

Chapter 10

Spirit Empowered Women: Why and How the Full Participation of Women in Spirit Empowered Ministry Strengthens Global Christianity (Jacqueline Grey)

Abbreviation

KP Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a province in northwest Pakistan

Introduction

This chapter explores why and how the full participation of women in ministry remains crucial for the flourishing of the global Church. First, I address why a biblical vision for the contribution of women proves essential, and what that vision might look like. In many contexts of global Christianity today, women experience exclusion from key leadership roles and thereby from full participation in church ministry. Yet, imagine the positive impact on the global Church if women were fully released into Spirit-empowered ministry. Second, to envision what this could look like necessitates a return to the Early Church. Using the example of Romans 16, I retrieve biblical models for women's leadership. In this passage, Paul promotes the public ministry of Phoebe and commends Priscilla, among various other women. He emphasises these women as gifted, honourable, and hard-working. Paul's emphasis on their good reputation acts as a mechanism by which they could exercise influence and pursue leadership opportunities in a culture that often restricted women from the public sphere. The women in Romans 16 turned this cultural challenge into an opportunity to pursue the ministries for which God had called and gifted them. With these examples in mind, I conclude by considering some practical suggestions to assist contemporary women, particularly in the Majority World.

Why Is Participation of Women Needed?

Considering mechanisms for releasing women in ministry requires first being convinced that women are necessary for the flourishing of the church. *Why* is the full participation of women in ministry crucial for the global Church? Of course, women are necessary. Who else will clean the toilets and provide hospitality? No doubt the church needs women's ministries for the many tasks that keep Christian communities operational. But is the *full* participation of women in all activities and levels of ministry – including leadership – truly needed and wanted? Why is the full participation of women in ministry crucial? I offer here three key arguments why women remain central for the flourishing of the global Church: first, because women and men were created to work together; second, the Bible models women's ministry and leadership; and third, Spirit-empowerment is for daughters as well as sons.

God Created Women and Men to Work Together

In Genesis 1, God created men and women in his image and gave them the task of stewarding the earth together (Gen. 1:26-28). Carolyn Custis James refers to this creational design of men and women ministering together as a "Blessed Alliance".¹ God blessed them to be fruitful and gave them both the shared responsibility to act as God's caretakers of creation. This role of stewardship rested on the foundation of their shared nature as God's image bearers. In ministering together in loving relationship to serve the needs of the world, men and women together best reflect the image of the triune God. God designed for women and men to work together in unity towards the flourishing of the earth and human communities.

¹ Carolyn Custis James, *Half the Church: Recapturing God's Global Vision for Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010): 137.

Similarly, the narrative of Genesis 2 begins with the man (*ish*) placed in the Garden as its caretaker. However, God recognised that it was not good for the man to be alone; no individual is intended to stay independent of community. We need one another. As a solution, God made the woman (*ishah*). The woman was not created to function as the man's assistant. God presented her to the man as *ezer kennedo*, which refers to someone comparable or equal to the man, to serve with him.² The text describes the man and woman as uniting together to become one (Gen. 2:23-24). Genesis 2 reinforces God's original design of women and men working together. Of course, sin has broken this creational design and alienated human community. Humanity chose (and so often continues to choose) autonomy and independence. Too often we think we don't need God or each other. Yet, in turning to God, we acknowledge our total dependence on him. As part of the family of God, we also recognise our bond with, and reliance on, one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Although we live in a world broken by sin, including social structures that have distorted this blessed alliance, God has purposed for men and women to live in unity and minister together. Only human sin and brokenness subjugates one person over another based on gender or ethnicity, such as the development of the patriarchal culture described but not prescribed in the Bible.³ Instead, for Christians, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).⁴

The Bible Models Women's Ministry and Leadership

² Alice Mathews, *Gender Roles and the People of God: Rethinking What We Were Taught about Men and Women in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017): 39.

³ Mathews, *Gender Roles*, 93.

⁴ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, come from the New International Version.

Throughout the Bible, we see examples of women empowered by the Holy Spirit for their God-given task. So often God unexpectedly used people of low social status, such as women, to do his remarkable and Spirit-empowered work. We see God speak through female prophets, such as Miriam and Huldah. We see women courageously speak truth to power, including Hannah and Abigail. These women ministered as agents of change. We see a female judge, Deborah. We see Queen Esther making and implementing decisions at national level. These types of roles and activities were not normally open to women in the cultural context of the ancient world, yet God empowered these women by his Holy Spirit to act in counter-cultural ways to do his work of ministry and leadership. These female ministers and leaders were known for their integrity, strength, and good character. Yet these few examples in the Old Testament serve only as a signpost of what God would do at Pentecost when he would pour out his Spirit on his sons and daughters together.

Spirit Empowerment is for Daughters and Sons

God's vision for his daughters and sons in each community across the globe is for the Holy Spirit to empower them for the flourishing of the Church and God's work in the world. In fact, this was the purpose of Pentecost. The Book of Acts records how Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower believers for mission (Acts 1:4-5; 8). Luke highlights the presence of female disciples alongside the apostles expectantly awaiting the promise of the Spirit (v. 14). When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost, these disciples were all together in one place (2:1). Both women and men received the Holy Spirit equally and were initiated for ministry. Peter adopted the words of the prophet Joel to articulate this new thing God was doing:

In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,

your old men will dream dreams.
 Even on my servants, both men and women,
 I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
 and they will prophesy (Acts 2:17-18).

At Pentecost, the Spirit empowered both daughters and sons for ministry. Joel's promise of the blessed alliance of men and women working together in unity was realised at the birth of the Church. This empowerment of the Holy Spirit did not end at Pentecost or with the apostles but continued through the Early Church period and up to the church today. Therefore, Pentecost provides a paradigm and model for ministry in which the old walls of division that alienated human community – walls of gender, ethnicity, and social class – are torn down.⁵ What follows in the Book of Acts and the letters of the New Testament are countless examples of women empowered by the Holy spirit ministering in all different activities and levels of leadership in the Early Church.

What Spirit-Filled Women Did in the New Testament

This next section explores some examples of women in the New Testament that model for us the blessed alliance of men and women working together in ministry. I focus on the roles and activities of two women commended by Paul in Romans 16: Phoebe and Priscilla. However, in addition to exploring the Spirit-empowered gifting of these women to minister and lead, I also observe how Paul promoted their excellence of character and diligence. This focus remains important when considering the implications of these biblical models for the promotion of female ministers in the Majority World.

⁵ Melissa L. Archer, "Women in Ministry: A Pentecostal Reading of New Testament Texts", in Margaret English de Alminana and Lois E. Olena, Eds. *Women in Pentecostal and Charismatic Ministry: Informing Dialogue on Gender, Church, and Ministry*, vol. 21 of Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies, series editors William K. Kay and Mark Cartledge (Leiden: Brill, 2016): 37-38.

As a backdrop, we need to understand the culture of the Graeco-Roman world in which the New Testament Church was birthed. It is identified as an honour-shame culture. In such cultures, including many today, clear boundaries exist between the public and private spheres, as well as expectations regarding gendered roles in those spaces. Mostly, women cannot participate in the public sphere, with some exceptions for wealthy and socially elite women.⁶ Generally, however, women must adhere to a strict code of moral behaviour and maintain their reputation as virtuous to ensure the family's honour.⁷ So what does Romans 16 tell us about how the New Testament women navigated this honour-shame culture to engage in public ministry?

It was standard practice in the Greco-Roman world to conclude a letter with a list of greetings and commendations. As Nijay Gupta observes, this list is “the kind of thing we might just skip over when reading this weighty letter, like the closing credits of a movie.”⁸ Yet, Paul's list of commendations in Romans 16 reveals much data to us about men and women working together in the Early Church.⁹ In this list, we see that Paul refers to a total of twenty-six people, including ten women, with the names of the women and men all mixed in together. He also often refers to the men and women in the same way. Gupta suggests then that “Paul did not treat women differently than men when it came to church ministry and leadership.”¹⁰ Paul publicly honoured both his female and male co-workers as model leaders.

Phoebe tops the head of this list of commendations in Romans 16. Paul begins with commending Phoebe because she functions as the courier of this letter to the Roman Church on

⁶ See Susan E. Hylen, *Women in the New Testament World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁷ Julia Pizzuto-Pomaco, *From Shame to Honor: Mediterranean Women in Romans 16* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2017): 99.

⁸ Nijay K. Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023): 4.

⁹ Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 4.

¹⁰ Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 98-99.

behalf of Paul. Yet, this role involved more than just a personalised postal service. Phoebe served as Paul's ambassador. The role as letter-bearer required Phoebe to read Paul's letter to the Church in Rome, answer any questions local church leaders and members had about the contents of the letter, and respond on behalf of Paul. This required Phoebe to stay in Rome and receive their hospitality. Her credentials, cited by Paul, emphasise her competency to act as his representative. Paul entrusted the transportation and explanation of the Book of Romans – often considered his masterpiece – to a woman. Her role as letter-bearer also points to her strength of character. That she would travel to Rome, using her own resources and going at her own personal risk, points to her courage and self-sacrificial nature.

In terms of Phoebe's credentials, Paul commends her for her relational, ministry, and leadership roles. She is a sister, deacon, and benefactor. As a sister in the Lord, Phoebe had a close, trusted, relational connection to Paul. Interestingly, no reference occurs regarding her marital status or her natural family, but the emphasis remains on her status as part of God's family. Paul also recognises Phoebe for her key leadership role in her hometown of Cenchreae (located next to Corinth). Paul honours her as a "deacon," which means "servant"; a title Paul also uses of himself (see 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 6:4). Since Paul emphasises the importance of Spirit-gifting for ministers in the church, notably in 1 Corinthians 12, we can assume that Phoebe also evidenced the gifting of the Holy Spirit in her ministry as a deacon. This term *deacon* seems to develop later in the Early Church as an actual title for leaders in the Christian community. In fact, 1 Timothy 3:8-13 outlines the qualifications for and expectations of a deacon, including "being worth of respect" (v. 8). While the passage in 1 Timothy assumes most deacons were male, clearly women like Phoebe also functioned in this type of leadership role.

The final qualification of Phoebe that Paul mentions in Romans 16 is that she served as a benefactor to many, including him. To function as a patron suggests that Phoebe had wealth and status in the community. Yet, she used this wealth and status to benefit others. Overall, Romans 16 demonstrates that Paul promotes Phoebe to the Church in Rome and endorses her ministry. The text upholds her as a Spirit-gifted minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ and describes her – like many of the women of the Old Testament – as a woman of strength and noble character.

The second person Paul names in Romans 16 is Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila. Unusually, Paul here lists Priscilla's name before her husbands in his greeting. In fact, in four out of the six references to this couple (Acts 18:2, 18, 19, 26; Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19), Priscilla's name is deliberately mentioned first. Scholars generally agree that Paul lists Priscilla first because she had a more prominent ministry role than Aquila through her well-known gift of teaching. Paul did not reinforce hierarchy based on gender or social status, but highlighted Priscilla as a model for ministry. He describes this wife-husband team as “my co-workers” (Rom. 16:3), a term he uses for close colleagues in ministry.¹¹ Paul then describes his gratitude for this couple because they had risked their lives for him. We don't know the circumstances of the event to which Paul refers, but it points to their courage, self-sacrifice, and humility. This couple, known for their Spirit-gifting and character, also led a house-church in Rome. Priscilla and Aquila were clearly held in high esteem by Paul, the Church in Rome, and believers elsewhere.

While Paul commends many more women and men in Romans 16, space does not allow for a full exploration of their merits. We can note, however, that Paul endorses the ministries of women, men, couples, families, and singles. Andronicus and Junia, most likely a married couple

¹¹ Other examples include Romans 16:9, 16, 21; 2 Corinthians 8:23.

(like Priscilla and Aquila), had been imprisoned with Paul. This couple were at the vanguard of ministry and persecuted for their faith. Paul endorsed both husband and wife as “outstanding among the apostles” (16:7). Others in the list are commended for their hard work, resilience, and motherly care of Paul. In fact, Paul repeats the praise of many of the Romans 16 women as being “women who work hard in the Lord” (v. 12). Yet, what stands out in this list is that the men and women worked together for the gospel and flourishing of the church in the blessed alliance. Women in the Early Church functioned in all roles according to their gifts and calling, together with the men.

While other sections in NT letters seem to limit the roles of women, these must be read in the light of Paul’s actions and attitudes towards women highlighted here. For Paul, the gospel and health of the church remained the priority. Therefore, to advance the gospel may have required some women in particular contexts to limit their freedom and activities. This meant that the behaviour of Christian women (and men) would need to stay consistent with the culture in which they lived while maintaining Christian values. As Cynthia Long Westfall notes, Paul’s intentions were for “believers to fit into the culture while remaining ethically pure.”¹² Therefore, Paul encouraged the Corinthians to think of themselves as slaves to everyone to win as many as possible to the gospel (1 Cor. 9:19). Therefore, as described in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, if some women had to limit their freedom by wearing headscarves to ensure that the gospel would not be held in disrepute, then Paul thought they should wear the headscarf. Similarly, if some unlearned women had questions that disrupted the church service, as described in 1 Corinthians 14:6-40, then Paul instructed them to wait and ask their husbands at home to ensure order in the church

¹² Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle’s Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016): 13.

but still allowing the women to learn. Or, if some uneducated women who had accepted wrong teaching had to be silent and learn, as was the situation with the woman in 1 Timothy 2:12, then they should get educated and learn as students.

However, the seeming restrictions of women's activities noted above had to do with particular situations in local churches at that time. They were not universal commands. Instead, all believers, women and men, must live worthy of the gospel to which God has called us (Eph. 4:1). Paul – counter-cultural in many ways as demonstrated in his commendations of Phoebe and Priscilla – would not have promoted these two women unless they were known as honourable women. However, when it came to his mission, Paul wanted women and men to ensure that their behaviour did not hinder the advancement of the gospel. While Paul promoted the full participation of women, the promotion of the gospel came first. Yet, he did not want the full resources of the church and the gifting of women to go untapped.

So, what can we learn from Phoebe to help release women for ministry in the global church today? We can learn that both character and gifting remain essential for women operating in the cultural context of an honour-shame culture. Many women in the Majority World also live in this type of context. For many years, I lived and worked in Izmir, Turkey. I experienced that honour-shame culture, albeit as an outsider, and the difficulties navigating it. Therefore, learning from these models of women in Romans 16 can also help women navigate leadership and ministry in their own contexts today.

How We Can Release the Full Participation of Women in Spirit-Empowered Ministry?

What would the global Church look like if gifted and called women were released into the fullness of their ministry potential? What would the global Church look like if space was made for godly women to lead, speak, and minister like Phoebe? What would the global Church

look like today if men in our world acted like Paul – commending godly women in their communities and promoting their ministry? To do so would require that courageous men share space at the table, trusting that room enough exists for everyone. God’s vision for his daughters and sons in each community across this globe is for the Holy Spirit to empower them for the flourishing of the Church and for his work in the world. Yet, while God’s vision is universal, it is not universal in application but must find its outworking in the specifics of geography, culture, and context. Two simple mechanisms can help release Spirit-gifted women into their full potential and full participation in the global Church – male champions and a good reputation.

Male Champions Are Necessary

As evidenced in Romans 16, Paul championed many women in his sphere of influence. He identified women such as Phoebe and Priscilla as both gifted and of good reputation. Paul publicly named women as his co-workers and leaders in the Early Church. He promoted these women and commended them to others. Paul, despite many misconceptions about him, championed women. While few formal titles existed in the Early Church and no official ordination, we could ask: if Paul was around today, would he have ordained Phoebe? We speculate, but based on his comments in Romans 16, I think Paul would. This is one significant way that male leaders can champion women. They can look for the call and gifts of ministry on a woman’s life and encourage those giftings. Giftings evidenced in one person’s life may look different to those evidenced in another person. For example, a leadership gift in a woman might look and be expressed differently to a leadership gift in a man, yet both have the same outcome of influencing others. Phoebe was very different to Paul. Paul was a male Jew. Phoebe was a female Gentile. Yet, Paul could look beyond these differences to see her gifts and strength of character and promote her ministry to others.

Having an official position and formal title in the church or Christian organisation gives women agency to lead and influence others in cultural contexts that do not normally accept women as leaders. The same proves true for official endorsement of women by male pastors. This is also another way men (or powerholders) can champion women: give public recognition of their gifts and ministries in congregational and denominational meetings.¹³ This sponsorship and promotion of women gives confidence to other ministers that this person is trustworthy and has a valuable ministry. Similarly, men can bring women into their networks for ministry. Brothers in Christ, like Paul, can help women identify their calling and Spirit-empowered giftings. Men should seek to mentor women and nurture the development of their sisters with the goal of seeing male and female leaders carry out God's mission together. To do this requires that men open doors of ministry to women, as they often function as the gate keepers. It is not enough to say, "Women just need to rise up." How can women step into the room if the doors are locked, with men holding the key?

The Importance of a Good Reputation

Women do have agency. The question remains how to identify their opportunities. In many contexts of an honour-shame culture, a key mechanism for women to be released into ministry is having a good reputation in the community. This is true for men as well but vital for female leaders in many cultures that have strong expectations about female behaviour and requirements of female purity. In fact, 1 Timothy 3:7 requires that church leaders "have a good reputation with outsiders". While these expectations may seem to present an obstacle, they can

¹³ Kimberly Ervin Alexander and James P. Bowers, *What Women Want: Pentecostal Women Ministers Speak for Themselves* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

provide an opportunity for women to engage in public ministry. In a recent study of women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), a province in northwest Pakistan, Susan Smith found that women identified a key mechanism by which they obtained influence in the public sphere – being known as honourable and hard-working women.¹⁴ These women found that, as they could demonstrate compliance to social norms through their personal integrity and hard work, this in fact gave them a voice and opportunity to work in public roles, despite the social restrictions of their culture. This mechanism of good reputation and hard work proved effective even when women worked in public roles alongside men who were not family members.

This strategy of women promoting their good reputation has to do with turning a cultural obstacle into an opportunity. In essence, it serves as a pragmatic approach to empower women in cultural contexts which may restrict their participation. In fact, while the Early Church did not seek to destabilise their culture, the impact of the gospel resulted in cultural reform. May such reform continue today through contemporary examples of the blessed alliance of men and women working together and bring positive changes to cultures that diminish the contribution of women. While this emphasis on a woman's honourable character may not be required in all contexts of the global Church, many women, particularly in the Majority World, operate in such situations. Therefore, a key method for Spirit-gifted women to be released into public ministry involves their demonstrating – and others promoting (as Paul did for Phoebe) – their honour and hard work. This requires support from their male family members as well as their Christian brothers.

¹⁴ Susan Smith, "Sitting with Melons: A Critical Evaluation of the Mechanisms by Which Women Exercise Public Sphere Influence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa", PhD diss., Alphacrucis University College, Australia, 2023.

Conclusion

Upholding reputational purity and hard work may seem heavy requirements for women. We must ask: do these requirements put an additional burden on women? Yes and no. They unfortunately present an additional weight our sisters in the Majority World must carry, and they reflect the reality of gender bias embedded in our cultural systems that women must navigate, but of which many men remain unaware. However, as noted above, the Bible requires that all leaders in the church have a good reputation in their communities regardless of gender. Yet, as we have seen with Phoebe and Priscilla, they navigated the limitations women encountered in the Graeco-Roman culture through the mechanism of promoting their good character and hard work. Paul aided their navigating these limitations by championing their ministries. As Genesis reminds us, gender hierarchies were not God's intention for human communities. Yet, despite the cultural obstacles resulting from our broken world, the New Testament shows women working alongside men in the public sphere. Women's leadership in the Early Church was real and is well evidenced in the biblical and extra-biblical data.¹⁵ Such rich data provides models to emulate, especially for young men and women in the Majority World who will benefit from seeing women upheld as examples. These examples can also inspire us today to see God's vision for the full participation of Spirit-empowered women that will strengthen and benefit global Christianity.

¹⁵ Joan E. Taylor and Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, "Introduction", In Joan E. Taylor and Ilaria L.E. Ramelli (eds), *Patterns of Women's Leadership in Early Christianity* (Oxford: OUP, 2021): 5.

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This essay is part of the **Global Pentecostal Voices Initiative** sponsored by **City Harvest Church in Singapore**. See www.chc.org.sg

This essay is the print version of a video presentation that can be viewed at www.GPVoces.org

This essay is published in **Voices Loud and Clear** edited by Kong Hee Byron D Klaus and Douglas Petersen published by Regnum Books UK.

It may be purchased at <https://www.regnumbooks.net/products/voices-loud-and-clear>

The ebook is available in open access format at <https://www.regnumbooks.net/products/voices-loud-and-clear?variant=45345072513175>

Abstract

This paper explores why and how the full participation of women in ministry is crucial for the flourishing of the global church. First, it presents a biblical vision for the contribution of women. Biblical models for women's leadership are retrieved through a reading of Romans 16. Secondly, it provides practical insight to assist contemporary women, particularly in the Majority World. A strategy for women to navigate complex social expectations and cultural limitations is presented. The demonstration of godly character acts as a mechanism by which women can exercise influence and pursue leadership opportunities for which they are gifted and called.