

Commissioning of Women in the Gospels, Acts and Paul

This paper offers an initial exploration of the dynamic of the commissioning of women in some chapters in the gospels, Acts and Paul. As a preliminary, it is worth separating two questions. The first is: do the Scriptures picture men and women as equally suited to the tasks of public ministry, in particular, the task of missional leadership and proclamation of the good news within the congregations of those following the Way? The second is: does there appear to be any kind of ministry which is, in principle, prohibited to women? The first question is the 'maximal' form of the question of women's ministry, since if we answer this in the affirmative, it implies that we might expect women to be equally suited to public leadership, and so might then expect to see men and women equally called to public ministry and leadership. The second answer is the 'minimal' form of the question about women's ministry. An affirmative answer to this will simply assert that there are no particular forms of ministry which Scripture appears to prohibit to women, but says nothing in particular about whether we might expect to see men and women in comparable numbers in these roles.

In looking at this small selection of passages, I will primarily be considering this second form of question.

Luke 24.1–11

All the gospels accounts include a significant role for women at the tomb, and so it is instructive to explore the dynamic of their involvement in the discovery of the empty tomb and the proclamation of this discover and its meaning.

This section in Luke has some textual uncertainties, particularly around the phrases 'of the Lord Jesus' (v 3), 'here is not here but he has been raised' (v 6) and the whole of verse 12. However, there are sufficient textual and stylistic reasons to be confident that these are original.

Luke's account is unusual in some respects. Bock (p 1885) notes the points unique to each gospel, and offers four options for harmonisation, particularly between John and the synoptics, with their different accounts of the order of the women and the male disciples coming to the tomb. The most emphatic difference comes in John's narration of Mary's encounter with Jesus. When the women flee from the tomb, initially 'at a loss' (v 4) and then 'terrified' (v 5) at the angel, but now 'remembering' (v 8) the words of Jesus before his death, they return to the 'eleven' and recount what has happened. Bock (p 1898) follows Marshall (p 888) in noting that their testimony includes no reference to any encounter with the risen Jesus, and agrees that the purpose of this is to create the narrative shape of Luke 24, where the journey of the two disciples to Emmaus provides the setting for the first named encounter with the risen Lord.

Luke's account of the response of the eleven (v 11) is particularly sharp: 'But [*kaí*] these words seemed to them an idle tale [*leros*] and they did not believe them.' This is unusual, in that *leros* is not only *hapax* in the New Testament, but it occurs only once in Josephus; its usual meaning is the delirious talk of the very sick (Bock, p 1898, citing Plummer). What are we to make of this? Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues at some length (pp 315–34) that this represents an androcentric suppression of the testimony of the women. Luke, and Paul in 1 Cor 15, emphasise the primacy of Peter as first witness of the resurrection, in contrast to John who makes Mary Magdalene the primary witness. But Thiselton (pp 445–447) counters Fiorenza's case fairly comprehensively, citing both textual comment and the experience of women readers.

...Luke 24.11 is read by most specialist (and probably by most ordinary readers) as a rebuke to the unbelief of the *male* disciples. All of the women in my classes judged that the verse should be read in this way: the failure of the men is consistent with the earlier accounts of their other failures (p 447).

Bock notes the significance of this contrast for the first audience:

This provides a lesson for Luke's readers, who cannot see Jesus but are under fire for believing in him. They can trust that he is alive (p 1899).

There is a sense, then, that this moment functions in a similar way to John's story of Thomas' encounter with Jesus, where the readers are almost addressed explicitly: 'Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe' (John 20.29). The difference here, though, is that it is the women are the models not only of believing response to the facts of the empty tomb, but (in contrast to the account in Mark) are also presented as the first models of faithful proclamation. Tannehill (p 351) sees this as doubly significant, since it contrasts not only with the response of the eleven, but also with the dominant models of proclamation later on in Acts. He notes the contrast between Luke and Acts, in that women have prominent roles in Luke, but all the main figures in the church's mission in Acts are men.

As others have noted...this reflects cultural resistance to women as witnesses...and in public roles, such as speakers (p 351).

It seems that for Luke, wherever this public resistance is not a factor, women function as models for faith and testimony for his readership.

Thiselton notes another intriguing dimension to testimony of the resurrection in the New Testament, arising from the work of Walter Kunneth in 1965. Since the resurrection is the supreme expression of hope from despair, of the restoration of broken relationships, it is those who have mostly clearly failed, lost hope, and broken relationship who begin to assume primacy as witnesses to the transforming power of the resurrection of Jesus. This fits well with Paul's repeated self-description of himself as the 'worst of all sinners.' Somewhat ironically, therefore, Peter, as a failed male disciple, eclipses the women as a primary witness, since he can testify to the grace of God in forgiving his failure, where the women have instead kept faith (Thiselton p 447) and so do not have a position of failure from which to be restored—rather the reverse of the situation of the unnamed sinful woman in Simon's house (Luke 7).

John 20

Study of John in the last thirty years or so has highlighted two features of the gospel that are particularly notable, and significant for its reading and interpretation. The first is its literary quality, with its complex structure, repeated use of a more limited vocabulary (often with a sense of development), carefully developing plot, use of irony and characterisations. The second, which can be seen as part of the first, is its careful use of different characters, often as a foil for the central character of Jesus or as aids to give the gospel shape and momentum.

Within this, 'the Gospel of John is remarkable for its intentional presentation of women as models of faith' (Kysar, p 177). In contrast to its presentation of men, who are often ambiguous or clearly negative, the portrayals of women are almost universally positive (Kysar p 180, though for a more cautious view see Edwards p 106). The most developed of these positive models is Mary Magdalene, who features as the most prominent single character in the resurrection accounts in John 20, even though she has barely featured earlier in the gospel (perhaps suggesting that John expects his readers to know the other gospels already). Kysar sees her as combining all the positive qualities of the earlier positive female models—the devotion and love of Mary of Bethany, the receptiveness of Martha, and the willingness to witness of the Samaritan woman.

John 20 as a whole has a number of strong literary parallels with John 1, as well as correspondences with the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11, which may suggest it was the original ending of the second half of John and therefore of the whole gospel (Stibbe, p 199). The chapter neatly divides into four sets of encounters: Peter and John coming to the tomb; Mary encountering Jesus in the garden; Jesus coming to the disciples in the upper room; and Thomas meeting Jesus.

As elsewhere in John, there is a strong sense of symbolic realism; so, for example, Mary comes to the tomb still cloaked in her grief and failure to understand 'while it was still dark.' There is also the typical Johannine use of contrast and symmetry. Thus Peter and John, after seeing the cloths in the tomb and 'believing' (though what, we are not quite clear), simply return to their homes (20.10, Burridge p 229). But Mary, by contrast, having met with the risen Jesus, 'announces' this to the disciples, a strong echo of the 'announcers' (angels) she has met at the beginning of this section. In her faith response, she becomes the first to be the agent of proclamation and (like the Samaritan woman) a model for other to follow, not just in faith but also in action.

Mary's instant recognition of Jesus when he calls her by name, and the fact that he entrusts her with a message for his 'brothers', are sure evidence that she is intended to be understood as a model of faithfulness. Her message to them, 'I have seen the Lord' (20.18), marks her out as an apostle [cf 1 Cor 9.1]. (Edwards, p 110)

In the light of the limitations placed on women's witness in the first century... Jesus' entrusting Mary with this important message is surely significant. (Köstenberger, p 188)

Mary Magdalene is the personification of all that it means to be a disciple. She is... the first to discover the empty tomb, the first to witness the risen Christ, and the first to announce the good news of the resurrection. (Kysar, p 183)

Thus it is that Raymond Brown describes her as the first apostle, and the apostle to the apostles (*Community of the Beloved Disciple*, p 189–90).

Acts 18

This passage relates Paul's first visit to Corinth and the establishment of a congregation there, followed by his first visit to Ephesus. His partners in ministry are named as Priscilla and Aquila, believing Jews with Latin names who have come from Rome following the Emperor Claudius' edict expelling the Jews. Witherington (p 536) notes the uncertainties around the dating of this edict, and whether Acts matches the account of Suetonius or of Orosius. But he concludes that the most likely dating for the edict is 49 AD (with Marshall p 292, who believes it is the same edict mentioned by Suetonius, arising 'on account of Chrestus'), so Paul's visit should be dated to around 50, since Priscilla and Aquila had arrived in Corinth 'recently'.

The passage is rather compressed, giving a briefer account of Paul's 18-month stay than of his visit to other cities of similar importance (Williams, p 326). Witherington (p 537) concludes that Luke is not working from other sources (as he probably is elsewhere) but notes that there is sufficient agreement in terms of events and personae with 1 Corinthians to give confidence in the episode's reliability.

It seems very likely that Priscilla and Aquila were already followers of The Way, since no mention is made of their conversion in Acts, and it seems unlikely that unbelieving Jews would offer Paul hospitality so readily (Witherington p 545, Marshall p 293). The account of Paul's visit to Ephesus, from which he hurries on leaving Priscilla and Aquila to establish a congregation, is rather confused. In Acts 18.19, on arriving in Ephesus, Paul is said to leave them there, before going on briefly to recount his visit to the synagogue. The grammar is sufficiently awkward to

suggest that verse 21b originally followed on from 19a, but that Luke then went back and added in the details (Williams p 326, Marshall p 293).

Several things are notable about this episode. The first is that, although Luke is clear that Paul was the first to speak to the Jews at Ephesus, there is no doubt that it is Priscilla and Aquila together who found a church/congregation; it is apparently already established by the time Paul returns (Williams p 323). Secondly, Priscilla and Aquila are together responsible for teaching Apollos, a Jewish believer from Alexandria, 'explaining the way of God to him more accurately.' Since he only knew the baptism of John, this presumably included an explanation of Pentecost, the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit, and baptism in the name of Father, Son and Spirit.

Thirdly, although Luke introduces Aquila first of the couple in Acts 18.1, thereafter Priscilla comes first in order, either because of her higher social status, or because of her greater prominence amongst the believers (Witherington p 539, Marshall p 292, Fernando p 504). The only exception to this in the New Testament is in 1 Cor 16.19, where Paul, writing to Corinth from Ephesus, passes on greetings from 'Aquila and Prisca', the latter a variant of Priscilla, and the *ekklesia* that meets in their house. Later, when Paul is writing to the Christians in Rome, he greets 'Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers (*synergoi*) in Christ Jesus', who by now have returned to their native city, as he does in writing to Timothy (2 Tim 4.19). Fernando cites F F Bruce's intriguing suggestion (in *The Pauline Circle*, 1985) that the order was reversed in the greeting *from* the couple at Priscilla's request, presumably to safeguard Aquila's social standing.

What is striking about this account is the way that, rather exceptionally in Acts (see comment on Luke 24.11), neither Luke nor Paul appear to show any embarrassment about portraying a woman as an equal partner both with her husband and with Paul in engaging with the Jewish community, establishing a congregation, continuing in leadership of it, correcting the teaching of someone who then became an important leader amongst believers in Corinth, and being described as a fellow worker with Paul. In fact, at most points, the texts appear to give her the lead role in the partnership.

This makes it difficult to see that Luke thought of certain roles of leadership to be prohibited to women, or that he (or Paul) have here worked with a general principle that women should not exercise a teaching ministry or have authority in defining and correcting faith amongst believers.

Romans 16

Paul's list of personal greetings in Romans 16 is quite exceptional in its length; it might be that, in writing to a church he has neither founded nor visited, he needs to demonstrate his strong connections with it (France, p 10). Apart from general greetings to the households of Aristobulus and of Narcissus, he sends greetings to twenty-seven individuals, some as friends, others as fellow countrymen (the most likely meaning of *sungenes*), and many as fellow workers. What is striking about this is that ten of the named people are women. There are a number of features in these descriptions worth noting:

- Four of the women are said to have 'worked hard', either 'in the Lord' or 'among you.' The word Paul uses (*kopiaio*) is the one he uses of his own apostolic ministry in evangelism and church building (1 Cor 15.10, Gal 4.11 and Phil 2.16) or of others' (1 Cor 16.16, 1 Thess 5.12).
- As noted above, Prisca and Aquila (v 3) are described as 'fellow workers' (*synergoi*), a term Paul uses elsewhere for others who were his chief associates in his apostolic mission, such as Timothy, Titus, Mark, Luke and Philemon. This supports the observation from Acts 18 that Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila were the founders of the congregation in Ephesus.

- Phoebe (vv 1–2) is described as a ‘deacon’, and there is no reason to think this is not the same office as that mentioned in Phil 1.1 and 1 Tim 3.8 (Cranfield p 781). She is also described as a *prostasis*, which France (p 11) suggests is best translated as ‘benefactor’ or ‘patron’, though it also has strong connections with terms of leadership (see Romans 12.8; Cranfield p 782, 625–627).
- Junia (v 7) is described as ‘prominent amongst the apostles’; though some translations suggest this means ‘in the eyes of’ (that is, Andronicus and Junia are not part of the group of apostles), Cranfield comments that it is ‘virtually certain’ that the sense is that they are outstanding members of the group known as apostles (p 789; Dunn p 894). A number of translations use the masculine name ‘Junias’; the difference is in the Greek accenting. But this name has no attestation, whilst the female ‘Junia’ is common; all the fathers and commentators up till the Middle Ages read it as feminine; and the most likely interpretation is of a husband and wife couple (Cranfield p 788, France p 11, Dunn p 894).

France concludes his discussion:

The cumulative impression from Romans 16.1–16 is that Paul numbered women amongst his closest fellow-workers in his apostolic mission, that they held positions of recognized authority in his churches, and that they were engaged in teaching and indeed ‘apostleship.’ ... All this seems to be in a different world from 1 Tim 2.11–12, and to be hard to square with the belief that Paul’s principle of female ‘submission’ extends outside of the marriage relationship to include also the prohibition of authoritative ministry in the church. (France, pp 11–12)

Conclusion

These accounts appear to show no embarrassment about the commissioning of women to roles that would normally be restricted to men in relation to witnessing the resurrection, communicating this witness to others, and offering reliable testimony that others should trust (though they often do not). The gospel accounts on their own do not appear to be a systematic establishing of women in these roles in a permanent or ‘institutional’ way, but even here it is a striking statement of women’s roles given both the theological and cultural barriers to this having happened in the normal course of events. There are no parallels to this kind of commissioning and trustworthy testifying in Jewish literature of the time; in fact, there is strong evidence of the contrary. Moreover, the women here are frequently offered (more or less explicitly) as models of testimony or discipleship, and are often presented in sharp contrast to the main group of (male) apostles.

The evidence from Paul goes further. Women appeared to occupy the roles of deacon, leaders, teachers, church planters and even apostles, and though these are not as numerous as the roles held by men, there is no limitation of certain roles and significances along gender-defined lines.

Revd Dr Ian Paul
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