

WOMEN
IN MINISTRY
and the
WRITINGS OF PAUL



Karen M. Elliott, C.P.P.S.


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Cover art: The seventeenth-century icon of the Myrrh-Bearing Women on the cover of this book depicts the disciples who went to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body with myrrh oils. Five of the women are specifically named in the Gospel accounts related to this event: Mary, the *Theotokos* (in Greek, “God-bearer,” the mother of Jesus), Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Salome, and Mary the wife of Cleopas (or Alphaeus). While Susanna, Mary of Bethany, and Martha of Bethany are not named in the Gospel accounts, according to tradition they are included. The Gospel accounts of these disciples ministering to Christ in the tomb are: Matthew 27:55–56, Mark 16:1, and Luke 23:55–24:1.

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preface



We live in an age in which most of us use the World Wide Web daily, spout jargon such as “global economy” and “world politics,” and have international communications at a mouse-click. In spite of the global information so readily available to us, however, many of us focus on the microcosm and the frenetic pace of our daily lives. As a result, our world often becomes small and insular. We insulate our perceptions of history, restricting our thinking and actions to only what we have learned or remember. We similarly insulate our perceptions of food, politics, culture, ethnicity, economics, worship, and faith. To the extent that we insulate our perceptions, we limit our understanding.

The Apostle Paul implores the early Christian communities not to be insular. He urges them to eliminate the divisions that impede their faith. In Galatians 3:27–28, Paul pleads with the Christian communities to focus on their oneness in Christ Jesus. He insists that the Spirit given to each one in baptism eradicates political and cultural divisions. He commands them to let go of the entitlements and privileges of wealth and to have concern for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. And he urges them to abolish the gender biases that exist in every historical and cultural context. Implicit in this latter entreaty is Paul’s openness to recognize the contributions and possibilities for both women and men to proclaim the gospel message and to minister to God’s people.

The sacred texts, particularly the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and the writings of Paul, abound with stories of women engaged in such ministry. Other writings from the first century, as well as historical documents through the ages, substantiate the significant engagement of women as faith-filled followers of Jesus, the Christ, proclaiming the gospel message.

This book attempts to respond to issues of ministry being discussed within the Christian community, particularly as they apply to women. Dialogue, study, and prayer gave birth to this book, for it is through listening to one another, careful reflection on the texts of Sacred Scripture, and the prayerful creation of new and imaginative paradigms that one can best engender hope: hope that leads one to embrace the diversity of gifts and talents within Christian communities of faith; hope that recognizes the endless possibilities and variations within the people of God; hope inspired by the sacred texts of the Christian tradition that call believers, male and female, to be faith-filled followers of Jesus Christ; and hope in God, who graces with the gift of the Holy Spirit and empowers all communities of faith around the world.

I invite you, whatever your religious background or belief, to encounter here the witness of women of faith throughout the ages, and to encounter Paul, the passionate disciple of Jesus Christ who urged the early Christian communities to focus on oneness in Christ Jesus rather than on that which separates and divides. Paul wrote, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27–28).¹

1. All quotes from Scripture are from the *New American Bible*, 1990, unless otherwise indicated.

introduction



Some of my earliest memories of family gatherings are of the children playing and the adults sitting around the kitchen table talking. As children inevitably do, I would sit on the fringes of the adult conversation, listening. In my working-class family, the adult conversation at some point would focus on religion, and when that happened, the intensity and passion of the conversation would grow dramatically. I listened and marveled at how conversant especially my Protestant relatives were with the Bible. This sparked a desire in me to learn, to understand, and to become knowledgeable about the Bible. I wanted to be able to join in the conversation with the grown-ups and to use the sacred Scripture to assert and to confirm my position about the things that mattered to me.

With this desire to know more of Scripture, I attended my parish Catholic school as well as Vacation Bible School in the summers at both the Methodist Church and the Church of Christ. It was during Bible school that I first learned about a fiery, passionate, zealous disciple of Jesus named Paul, a man who travelled extensively, enduring misunderstanding, rejection, physical suffering, imprisonment, and numerous other hardships in his passionate fervor to preach the good news of Jesus Christ.

My first perceptions of Paul were favorable. I found him a compelling and amazing figure, someone whom I wished to emulate in my own Christian discipleship. Yet I also heard whisperings of dissent about Paul and even explicit dislike from adults who said that Paul was “too bold” and “too outspoken.” However, I had heard similar criticisms about my adult role models. My dad was a fiery and passionate semi-truck driver, my mother a fiercely courageous and direct “systems and operations director” of our home. In my family experience, to be bold and outspoken were qualities to embrace and emulate, not character flaws to avoid.

I emulated others as well. Among my favorites were those I read about in the many biographies and autobiographies I always looked for in the bookmobile. I read story upon story of people who struggled against all odds and who overcame adversity. I clearly remember identifying with these amazing women and men whose lives seemed thwarted by overwhelming obstacles. Yet an undefined, mysterious inner energy graced them with the ability to demonstrate faith, courage, determination, and hope in their lives. These were great women and men, a veritable “litany of saints”: Harriett Tubman, Wilma Rudolph, Jackie Robinson, Rosa Parks, Helen Keller, Indira Gandhi, Jessie Owens, Margaret Thatcher, Jim Thorpe, and Mildred (Babe) Didrikson Zaharias, to name but a few.

As I entered adolescence, however, my feelings regarding the Apostle Paul had soured. He no longer seemed the sage and brave hero I had once thought, but in many respects a typical chauvinist. During my sophomore year in high school, I heard a sermon on Ephesians 5:22, “Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord.” Like most women in the 1970s, I took great umbrage with this. It wasn’t until I audited an undergraduate course that I learned that biblical scholars consider Ephesians a deutropauline text—not actually written by Paul himself but attributed to him as one of the great teachers in order to indicate the importance of the writing, a common practice in the first century of the Common Era. This left me with much to ponder.

During my graduate studies, in a course on the Pauline writings, we studied the entire passage of Ephesians 5:21–33 and my troubled thoughts abated as we noted the reading, “Be subordinate *to one another* out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21, emphasis added). I felt foolish for my earlier anger with Paul, and especially for not having studied the text in greater depth. I dedicated myself to studying the sacred texts and determined that I would never again allow their depth and beauty to elude me through a lack of curiosity and scholarship.

As I worked on my master’s degree, I learned that the scriptural image of women in the community of faith is situated historically and culturally, and even those texts of Scripture containing stories of women were written from a predominately male perspective. The image of women and the roles of women correspond to the

patriarchal culture's understanding at the time in which these sacred texts were written.¹

This primarily male perspective imbues not only the written words, stories, and histories in the Christian tradition, but also visual representations of biblical events. Paintings, sculptures, mosaics, and stained glass windows have had a greater impact than the written word in cultures where literacy was uncommon. Even in the present historical and cultural context of developed countries, in which literacy is no longer an issue, artistic depictions of religious events, stories, and persons greatly affect one's interpretation of the sacred and response to the spiritual.

In the late summer of 1980 I visited the Louvre in Paris. I vividly remember my overwhelming emotion as I saw for the first time a picture of the Madonna nursing the infant Jesus. This sixteenth-century painting shows Mary looking upon Jesus with great maternal love. This rendering of the Blessed Mother as such a feminine figure filled me with awe and wonder. Her breasts were revealed, not erotically, but rather in a nurturing and beautiful manner. I was sad and angry that the only pictures and statues of the Blessed Mother I had ever seen showed her holding the child Jesus precariously, unnaturally. In those images she had appeared flat chested and could even have been mistaken for a man if not for her veil and the lack of a beard.

During a later visit to France, I was blessed with the opportunity to visit the stunning Notre Dame de Chartres, a cathedral that serves not only as a place of worship, but also as an expression of the spirituality of the artists who so magnificently crafted the religious art that is part of the cathedral's very structure. The overwhelming beauty of the stained glass windows, sculptures, and the ancient labyrinth formed out of stones in the main body of the church speak of the human longing for the sacred. Behind the choir stalls, sculpted in stone in the thirteenth century, are more than thirty panels representing various events in the life of Christ. The expressions on the faces of the characters grace them with such fluidity and motion that they seem alive. The panel of the scene of the visitation moved me to tears as I saw for the first time an artistic representation of a visibly pregnant Mary visiting a pregnant Elizabeth.

1. Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 182.

During a pilgrimage to Switzerland, I went to pray at Einsiedeln Abbey Church, a Benedictine abbey more than one thousand years old. The impetus and inspiration for my pilgrimage to this holy place was Maria Anna Brunner, the foundress of my religious community, the Sisters of the Precious Blood. As I sat in the abbey church praying at the Sunday liturgy, it occurred to me that Mother Brunner, who was illiterate, came here to pray and must have found inspiration in the statue of the “Black Madonna of Einsiedeln”² and in the church’s beautiful, lavishly painted Baroque-style ceiling. The ceiling dates from the seventeenth century and depicts important events in salvation history. These images are vibrantly colored and the characters’ expressions cheerful. Some, especially the small cherubs, are even whimsical. As I pondered these picture narratives, wondering what Mother Brunner saw in this sacred art, I saw them: the women, women present even in the painted scene of the Last Supper in the dome of Einsiedeln Abbey church.

A common thread interweaves all three of these experiences with the artistic texts of the Christian faith tradition through the various historical and cultural contexts in which they were created. The sculptures I saw were fashioned in the fifteenth century and the paintings were created in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this sacred art, I witnessed women performing significant ministries during key moments of Judeo-Christian history. These images cannot be dismissed lightly as feminist hermeneutic. In this art the women are present and visible; they are part of the image text embedded in Christian history.

The inspiration for this book is two-fold then: to identify the significant ministerial role played by women in the church throughout its history, and to acknowledge the great apostle Paul for his recognition of, respect for, and inclusion of women as ministers and “co-workers” in the emerging Christian communities.

Through careful reflection on the texts of Sacred Scripture, through empathic listening, and through the creation of new and imaginative paradigms one can best engender hope. It is this hope that leads one to embrace the diversity of gifts and talents within Christian communities of faith and, like Paul, to recognize women and men as “co-workers” in announcing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. The “Black Madonna of Einsiedeln” is a Late Gothic wooden statue from the mid-fifteenth century.

The Ministry of Women in the New Testament

All four Gospel accounts provide clear evidence of women disciples following and ministering to Jesus. While nowhere do the Gospel writers apply the term *mathētēs* (disciple) to any of these women of faith, arguments can be made for doing so. First, the Gospel stories recount the engagement of these women in ministries typical of “disciples” such as proclaiming the gospel, attending to the physical needs of Jesus, and going to the tomb intending to anoint the body of Jesus for burial. Secondly, biblical scholars posit that the authors of the Gospels avoided using the term *mathētēs* for these faith-filled women lest they offend the male-dominated leadership of the early Church. Although a number of the women in the stories of the Gospels are unnamed,¹ their contribution to the ministry of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ continues to be remembered and to inspire Christians today.

WOMEN AS MINISTERS IN THE GOSPELS

In Matthew 26:6–13 and Mark 14:3–9 the Gospel writers report the courageous and inspiring example of the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus, an action not universally approved by others with him. This woman ministers to Jesus in a way that none of the men in the story, including the host, offers to do. The beauty and significance lie in the fact that this woman responds not only to the need of the present moment, but her action foreshadows Jesus’ bodily need for anointing before his burial. The unknown woman sees and responds

1. Examples include: Matthew 9:20–22; 15:22–28; 26:6–13; 27:56; Mark 5:25–34; 7:25–30; 14:3–9; Luke 7:12, 37–50; 8:43–48; 11:27; 13:11–12; John 4:7–42; 8:3–11; 19:25.

to a need that went unnoticed by Jesus' male disciples.² Jesus asks the men in the story why they criticize the woman and "make trouble" for her, or "trouble"³ her.

Jesus emphasizes the profound significance of this woman's service to him: "Amen, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be spoken of, in memory of her" (Matthew 26:13); "Amen, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (Mark 14:9). The "memory" of this woman, her memorial, continues to be proclaimed as part of the gospel, testifying to her good deed and her greatness in the eyes of Jesus.⁴

In the Fourth Gospel, the Samaritan woman reflects the pattern of discipleship established in John 1:29–51 as she encounters Jesus, has a life-changing conversation with him, grows in her belief, and goes out to call others.⁵ Jesus and the Samaritan woman enter into a lengthy and complex theological discussion, including the prophetic role of calling the people from idolatry to the worship of God "in Spirit and truth" (John 4:23). The Samaritan woman's response is a template for the apostolic formula of leaving all to follow Jesus. "The woman left her water jar and went into the town and said to the people . . ." (John 4:28). Her action parallels the stories of the male disciples in the Synoptic Gospels. Just as the men leave their boats, fishing nets, and tax stalls to follow Jesus, the Samaritan woman abandons her daily work to follow Jesus and to evangelize her town.⁶ The theological discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is thoughtful and reflective, and a mutual self-revelation between Jesus and the woman unfolds.⁷

2. Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 362.

3. NRSV.

4. John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 368.

5. This pattern is discussed in Raymond F. Collins, *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Press, and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 48–55.

6. Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 192.

7. *Ibid.*, 191.

Just before the woman returns to her town and embarks upon the missionary proclamation of the Good News, the disciples arrive to find Jesus talking with the woman. The text tells us that the disciples view the scene with amazement (v. 27), and one could argue that they even disapprove of Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman. Using a feminist hermeneutic in approaching this text of Scripture, Sandra Schneiders asserts:

This little interlude of the return of the disciples undoubtedly tells us more about the Johannine community than about the earthly Jesus. The theological and missionary role of the woman is profoundly unsettling to the male disciples, who see themselves as the privileged associates of Jesus, who, nevertheless, seems to have gotten along quite well without them. He does not need the food they have brought him (vv. 31–34), because his dialogue with the woman has satisfied both his hunger to do the will of the one who sent him and the thirst that symbolically mediated their encounter. And the Samaritan mission, plainly in the hands of the woman, is one in which Jesus says they will participate as “reapers.” But they do not initiate it and it is not under their control (vv. 35–38). It seems not unlikely that whoever wrote the fourth gospel had some experience of women Christians as theologians and as apostles, was aware of the tension this aroused in the community, and wanted to present Jesus as legitimating female participation in male-appropriated roles.⁸

This woman went and proclaimed the Good News of Jesus Christ to her people and “many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman who testified” (v. 39). In all four Gospels, the Samaritan woman is the only person, male or female, who encounters Jesus and whose subsequent witness and proclamation of the word (Jesus in John's Gospel *is* the word) brings many people to “come and see” the Lord, with the result that many believed in the Lord because of her testimony.⁹

8. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 192.

9. *Ibid.*, 193.

In addition to this unnamed women in the New Testament there are many women disciples who follow Jesus and minister to him who are identified by name. Some of them are:

Mary the mother of Jesus	Matthew 1:16, 18, 20; 2:11; 13:55; Mark 6:3; Luke 1:27, 30, 34, 38–39, 41, 46, 56; 2:5, 16, 19, 34; John 2:1, 3, 5, 12; 19:25
Mary Magdalene	Matthew 27:56, 61; 28:1; Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1, 9; Luke 8:2; 24:10; John 19:25, 20:1, 11, 16, 18
Martha	Matthew 27:56, 61; 28:1; Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1, 9; Luke 8:2; 24:10; John 19:25, 20:1, 11, 16, 18
Mary of Bethany	Luke 10:39, 42; John 11:1–2, 19–20, 28, 31–32, 45; 12:3
Mary the wife of Clopas	John 19:25
Joanna	Luke 8:3; 24:10
Mary the mother of James and Joseph	Matthew 27:56
Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joses	Mark 15:40
Joanna and Suzanna	Luke 8:3
Mary the mother of Joses	Mark 15:47
Mary the mother of James	Mark 16:1
Salome	Mark 15:40; 16:1

MARY MAGDALENE: APOSTLE TO THE APOSTLES

The most significant woman in the New Testament, after Mary the mother of Jesus, is Mary Magdalene. The New Testament tradition, recorded in all four Gospels, presents Mary Magdalene as among the first women commissioned to proclaim the good news of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the early centuries, in patristic writings and iconographic representations, Mary Magdalene is depicted as the *apostolorum apostola*, apostle to the apostles.

It is significant to note that it was the women who stayed by the cross, who anointed and prepared Jesus' body for burial, who kept vigil and mourned at the tomb, and who encountered the angel. The women also were the first to encounter and recognize the risen Christ. The absence of the male disciples in these crucial events diminishes the legacy that was extended to Peter (Matthew 16:18–19). While Jesus later forgave the male disciples for their fear, betrayal, and absence, the women were the first to be given the commission by Jesus to “go and tell” the good news of the Resurrection. Jesus affirmed the women for their faithfulness and it is through their telling of their experience at the tomb with “fear and great joy” that the essence of the Christian message—Jesus' Resurrection—was first proclaimed.¹⁰

In Matthew 28, an “angel of the Lord” commissions Mary Magdalene and the other women to preach the good news of Jesus' Resurrection:

He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.” Behold, I have told you. (Matthew 28:6–7)

In Matthew 28:10, Jesus himself commissions these women to this task.

Mark's Gospel account also depicts Mary Magdalene and the other women's encounter with a divine messenger, described as “a

10. Mark Allan Powell, “Matthew,” in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), 899.

young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe” (Mark 16:5), who says to them, “Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him. But go and tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.’” (Mark 16:6–7)

The Gospel according to Luke describes the news of the Resurrection of Jesus being conveyed by “two men in dazzling garments” (Luke 24:4) who appear to the women, among whom Mary Magdalene is named first. These divine messengers ask Mary Magdalene and the other women (Luke 24:10),

“Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but he has been raised. Remember what he said to you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day.” And they remembered his words. Then they returned from the tomb and announced all these things to the eleven and to all the others. (Luke 24:5–9)

However, in Luke’s version the women are not believed (Luke 24:11).

In the Gospel of John, the divine messenger is Jesus himself. Jesus chooses Mary Magdalene to be the messenger of his Resurrection and commissions her to go and tell the other disciples. The interaction between Jesus and Mary Magdalene in this Resurrection appearance is both intimate and tender. A grieving and weeping Mary recognizes Jesus when he speaks her name.

“Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rab-bouni,” which means Teacher. Jesus said to her, “Stop holding on to me. . . . But go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary of Magdala went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and what he told her. (John 20:16–18)

Initially, Mary Magdalene did not comprehend the message of the angel. However, after she recognized the resurrected Christ, she accepted her role as messenger and announced the words of Jesus

to the other disciples.¹¹ Mary had an Easter experience. She moved from weak or partial faith into perfect faith and, in doing so, she did what Jesus himself commissioned her to do. She went and announced the Resurrection of Jesus. Jesus' words of commissioning to Mary Magdalene are also deeply relational, reminiscent of the words that Ruth spoke to Naomi: "Wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

Historical Misunderstanding

It is tragically ironic that even though, according to the Fourth Gospel, Mary Magdalene was the first person to encounter the resurrected Jesus and was told directly by him to preach this good news to the other disciples, today some Christian denominations would prohibit her from preaching, the very act that Jesus himself commissioned her to do.

All this raises the issue of mistaken assumptions about Mary Magdalene's character that are not borne out by Scripture. One traditional misinterpretation identifies Mary Magdalene, *apostolorum apostola*, the apostle¹² to the apostles, as a repentant prostitute. Yet nowhere in the Gospels or the entirety of the New Testament is there any reference to Mary Magdalene as a prostitute. This error has its foundation not in Scripture but in a homily given by Pope Gregory the Great on September 21, 591, in the basilica of San Clemente in Rome. Addressing the pericope in the Gospel of Luke (7:36–50) in his thirty-third homily, Pope Gregory declared, "We believe that this woman [Mary Magdalene] whom Luke calls a female sinner, whom John calls Mary, is the same Mary from whom Mark says seven demons were cast out."¹³ Gregory merged a correlation among three distinct women: the unnamed woman who was a sinner (Luke 7:36–50); Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 11:1–45; 12:1–8); and Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus healed and from whom he made seven demons depart

11. Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 527.

12. The word *apostle* literally means "one who is sent."

13. Gregory the Great, *Homilia 33 in Homiliarum in evangelia*, Lib. II, PL 76, 1239.

(Luke 8:2).¹⁴ “Although Mary had ‘seven demons driven from her,’ the text gives us no reason to connect her to ‘the sinful woman’ of the previous story, although the harmonizing tendency of church tradition has done so.”¹⁵

As a result, Mary Magdalene continues to be known by many as the repentant prostitute saint. Gregory’s position as pope has certainly substantiated and extended the acceptance of this distortion. The historical perspective of the ensuing fifteen centuries and advances in Scripture scholarship have provided a more accurate exegesis, however, and also an understanding of the errant exegesis of Pope Gregory. Although “penitent” was officially removed from Mary Magdalene’s title by the Roman Catholic Church in 1969, popular culture and media continue to portray her as a penitent reformed prostitute.

It is important to recognize and to understand Jesus’ view of women and of women as ministers as recorded in all four Gospels. Throughout the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ teaching, interactions, and relationships there is not a single example of Jesus’ behavior condoning the cultural and religious discrimination against women that was customary in his historical context.

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS OF PAUL’S VIEW OF WOMEN AS MINISTERS

The Acts of the Apostles gives us examples of Paul interacting with women and empowering them to function in roles of ministerial leadership in the early Christian communities. Lydia of Thyatira, mentioned in Acts 16:11–15, appears to have been prominent in Philippi’s “place of prayer” (Acts 16:13). In Jewish practice a synagogue cannot form without a quorum of ten adult males. Since this gathering is not termed a synagogue, it probably was a more loosely organized gathering for prayer, without the requisite ten-man quorum. If the group consisted solely of women, Lydia may well have been their leader.

14. Gregory finds this last detail in Mark 16:9, which was probably not part of the original text. It is, however, found in Luke 8:2.

15. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 131.

In the Christian communities of the first century, a number of women were in positions of ministerial leadership. The undisputed letters of Paul provide unmistakable examples of women functioning as ministers within the early Church, particularly within the communities founded by Paul.

Priscilla (cf. Acts 18:2, 18, and 26), also called Prisca (cf. Romans 16:3, 1 Corinthians 16:19, and 2 Timothy 4:19), along with her husband Aquila, was the co-head of a house church. Both Prisca and Aquila accompanied Paul on one of his missionary journeys (Acts 18:18).

In the Letter to the Philippians, Paul writes about two women, Euodia and Syntyche, who “have struggled at my side in promoting the gospel” (Philippians 4:3). Paul calls these women his “co-workers,” stating that their names “are in the book of life” (Philippians 4:3).

Romans 16 is replete with references to women ministers in the early Christian community. Paul acclaims a woman named Phoebe, who is a deacon: “I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is (also) a minister¹⁶ of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well” (Romans 16:1–2). Following the commendation of Phoebe, Paul sends greetings to Prisca and Aquila, emphasizing the importance of their ministry and leadership: “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I am grateful but also all the churches of the Gentiles; greet also the church at their house” (Romans 16:3–5). The next woman named by Paul is Mary, of whom he writes: “Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you” (Romans 16:6). In the next verse Paul names another woman, Junia, as “prominent among the apostles”: “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives and my fellow prisoners; they are prominent among the apostles and they were in Christ before me” (Romans 16:7). Later Paul identifies three other women and recognizes their ministry: “Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord” (Romans 16:12). The next woman remains

16. Although the NAB translates the Greek *diakonos* as “minister,” a more accurate translation of the Greek is “deacon.” The *New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament* and the NRSV both translate the Greek word *diakonos* as deacon.

unnamed; however, her status is highly significant to Paul as revealed by his words: “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine” (Romans 16:13). Paul concludes this “who’s who” of ministerial leadership in the early Christian community, naming Julia and the sister of Nereus, “Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the holy ones who are with them” (Romans 16:15).

The commendations, greetings, and words used in Paul’s writings attest to the ministerial leadership of women in the early Christian churches. Paul, in his typical straightforward style, wrote courageously, audaciously revealing his feelings about women whom he regarded as apostles, co-workers, deacons, fellow prisoners, sisters, those working hard in the Lord, and holy ones. Paul listened to and responded to the concerns of women, especially as those concerns addressed the dangerous divisions that threatened the nascent Christian community at Corinth. The writings of Paul move one to ponder what might have become of the early Christian Church had Paul chosen to ignore the concerns, as well as the gifts and talents, of the women who ministered in positions of leadership in these early communities of faith. These writings are explored in detail in subsequent chapters of this book.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. List the various ways that the women disciples ministered to Jesus and participated in his ministry.
2. What did you learn from the stories of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, the Samaritan woman, and others in the Gospels?
3. What are the leadership roles that Paul attributes to women in his writings to the early Christian communities? What is the significance of women fulfilling these roles in the early Church?