with a strong theological assertion:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are

8 “And indeed to be apostles at all is a great thing. But to be even among these of note, just consider what a great encomium this is! But they were of note owing to their works, to their achievements. Oh! How great is the devotion (φιλοσοφία) of this woman, that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle!” John Chrysostom, “Homily 32 on Romans.” Translated by J. Walker, J. Sheppard and H. Browne, and revised by George B. Stevens. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 11*. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight.<<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2102.htm>>.

9 Witherington, *Romans*, 394.

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varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor 12:5-7).<sup>10</sup>

This ‘manifestation of the Spirit’ is illustrated with two lists of gifts / activities / service, the second of which includes leadership (1 Cor 12:8-10, 28-30). The principle is clear: God equips different people in different ways, and these gifts are to be used for the good of the whole. Paul stresses that it is not a matter of people choosing their own calling or avenues of service, nor about those in authority assigning roles to the members, for “all these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.” (1 Cor 12:11). The Spirit gifts and enables the members of the Body, according to God’s own calling (1 Cor 12:18). The task of the community, then, is to recognise these gifts and to facilitate their effective use for the common good.

By playing with the image of a body with its hands and feet, ears and eyes, Paul critiques unhealthy ways of understanding the role that individuals or groups play in the Church. He highlights the importance of diversity and the essential role that each part has to contribute to the whole. If I may draw contemporary applications from the analogy: for the laity to say “I am not a part of the church because I am not ordained” is as absurd as the foot saying “I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand” (1 Cor 12:15-16). To define the Church in terms of its clerical hierarchy alone would be like wanting the whole body to be an eye; what would become of the body’s ability to hear and to smell? If any part is missing, the function of the body is impaired. Paul stresses mutual cooperation and interdependence. Writing to a community that was caught up in honour and status games, he stresses the value of those members which are considered less honourable; the body’s private parts are treated with the most respect and care (1 Cor 12:22-24). In God’s upside-down Kingdom, it is the least who are the greatest. No part of the body can claim independence from the others, and the body thrives or suffers as a whole (1 Cor 12:25-26).

If we look at the topic of women in leadership in the Church through the lens of this fertile metaphor, the question is not: “What are women allowed to do?” Instead we need to ask: “Do women – and men and children – have the spaces and opportunities in the Church to exercise their gifts and calling in service of the common good?” If we approach the issue from the conviction that people are variously called and gifted by God, that this is God’s choice and

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<sup>10</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

not ours, and that this diversity is to be celebrated and facilitated, then we can begin to think creatively about how to stop standing in the way of the Body benefiting from the full cooperation of all its members. To prevent women from exercising their God-given callings is to oppose the work of the Spirit.

### III. AN EXAMPLE: MIRIAM

Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, is one example of a woman exercising leadership in Scripture. Recalling the Exodus, the prophet Micah declares on God's behalf: "I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam" (Micah 6:4). We are first introduced to her as an unnamed slave, a child beside the Nile standing watch over the basket containing her baby brother (Exod 2:4-9). Thrice marginalised, she uses her wits to collude with the oppressor's daughter to save Moses, the future deliverer of God's people. Typical of those devoid of power, she has to think quickly, seize opportunities and find unlikely allies to act to bring life and hope in a perilous situation.

When we come across Miriam again, it is beside another body of water, after Moses has brought God's people to safety through the Red Sea<sup>11</sup> and the oppressor's pursuing army has been drowned. Moses leads the people in a song of victory to celebrate the Exodus. It is a long song that begins "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (Exodus 15:1-18). Miriam then takes up a tambourine and leads the dancing (Exodus 15:20-21). She simplifies Moses' song to a single celebratory chorus: "'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.'" This vignette of Miriam on the shore encapsulates so much of what feminine genius can bring to leadership: it is participatory, inclusive ("I will sing" becomes the hortatory "(let us) sing") and embodied. The long hymn is stripped down to its essentials and the women dance to it, celebrating and inscribing the memory of God's saving deeds in their bodies through movement so that it lives on in more than the mind.

The next time we meet Miriam she and Aaron are complaining against Moses (Numbers 12). There are actually two complaints here. Firstly they speak out against him because he had married an Ethiopian ("Cushite," Num 12:1). In the Old Testament, Ethiopians were the ultimate exotic outsiders. The second complaint is expressed this way: "'Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?'" (Num 12:2). They resent Moses' pre-eminence. Miriam is also susceptible to the temptations

11 In the Hebrew Yom Suph, Sea of Reeds.

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of leadership; she has let power go to her head and become hungry for more. The Lord responds to these accusations in reverse order. God reaffirms Moses and checks their ambition (Num 12:5-8). God then deals with the first complaint in a surprisingly harsh way: Miriam is struck with leprosy for seven days. Those with leprosy were excluded from the community; she has to remain outside the camp for the week until she is healed (Num 12:9-15). Miriam, who as a child had depended on the kindness of an outsider to save her brother, had become intolerant and wanted to exclude that brother's foreign wife. So the Lord makes her experience the shame of exclusion from the community in return. What appears as cruelty against Miriam here is the God of the Exodus coming to the aid of the marginalised Ethiopian woman. This story of Miriam's pride, where power has made her resent someone 'above' her on the ladder and to turn against someone 'below' her, is a salutary reminder of the dangers of leadership which tempt men and women alike.<sup>12</sup> But even here, the tremendous loyalty of the community to Miriam is highlighted: they refuse to move on until she rejoins them (Num 12: 15).

Immediately after Miriam's death in Numbers 20:1 we are told: "Now there was no water for the congregation." Jewish tradition associates Miriam, the child keeping watch on the banks of the Nile and the woman celebrating on the far shore of the sea, with the water which God provided for the people in the desert, a Well that accompanied them on their journey.<sup>13</sup> It is a poignant reminder that, without their women leaders, the people of God are deprived of a refreshing and life-sustaining gift.

## CONCLUSION

Much more can be written about women in church leadership from a biblical perspective. There are a surprising number of influential women who grace the pages of Scripture. In this short investigation I limited myself to two passages from the Pauline Epistles and one example from the Old Testament. The question of women in leadership in the Church is part of a wider issue of recognising the manifold ways in which God gifts the baptised in order to build up the body of Christ and finding ways to facilitate and empower individuals to exercise their vocation for the common good. In the first century Church women played roles as apostles and deacons, benefactors, missionaries and evangelists, working

<sup>12</sup> I see here a particularly strong echo of the tendency of white feminism to focus on patriarchy while overlooking the discrimination faced by people of colour, male and female.

<sup>13</sup> These Talmudic traditions are reflected in Ruth Fainlight, "Miriam's Well," *European Judaism* 45/2 (2012), 164.

hard to spread the Gospel and support and build up the community. Women leaders like Miriam bring something distinctive to their role. They are not perfect, but neither are the men! They are called, chosen and gifted by God - that much should not be in dispute. The question then becomes: Will the official and de facto structures within which they operate facilitate or frustrate the exercise of their ministry?

**Mystery.** A Society can nurture soul or blight it. Our general western culture has for centuries now had a withering effect. It killed off the mystery. It delivered us over to empiricist and rationalist theories of knowledge – Blake’s ‘mind-forged manacles’ – something suitable for the natural sciences but not for an appreciation of the wonder and mystery of the human person.

– VINCENT MACNAMARA, *New Life For Old*, (Dublin: Columba Press), p. 321.