

The Role of women in Early Church based on Pauline epistles by Fr Bijo Panachamuttill



There are many different views on how women should act within the church. As we have seen, Paul wrote several times about women in the church. When we look at Paul and his view on women, we need to remember the cultural embeddedness of his writing. We need to remember that women were subject to their husbands, had little independence, and were not allowed to worship with men. In the undisputed letters, Paul treats women as equals. In Romans 16, he mentions many women that he worked with in the ministry and calling some of them apostles. In the disputed letters, Paul tells women to be subjected to men, to be silent in the churches, and to dress modestly.

Women deacons appear to be under discussion in I Timothy 3:11, although the feminine form “deaconesses” did not come into use until about 100 A.D. As late as the end of the 4th century, diakonos might designate a woman as well as a man. The order of deaconesses as distinct from that of widows appears clearly delineated in the first half of the 3rd century in the didaskalia, which declared that the deaconesses should be honored as figures of the Holy Spirit. They could visit believing women in pagan households where a male deacon would be unacceptable. To them belonged the duties of visiting the sick, bathing those recovering from illness, and ministering to the needy.

Deaconesses also assisted in the baptism of women, anointing them with oil and giving them instruction in purity and holiness. They could give communion to women who were sick and unable to meet with the entire church. The Apostolic Constitutions even specified that both male and female deacons might be sent with messages outside the city limits. The ministry of the widow was largely that of prayer, fasting, and laying of hands on the sick, while the deaconess, usually a considerably younger woman, undertook the more physically arduous tasks. Ancient documents show that deaconesses were ordained. The Council of Chalcedon set down requirements for the ordination of deaconesses, and the Apostolic Constitutions includes their ordination prayer.

In a brief letter of recommendation at the conclusion of the letter to the Romans, Paul commends the bearer of his letter whom the Romans may trust to explain it to them (Rom 16:1-2). Phoebe is “servant” of the church at Cenchreae, the port city of Corinth; the term may refer to a “deacon” (Diakonos~), apparently a person with administrative responsibility in the early church, but which in Paul’s letters usually refers to a minister of God’s

word, such as himself. He also calls her a “helper” (Prostati~) of many, a term which normally referred in antiquity to patrons, some of whom were women. As a patron, she would own the home in which the church met and hold a position of honor.¹ In the following greetings (Rom 16:3-16), he lists about twice as many as women, but commends more than twice as many women as men. This may indicate his insensitivity to the opposition women undoubtedly faced for their ministry in some quarters. Among the most significant members he lists Prisca (a diminutive form of Priscilla), possibly mentioned before her husband Aquila because of her higher social status (Rom 16:3-4). Luke also portrays her as a fellow – minister with her husband, joining him in instructing another minister, Apollos (Acts 18:26).

Paul also lists two fellow apostles (this is the most natural way to construe “notable among the apostles”), Andronicus and Junia. “Junia” itself is clearly feminine name, but writers inclined to doubt that Paul could have referred to a female apostle have proposed that this is a contraction for the masculine “Junianus”. But this contraction does not occur in our inscriptions from Rome and is by any count quite rare compared to the common feminine name; the proposal rests² on the assumption that a woman could not be an apostle, rather than on any evidence inherent in the text itself.³

“Paul’s letters also mention twelve women by the name of who were co-workers with him in the gospel ministry. This is the most often neglected evidence from the new testament relevant to the participation of women to the ministry.” Three women are known as leaders of house churches; Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11), Nympha (Colossians 4:15) and Aphia (Philemon 2).⁴

Some fifteen women are mentioned in many of the passages of Paul’s letters in which ten are specified in Romans 16: 1–16. Romans 1: 1-16 contain a list of persons who were actively engaged in the ministry of the church. Among them ten are women: Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia, Julia, Mary, Tryphoena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus’ mother and Nereus’ sister. In these passages Paul acknowledges their ministry and greets them by their name. In the Rabbinic culture man never greets a woman. A woman was designated as the wife of a certain man and it is forbidden for other man to call her by name. Therefore it is clear that Paul’s thinking was different from them. This passage is very important to understand Paul’s attitude towards women and their ministry.

Various Role played by Women in the Pauline Epistles

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul Apostle of God’s glory in Christ* (England: Inter Varsity Press, 2001), 398-400.

² Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P Martin, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His letters* (England: Inter varsity Press, 1993), 584-590.

³ Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P Martin, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His letters* (England: Inter varsity Press, 1993), 583-591.

⁴ Alexandre Monique, *Early Christian Women in History of women in the west Vol I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 123.

From the early decades of Christianity, women were co-workers, missionaries and leaders of house churches. They enjoyed several positions of leadership in the church as a deaconess, widows, virgins, saints, prophetess etc. Within the official ordering of the early churches life, there were two primary orders of women; widows and deaconesses.

- **Women Laborers and Coworkers**

Paul calls three women “coworkers” (synergoi): Prisca (Rom 16:3) and Euodia and syntyche (Phil 4:3). One of the most striking texts is Philippians 4:2-3, where Euodia and syntyche are exhorted to harmony in the Lord. Paul says that they “labored together with him in the gospel” and goes on to call them “co-workers” (synergoi). Probably they labored with Paul in spreading the gospel, functioning as missionaries by proclaiming the word. Urbanus (Rom 16:9), Timothy (Rom 16:21; I Thess 3:2), Titus (II Cor 8:23), Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25), Philemon (Phil 1) and various others (Col 4:11; Philem 2:4 the verbal form in I Cor 3:9; 2 Cor 1:24) are also called coworkers. Prisca and Aquila according to Acts 18:2, were expelled from Rome circa AD 50-51 by Claudius’s decree. They met Paul in Corinth and ministered with him there. They instructed Apollos more accurately about the gospel (Acts 18:26) and according to 2 Timothy 4:19 they resided in Ephesus near the end of Paul’s life. It may be significant that Prisca is typically named first. Certainly she was vitally involved in the Christian movement. Paul clearly believed women played a crucial role in the ministry of the Church. They functioned both as laborers and coworkers, fulfilling significant roles in the early Christian movement. Once again, however we cannot establish that women functioned as overseer-elders from the term coworker alone. The term broadly designates ministry in general, but it cannot be used to determine whether women filled every ministry position.

The ministry of women is also described in the verb labor (kopiao). Four women are designated as “labourers”: Mary (Romans 16:6) and Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis (Rom 16:12). We know nothing about these women apart from these all-too-brief descriptions. The word kopiao designates both Paul’s ministry (I Cor 15:10; Gal 4:11; Phil 2:16; Col 1:29; I Tim 4:10) and the ministry of others (I Cor 16:16; I Thess 5:12; I Tim 5:17). Many scholars maintain that the term denotes missionary service, and this is as good a guess as any, though certainty eludes us. The term itself does not mean that one served as a leader. Women here served significantly in the ministries and labored with intensity.⁵

- **Women Apostles**

A text that continued to be debated is Romans 16:7, where Andronicus and Junia or Junias are saluted as distinguished in the eyes of the apostles. The

⁵ R. Schreiner, Paul Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ (England: Inter Varsity press, 2001), 402-404

debate centres on whether the person Paul compliments with Andronicus is male, then the name is contracted from Junianus. Most scholars however, now agree that the person in question was female. The contracted form of this name appears nowhere in Greek literature, so it is difficult to believe that in Romans we have the only example of such a contraction. Moreover, the name Junia for a woman was quite common. Finally, until the thirteenth century virtually all writers understood this person to be a woman. The evidence for the person in question being a woman is, therefore, rather impressive. Many scholars believe that Andronicus and Junia were husband and wife, and this is indeed probable.⁶

What is striking here is that Paul says Andronicus and Junia are “distinguished among the apostles”. The Greek phrase could also be translated “outstanding in the eyes of the apostles,” but most agree that this is an unlikely way of rendering the phrase. The Term *apostle* (apostolo~) is not always a technical term (2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25) and Andronicus and Junia were likely itinerant missionaries if they are called apostles here. The word *apostolo~* is used of such travelling missionaries in the apostolic fathers (DBid. 11:3-6; herm. Vis.13:1; Herm. Sim 92:4; 93:5; 102.2). Such apostles did not have the same kind of authority as did Paul, the twelve, Barnabas or James, the brother of the Lord. Given the Patriarchal nature and the practical necessities of life in the ancient world and given our interpretations of 1 Timothy 2:11-14, Junia probably exercised her ministry particularly towards other women.⁷

- **Deaconess:**

Romans 16 are a surprising source of information on the contribution of women in the ministry of the early Church. We begin with Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2) who is designated as a “deacon” (diakono~) of the church in cenchrea. Possibly the word diakono~ here simply refers to service of a general kind and should not be defined in terms of the office. It seems more likely, though, that Phoebe actually served as a deacon since she is described as a deacon of a particular Church- “of the church in cenchrea”. Some have suggested that Phoebe was a leader of the Church since she is called *prostatisin* (Romans 16:2). But given the patriarchal nature of the ancient world, we should beware of seeing the term as carrying the same status as was the case when describing male patrons (*prostate~*). Moreover, it is doubtful that Paul would describe Phoebe as his “*leader*” or “*president*”, especially since he is reluctant to grant that kind of authority even to the “*pillar*” apostles (Gal 2:1-10). It is likely that Phoebe is commended here as a “*patron*”; that is, she rendered significant financial assistance to the Church in Cenchrea. Paul calls on the Roman churches to render assistance (*parastete*) to Phoebe since she herself has been the helper (*prostatin~*) of many, including Paul.

In the case of Phoebe she served in the office of deacon. It is likely that Paul refers to women deacons in I Timothy 3:11 as well, though the word

⁶ Abraham Nellickal and Tony Neelankavil, eds., *Feminine identity in the Church* (Thrissur: MaryMatha Publications, 2011), 17-26.

⁷ R. Schreiner, *op.cit.*, 400-401.

gynaika~ is ambiguous and possibly refer to the “wives” of deacons. Several lines of argument suggest that women deacons are in view in I Timothy 3:11.⁸ First, the word likewise introduces the discussion on women, and this is the same linking word that introduces men who serve as deacons in I Timothy 3:8. No indication of a change of subject is given, and thus we should presume women deacons are intended. Second, if Paul intended wives of deacons, he could have made it clear by adding the word of deacons or the pronoun their (auton) to say they were “their wives”. Third, the qualifications for women in I Timothy 3:11 are quite similar to those required for men who serve as deacons (I Timothy 3:8-10. 12-13), indicating most probably that qualifications for an office are in view. Fourth, if wives of deacons are intended why Paul does say something about the wives of deacons but not the wives of overseer-elders?⁹ The wives of the latter would seem to be equally, or even more, important. It is more convincing, therefore, to see women deacons in view instead of wives of deacons.

The roots of women ministry in the early church unquestionably go back into the apostolic church, although it is difficult to define their particular job or its nature in first centuries of the Christian era.¹⁰ This is not surprising because all the ministers of the church at that time were fluid and not distinctly defined. The early references to women deacons are found in the writings of St Paul.¹¹ For example Paul calls Phoebe as ‘diakono~’ and also women in 1 Timothy 3:11, but exactly what service did they performed is not really mentioned. It is difficult to trace in a clear and comprehensive manner the historical development of the order of the women deacon or the deaconess, especially during the first four centuries of the church.

In eastern Christianity, the order of the women deacons flourished till the middle ages. But in the western Christianity this order was generally discouraged. ‘Many evidences have suggested that the various aspects of the ministry of the ordained deaconess in the east era Christianity were taken up by the women in the west, especially by the widows and later nuns.’ The New Testament provides us with some limited references to the ministry of women deacons. One is in the first letter to Timothy; “Deacon’s likewise must be serious, not double tongues, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; they must hold fast to the mystery of faith with a clear conscience...Women likewise must be serious, not slanders, but temperate, faithful in all things.” (I Timothy 3: 11)

⁸ Alexandre Monique, *Early Christian Women in the History of women in the West- Vol I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 162

⁸ Elizabeth Behr Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church* (New York: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 1999), 171-175

⁹ R. Schreiner, *op.cit.*, 400-401.

¹⁰ Alexandre Monique, *Early Christian Women in the History of women in the West- Vol I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 156.

¹¹ Elizabeth Behr Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church* (New York: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 1999), 171,172.

In this verse 11 many commentators have referred women as deacons in different manuscripts and interpretations but not all the commentators or translations recognize it as a reference to women deacons in this passage but on the other hand the early Christian commentators including Clement of Alexandria and St John Chrysostom saw them as deaconesses. The other significant New Testament reference to a woman deacon is in St Paul's commendation of Phoebe, to whom he clearly refers to as a Deacon (Diakono~) of the church of Cenchrea.

"I command you to our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchera, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is sitting 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."(Romans 16:1-2).

Here also some scholars arranged that the Greek term Diakono~ here should be understood as 'helper or minister', those some of the eastern Christianity do not support this argument.

In apostolic constitution, Deacons are considered as clergy. Here deaconesses are compared to Holy Spirit.¹² The apostolic constitution assigns the duties of a deaconess as:

- For the ministrations towards women
- For visiting women in their homes when it is not possible to send man. (III.II.15)
- The deaconess keeps the doors on the women's side of the church (II.VII.52)
- The deaconess is to accompany women who speak with bishop or deacon. (II. IV. 26)
- Deaconess makes the distribution of charity to the widows.

An Outline of the Activities of Deaconess in the Early Church:

- They assisted women who were in need and who were ill.
- They verified the corporal integrity of the virgins.
- They gave private instructions to catechumens when necessary.
- They guarded the door by which women entered the assembly and ensured that the younger women gave way to the older women in the place reserved for them.
- They served as an intermediary between the women and the male clergy.
- They bore message and travelled on congregation of business.
- They assisted the bishops in the baptism.
- Within Syrian Christianity, these deaconesses gave the Eucharist to women who were ill, to nuns and young children and to their sisters (apparently other deaconesses) when a priest was not available.¹³

¹² Alexandre Monique, *Early Christian Women in the History of women in the West- Vol I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 176.

¹³ Robert Nguyn; www.bibletext.com/women.htm

- **Widows:**

The role of the widows in the early church was to perform charity and they were also appointed for prayer. According to Tertullian (c.162- 228), the widows were an order and they were assigned a place of honor within the assembled congregation. By the 3rd century, these widows were promoted in the responsibilities that were assigned to them. During that period, they performed charity especially to the women and also they gave teachings. These widows were an active class during the New Testament and early Christian periods. Women without her husband was excluded a many in the community¹⁴. The condition of the widow was worse as they had to face social rejection¹⁵ and poverty because there were organized structures for widows and orphans. In the midst of these critical situations that prevailed during the early church, the church took the responsibility and came forward to protect them and provided charity for them. Not only they played a major role in ancient Christian community but their role was also to accept the donations from others and also they themselves participated in the charity and welfare. Another major role they played was in prayer and fasting (I Timothy 5:5) and these widows were rightly called the intercessor of the church. They were designated as the altar of God. They gave advice to Christian women, they prayed for them, fasted for them and participated in the sacramental life of the church.

A clear picture of the widows can be seen in the pastoral epistles of St Paul. 1 Timothy 5:3–6 issues the actions about the character, conduct and also the responsibility of women who were enrolled as widows. If one was to be enrolled among the widows, she should be at least 60 years old, married only once and well attested for her deeds, as one who brought up children , shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the affected and devoted herself to do good in every way (5:10). The additional role of the widows¹⁶ were in the communities economic support, they were to remain celibate and needed to be engaged in the ministry of prayer.

‘The real widow, left alone, has set her hope in God and continues its application day and night’ (5:5).

Didascalia gave a detailed role of the conduct of the widows. There it is defined that widows should spend their time in prayer for the church and its benefactors and from whom they received charity and material support. *‘For a widow should spend time in prayer for the whole church and also for whom they have received material support.’ (XV.III.5).* the apostolic constitution

¹⁴ Bimitra Koukoiura; Women in Early Christian Church (Greece: WCC Publications, 1999), 73

¹⁵ Kyriake Karidoyanis Fitzgerald, Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 161.

¹⁶ Margrett Howe, Women and Church Leadership (USA: Zondervan Publication, 1982), 50

prohibited women from teaching and baptizing. They were to be obedient to the bishops, presbyters, deacons and also to the deaconess (iii.i.7).¹⁷

- **Virgins:**

The information about the virgins has been provided by the church father from apostolic tradition of Hippolytus. The recognized class of virgins came into existence during the first two centuries within the life of the church. They are not ordained or appointed. They do not have any public ministry as such, but they are acknowledged for this voluntary separation from other lay men. The origin of the virgins within the church is unknown but they have been associated with the widows who are expected to be celibate once upon a time. By the end of the 3rd century, Methodius of Olympus in his work 'Symposium on Virgins Concerning Charity' praises charity as it is presented by women themselves and in the way they experience it. A virgin is dedicated to the church which according to the Apocalypse is 'Our Mother and the Temple and Tabernacle of God' (Rev.12: 1 - 6).¹⁸ By the 3rd century, the Christians in the Mediterranean Basin considered charity as a supreme gift from heaven and an angelic quality on earth. This thought is also seen in the 'Acts of Thomas' where St.Thomas the Apostle stresses on charity and he also believed that dejection of the sex would enhance towards spiritual perfection. The early church also gave respect to women martyrs who were designated as saints by the churches.

As Clement of Alexandria made mention of Paul's reference to deaconesses in I Timothy 3:11, so Origen commented on Phoebe, the deacon that Paul mentions in Romans 16:1-2:¹⁹

"This text teaches with the authority of the Apostle that even women are instituted deacons in the Church. This is the function which was exercised in the church of Cenchreae by Phoebe, who was the object of high praise and recommendation by Paul . . . And thus this text teaches at the same time two things: that there are, as we have already said, women deacons in the Church, and that women, who by their good works deserve to be praised by the Apostle, ought to be accepted in the diaconate."

Women deacons appear to be under discussion in I Timothy 3:11, although the feminine form "deaconess" did not come into use until about 100 A.D. As late as the end of the 4th century, Deacon's might designate a woman as well as a man. The order of deaconesses as distinct from that of widows appears clearly delineated in the first half of the 3rd century in the Didascalia, which declared that the deaconesses should be honored as figures of the Holy Spirit²⁰. They could visit believing women in pagan households where a male deacon would be unacceptable. To them belonged

¹⁷ David D Bercot (ed), *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (USA: Hand Brickson Publications, 1998).

¹⁸ Dimitra Koukoiura, *Women in Early Christian Church* (Grace:WCC Publication, 1999) 74, 315

¹⁹ Francine Cardman, *Women Ministry and Church Orders in Early Christianity* ed by Ross Kramer (Texas: World Book Publications, 1988), 300.

²⁰ Mary Ann Getty- Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001). 231-252.

the duties of visiting the sick, bathing those recovering from illness, and ministering to the needy. Deaconesses also assisted in the baptism of women, anointing them with oil and giving them instruction in purity and holiness. They could give communion to women who were sick and unable to meet with the entire church. The Apostolic Constitutions even specified that both male and female deacons might be sent with messages outside the city limits. The ministry of the widow was largely that of prayer, fasting, and laying of hands on the sick, while the deaconess, usually a considerably younger woman, undertook the more physically arduous tasks. Ancient documents show that deaconesses were ordained. The Council of Chalcedon set down requirements for the ordination of deaconesses, and the Apostolic Constitutions includes their ordination prayer.

Conclusion

The status of women in early Christianity has been quite debated in recent decades, no doubt prompted by interest in the women's movement in Western countries today. I think the evidence is somewhat mixed. Certainly there's evidence in the New Testament itself of women doing many things within early Christianity. In Paul's letters he greets women and calls them as co-workers and also He refers to one of them with a word in Greek that we would translate as "deaconess." Even calls one of the women an Apostle. What exactly these terms meant is a little hard to say given the distance in time, but there's plenty of evidence of women's activity. I think part of the activity in the early period, that is the New Testament period itself, perhaps is related to women's role in the house churches. The earliest Christian communities met in people's houses; they didn't have churches yet for quite some time, and throughout the New Testament, particularly Paul's letters in the Book of Acts, we find out that women owned the houses in which the early Christians met. This I think is significant because I don't think the women who owned the houses were simply providing coffee and cookies, in effect, for the Christian community. I think that this probably gave them some avenue to power... in the church. What seems to happen within the first few centuries is that whatever limited activities women had in the beginning begin to get curtailed as you have the development of a hierarchy of clergy members with bishops, presbyters and deacons, and it's pretty firmly established that women should not be either bishops or priests. Many church fathers wrote about this so that women tend to get excluded from those functions, though they do have some roles, such as joining a group called the widows or deaconesses in the fourth century. We have good evidence of an order of deaconesses, but they are excluded from the priesthood.

