

WOMEN IN APPOINTED AND/OR ASSUMED ROLES

Women functioned in a variety of roles in the early church, including deacon, patron, and teacher. We will discuss different views as part of the exegetical process.

1. Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2)¹

Rom 16:1 mentions a Christian lady named Phoebe who was a "deacon" who lived in the port town of Cenchrea near Corinth. The KJV translates "a servant of the church," as does NIV. However, RSV renders "a deaconess of the church," and NEB reads, "who holds office in the congregation." Fiorenza² even contends that Phoebe was "an official teacher and missionary in the church of Cenchrea." A question thus arises whether Paul refers to her as a designated "servant" or as an official "deaconess."

Now it is not uncommon for those who do not like to view Phoebe as a "church official" to argue that she could not have been a "deaconess" because the Greek language in NT times had only the masculine form [*diakonos*] of the word, but not the feminine form.³ However, this argument illustrates a vital misunderstanding of the Greek language, for the masculine form of the noun refers both to males and

¹This section summarizes the essay of James Walters, "'Phoebe' and Junia(s)—Rom 16:1-2, 7," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, 167-90.

²Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983): 171.

³See F. Lagard Smith, *Men of Strength for Women of God* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1989): 216.

females during the NT period.⁴ The feminine form [*diakonissa*], referring to an official church position, dates no earlier than the Council of Nicea in AD 325.

It is important to understand precisely the meaning of the terms used here. One must distinguish clearly between "female deacon," referring to the NT concept, and "deaconess," referring to the later official position. The earliest clear reference to deaconesses as church officials is in the third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum* 16,⁵ suggesting an Eastern innovation.⁶ It is more than interesting that no sources reflect an order of deaconesses even in the West at this later period. Some see in Rom 16:1, however, a "definite office"⁷ like that which came later, but this is to read later practice back into the first century. Although in later practice the role of "deacon" became an official position in the church, there is no indication in the NT itself that the term "deacon" ever meant anything more than a "designated servant"—whether male or female.⁸

⁴E.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 3.53.3. See further, W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (2nd ed. rev. Gingrich and F.W. Danker; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979): 184.

⁵See A. Vööbus, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac* (Louvain: CSCO, 1979): iv, 156-158.

⁶See Jean LaPorte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity* (Studies in Women and Religion, 7; New York: E. Mellen, 1982): 114.

⁷See among others, C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979): 718. There is no reason to read "administration" into the term as does E. Best, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1967): 174.

⁸See 1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6, 6:4; 11:15, 23; Gal 2:17; Eph 3:7, 6:21; Col 1:7, 23, 25; 1 Thess 3:2. In Rom 13:4, it is used of civil magistrates. There is no evidence that "deacon" in the earliest churches was an office at all. See J. Damérou, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (tr. G. Simon, London: Faith, 1961): 7f; John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990): 235-244; and Aimé Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* (tr. K. Whitehead; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986): 18-20.

It appears, though, that Paul calls Phoebe a "deacon" not because she merely "serves" Christ, but because she performs a specific type of service. If he only wanted to call attention to her service, Paul could have used the verb "to serve," as in Rom 15:25 and 16:6, or the phrase "the service of the saints," as in 1 Cor 16:15. However, Paul wrote "being a deacon of the church in Cenchrea," which suggests a role of some responsibility.⁹ If "deacons" in Phil 1:1 refers to a special designation within the Philippian congregation, one must understand Phoebe to be a "deacon of the church in Cenchrea" accordingly.

Some advocate that Phoebe indeed filled a special role as deacon, but that she would have served only women.¹⁰ As Haldane put it, "As deacons were appointed to attend to the poor, so deaconesses were specially set apart in the churches in order to attend to the wants of their own sex."¹¹ Now the third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum* mentions official deaconesses who assisted in the baptisms of women and cared for sick women, but to understand Phoebe as a "deaconess" in terms of this later practice would be anachronistic. To suggest that Phoebe served only, or even primarily, women is to make a distinction that the biblical text does not make.

There are helpful hints in the text regarding her service as "deacon."¹² The Greek words "to serve" [*diakoneo*] and "service" [*diakonia*] often refer in the NT to serving meals or tending the poor. For instance, in Matt 8:15 after Jesus

⁹ See among others, James Dunn, *Romans* (Dallas: Word, 1988): 11. 887.

¹⁰ W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895): 417.

¹¹ R. Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (London: Banner of Truth, 1963 reprint): 633.

¹² See Lawrence Hennessey, "Diakonia and Diakonoi in the Pre-Nicene Church," *Diakonia: Studies in Honor of Robert T. Meyer* (ed. T. Halton and J. P. Williman; Washington, D. C.; Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1986): 60-86, for a survey of usage from the classical period through the fourth-century church.

had reduced the fever of Peter's mother-in-law, "she served them." In Lk 8:3. Joanna and Susanna "served" Jesus, i.e., "supported" him financially. Some Grecian widows complained in Acts 6:1 of being neglected in the daily "service" of food. 2 Cor 8:4 describes the contribution of the saints to the poor in Jerusalem as "service." Rom 15:25 reads, "I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there." See also Lk 10:40; 12:37; Jn 12:2; and 2 Cor 9:1. With the Greco-Roman world of that period filled with so many needy people, there would have been great demand for people to devote time to helping the poor and sick.

Rom 16:2 mentions Phoebe as a "helper," (RSV), "good friend," (NEB), and "of good help to" (NIV). The Greek term used here [*prostatis*] is normally translated "patron." Many inscriptions from the era of the NT indicate that patronage was performed by women as well as men. One very important inscription dating from the mid-first century AD honors Junia Theodora, a neighbor of Phoebe in nearby Corinth.¹³ Called a "patron of the greatest loyalty to the Lycian federation," she is commended specifically for extending hospitality in her own home to Lycian travelers as well as Lycians living in Corinth, supplying everything they needed. That this patronage was much more than mere domestic service is clear from a statement in the inscription that she successfully arranged for Lycian authorities to meet with Corinthian leaders and dealt with ambassadors from Lycia at both the city and national level.

While the range of meanings in the term *prostatis* includes "ruling over" or "governing," the inscription mentions nothing about Junia Theodora holding civic office. Nothing is said about her work being under the direction or oversight of a man. Her considerable influence as "patron" apparently was due more to her wealth and social status. Marshall, professor at Aberdeen, has observed that

¹³ D. Pallas, "Inscriptions lyciennes trouvées à Solômos près de Corinth," *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 83 (1959): 496-508.

In Roman eyes, the influence and prestige of these wealthy women was not really based upon, or expressed by, the degree of actual political power vested in whatever civic offices they might hold. . . . The real leverage was of the kind exerted by Junia Theodora in Corinth.¹⁴

MacMullen's comment on the inscription is perceptive:

. . . what she was able to bring to bear, from (of course) a naturally favored social position, can have been nothing but a network of connections woven and made to work for the objects of her interest, in the way politicians of both sexes and every period in history have done since time began.¹⁵

Saller¹⁶ has argued convincingly that patronage involves 1) an exchange of goods and services, 2) a personal relationship of some duration, and 3) an unequal status that makes patronage different from friendship between equals. The centurion in Lk 7:2-5 who built a Jewish synagogue is an example of such a "patron," although the term itself does not occur there.¹⁷

Although Rom 16:2 does not describe Phoebe's work as "patron" on behalf of Paul as fully as does the lengthy account in the inscription to Junia Theodora, there is no doubt that she acted as "patron" for Paul in accord with Saller's definition. There is nothing to support Fiorenza's¹⁸ notion that Phoebe served as governing officer or president of the congregation, nor that she served as an official of any kind.

¹⁴A. J. Marshall, "Roman Women and the Provinces," *Ancient Society* 6 (1975): 125.

¹⁵Ramsay MacMullen, *Changes in the Roman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990): 168.

¹⁶Richard Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1982): 1.

¹⁷See J. H. Elliot, "Patronage and Clientism in Early Christian Society," *Forum* 3 (1987): 40.

¹⁸Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 181.

A second-century reference to female "deacons" in Bithynia occurs in Pliny's letter to Trajan in AD 112.¹⁹ To learn about Christian activities, Pliny tortured and questioned "two female slaves who were styled deacons" [*quae ministras dicebantur*]. *Dicebantur* suggests that the term *ministrae* [servants] was used by these females to describe themselves. Since in the NT "deacon" does not serve to denote Christians in general, the term *ministrae* refers here to a function or role that was special among the Christians. Phoebe was a "deacon in the church at Cenchrea" in the sense of designated "servant," and as well she was a "patron" of Paul and many others. It is certain that, "Whatever the 'deacons' were at Philippi, that Phoebe was at Cenchrea."²⁰

2. Female Deacons (1 Tim 3:11)²¹

In 1 Tim 3:11, Paul says, "Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things." Where ASV and NRSV read "women," RSV and NAB read "the women," and KJV NEB and NIV read "their wives." The RevEB reads, "the women in this office." Variation in translation reflects not textual difficulty, but contextual confusion over precisely what women are in mind. That the text refers to all Christian women²² or to the wives of elders and deacons²³ is rarely held and improbable. However, is the focus on "wives of deacons" or "female deacons"?

¹⁹Pliny (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1915): ii. 405. A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966): 708, argues that the Latin *ministrae* translates the Greek *diakonos*, but cf. J. G. Davies, "Deacons, Deaconesses, and the Minor Orders of the Patristic Period," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 14 (1963): 2.

²⁰C. H. Dodd, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1932): 235.

²¹See Barry L. Blackburn, "The Identity of the 'Women' in 1 Tim 3:11," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, 303-311.

²²See Davies, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (1963): 1f. But why would all female Christians suddenly be addressed within a unit addressed to deacons?

²³Burton Coffman, *1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, & Philemon* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation, 1978): 182.

Two arguments favoring "wives of deacons" are negative questions. First, some argue that if female deacons were meant, would not a more specific term have been used rather than the general term "women" [*gunaikas*]? Second, it is argued, if "women" refers to female deacons, why does the discussion revert to male deacons in v. 12?

The first argument has no basis in that the masculine form of "servant" [*diakonos*] was used of both men and women in NT times (see Rom 16:1). Roloff²⁴ observes that if deacons' wives are meant, v. 11 would surely be expected after the reference to marriage in v. 12 rather than here. Further, he asks, why would reference be made to deacons' wives, but no references at all made to elders' wives? If reference is to "female deacons," "women" [*gunaikas*] would be used to denote females of the category "deacons" under discussion in vv. 8ff.²⁵ If reference had been to "wives of deacons," "their wives" [*tas gunaikas auton*] would be expected, but "their" in KJV NEB NIV is not in the Greek text. Further, "the women" in RSV NAB is incorrect. There is no Greek article "the" in the Greek text. Ancient Greek manuscripts do not read "their wives" or "the women," but "women," a term understood in Greek as "women" of the category under discussion in the context.²⁶

The resumption of male characteristics in v. 12 poses a special problem in the NIV. That version reads in v. 8, "Deacons are to be men . . ." v. 11, "their wives are to be women . . ." and v. 12, "a deacon must be the husband of one wife." Now this certainly sounds as though "deacon" is strictly a male role. However, we noted that v. 11 does not read, "their wives," but "women," and the NIV even has a footnote indicating that women could be meant. So v. 11 is really not the problem. "Are to be men" in v. 8 in the NIV is not in the Greek text either. The text only says, "Deacons

²⁴J. Roloff, *Der erste Brief an Timotheus* (Zürich. Benziger, 1988): 165.

²⁵See Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 83f.

²⁶Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984): 51, is incorrect in viewing v. 11 as an "afterthought."

(must be [v. 2]) . . ." This addition of "are to be men" has no foundation. The only real problem here is that v. 12 might seem to indicate that only males can be deacons.

Presumably Paul was writing within and to an Ephesian culture that was hierarchal. However, some women in the Ephesian church had overstepped traditional roles and had assumed more visible roles in church life (2:9-15). Others were serving in honorable ways (5:9-13). So while all of the eldership and much of the designated servanthip was male, some Ephesian women were involved significantly in servant roles. Vv. 1-7 certainly discuss elders in terms of maleness. In the same way, vv. 8-10 and 12 would also give the impression that deaconship involved only males, but v. 11 was inserted to include characteristics for the females also serving in that particular capacity. In v. 13, he specifies that all those who serve well "gain an excellent standing."

Five matters favor the reading "female deacons." 1) "Likewise" relates v. 11 to vv. 8-10. "Likewise" v. 8 in turn relates vv. 8ff to vv. 1-7. Each unit of text (elders, vv. 1-7; deacons, vv. 8-10; females, v. 11) is dependent upon the verb "it is necessary" [*dei*] in v. 2. So, three groups are in mind, all related to the same verb in v. 2. 2) Note the parallelism evident between the four items in v. 8 dealing with males and the four in v. 11 treating females. Characteristics for male deacons are, "worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain." Similarly female deacons are to be, "worthy of respect, not malicious talkers, temperate, and trustworthy." 3) When the noun "woman" occurs with no article (*the*) or pronoun, it relates female(s) under consideration to the context.²⁷ "Women" in v. 11 is used without an article or pronoun and should be taken to refer to females of the category of "deacons" being discussed in vv. 8-10. 4) In 5:9-13, older widows who met certain requirements were designated servants in the Ephesian church. 5) Phoebe was a "deacon" in the church in Cenchrea.

²⁷F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (tr. R. Funk; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961): 134

1 Tim 3:8-10, then, treats selected characteristics of male deacons and v. 11 treats similar characteristics of female deacons.²⁸ Actually, the women in 1 Tim 3:11 are inserted into the discussion as an extension of the point in vv. 8-10, a supplementary note necessitated by the fact that there were some women in Ephesus also in that category. In this respect, v. 11 is not unlike 1 Cor 14:34-35, where the tongues speakers and prophets were the focus, but certain women were also creating disruption in the Corinthian worship and were included as an extension of the point in the context that worship should be for edification and not disorderly. As in 1 Cor 14:36, verse 12, then, resumes the discussion with a new sentence treating matters of marriage and family life. "Husband of one wife" simply reflects that most of the deacons in Ephesus were males, but in view of v. 11 "deacons" cannot be taken solely with regard to males.

It should be observed that "deacons," whether male or female, were not "officials" in the earlier churches. Viewing deacons as junior officials in the church came along later when churches adopted a Roman organizational model.

Bishop
Elders
Deacons
Members

However, deacons in the first instance were merely "servants" charged with taking care of matters of service too important to be left to chance. Rather than viewing "deacons" in 3:8, 11, as officers, it is best to view these men and women simply as "designated servants."

²⁸With Carl Spain, *The Letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus* (Austin, Tx: R. B. Sweet, 1970): 66f; Michael Green, *Called to Serve* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964): 55; Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 50f; Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 83f; E. Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1961): 86; et al.

3. *Prisca (Priscilla): Helper, Bishop, or Teacher?*

A few years ago, I examined Prisca as an example of the early Christian view of women.²⁹ Although never referred to by herself in the NT, Prisca and her husband Aquila are occasionally mentioned as outstanding workers in the early church. He was a Jewish tentmaker from Pontus who had moved to Rome, but was expelled along with other Jews by the Emperor Claudius. Moving to Corinth, Aquila and his wife allowed Paul to stay with them and to work in their shop during his initial work there. They then went with him to Ephesus where they remained while he went on to Antioch (Acts 18). Later they moved back to Rome (Rom 16:3), then returned to Asia Minor (2 Tim 4:19). While not much is known for certain about this couple, they (especially Prisca) have attracted considerable attention in recent Christian thought.³⁰

Assessments of Prisca's role vary considerably. Traditionalists view her merely as a "helper" of Aquila, and presupposing women could not teach Scripture to men, her role was merely one of "encouragement."³¹ On the other hand, feminists also read into Prisca their views, e.g., "Priscilla was one of the most prominent women in the early church, perhaps functioning much like a bishop."³² These varying estimates require careful sifting of biblical data to ascertain precisely Prisca's contribution to our understanding of women in the early church.

²⁹Priscilla, diminutive form of the name Prisca, occurs in Acts, whereas Paul prefers Prisca (NIV mistranslates "Priscilla" in Paul).

³⁰Adolf von Harnack, "Probabilia über die Adresse und den Verfasser des Hebräerbriefs," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 1 (1900): 16-41, unconvincingly proposed Prisca and Aquila as the writers of Hebrews.

³¹House, *The Role of Women in Ministry Today*, 139.

³²Denise Lardner Carmody, *Biblical Woman: Contemporary Reflections on Scriptural Texts* (New York: Crossroad, 1992): 121.

In recent scholarship, some stress that she was the prominent one, not Aquila.³³ Basing the argument on the fact that her name is mentioned before Aquila's in Acts 18:18, 26, Rom 16:3, and 2 Tim 4:19, it is common to turn to Acts 18:26, where it is argued that her teaching of an outstanding scholar such as Apollos warrants viewing her as an outstanding teacher of at least equal strength. Typical of this thinking is Fiorenza, for whom this one text provides a full-blown character sketch of Prisca's role in the early church. Fiorenza³⁴ holds that Prisca's name occurs before Aquila's in four out of six instances because her own outstanding missionary work is in focus rather than her role as a wife. Fiorenza³⁵ concludes that Prisca's teaching of Apollos reflects a powerful intellect eloquently convincing an extremely intelligent male of her point of view on a theological matter, which then becomes paradigmatic for Christian women.

However, it is fair to ask whether this characterization of Priscilla accurately reflects biblical data. Two notions underly the idea that she was the dominant of the two: 1) that her name precedes his in four NT texts, and 2) that she was of higher social standing. On the latter, speculation abounds. Ramsay suggests,³⁶ "Probably Prisca was of higher rank than her husband, for her name is that of a good old Roman family. . . . Aquila was a Jew, while Priscilla was not. . . . Aquila was probably a freedman." Now Prisca was a fairly common Latin name among Roman women, and that could indicate that she was a Roman.

³³Note "Prisca the missionary, with her husband" in Adolf von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (trans. J. Moffatt; 2nd ed.; London: Williams & Norgate, 1908): 179.

³⁴Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Women in the Pre-Pauline and Pauline Churches," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 33 (1978): 156.

³⁵Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983): 179.

³⁶William Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (3rd ed.; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1897): 268-269.

However, Aquila's name was also a Latin name, although he was a Jew (Acts 18:2). That both had Latin names might merely reflect the custom of Greeks and Jews taking Latin names while living in Rome. At any rate, there is nothing to confirm the view that she belonged to an old, noble Roman family and left to marry a lowly Jewish tentmaker.³⁷ Accordingly, we know nothing of her race or social standing, or whether either were former slaves.

The primacy of Prisca actually hinges on the sequence in which their names occur in the NT. In Acts, the major characters are Peter and Paul, with principal secondary characters being the twelve, Stephen, Philip, Barnabas, James, and Apollos.³⁸ It could be that Prisca and Aquila serve as minor characters to establish a connection with the broader historical context.³⁹ It is more likely that they serve to introduce Apollos, who, for the first time since chap 15, plays a role in the narrative not involving Paul.

In Acts 18:2, the first mention of this couple in the NT, there is a translation problem. The common reading (KJV, NIV, NASB, RSV, NRSV), "Aquila. . . who had recently come from Italy *with* his wife Priscilla," is not as good as, "Aquila. . . who had recently come from Italy *and* his wife Priscilla" (JerB, NEB). Her name occurs second in 1 Cor 16:19 as well.⁴⁰ Accordingly, it is only a guess that the

³⁷E.g., Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902): 418-420, who unsuccessfully attempt to link Prisca with the Acilian family in Rome and conclude that since "for a noble Roman lady to travel about with a Jewish husband engaged in mercantile or even artisan work is hardly probable," Prisca and Aquila were both likely "freed members of a great household."

³⁸See Adolf von Harnack, *The Acts of Apostles* (trans. J. Wilkinson; London: Williams & Norgate, 1909): 119ff. On Apollos, see 1 Cor 1:12; 3:4-6, 22; 4:6; 16:12.

³⁹Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992): 325.

⁴⁰The later Byzantine manuscripts read Aquila first at Acts 18:26, but the older manuscripts read Priscilla first. Some Syriac and Coptic

order of their names signifies that Prisca was the dominant person of the two. Any notion constructed on the inference that she was the dominant personality is precarious indeed. The text mentions neither Aquila nor Prisca as the dominant person.

Acts 18:24-28 is the crucial text. Both those who view her as dominant and those who view her only as a "helper" to Aquila approach this text with presuppositions that enable them to arrive at their preferred conclusions. Witherington, professor at Ashland Theological Seminary in Ohio, says,⁴¹ "her name is mentioned first, so that if anyone is indicated by Luke as the primary instructor, it is Priscilla," and further, "Apollos is not just any convert to the faith, but a man 'well versed in Scripture', and this presupposes that Luke wants his audience to see that . . . he would accept it from both a woman and a man."⁴² However, this is to miss Luke's intention regarding Apollos and to read modern concern into the text. When the text says that Apollos was "a learned man" who "spoke with great fervor," that is not to stress that he was corrected by a female, but to emphasize that with this new information, he was able (v. 28) "vigorously" to refute "the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ." This text is not so much about Prisca *teaching* as about Apollos *learning*!

copies at 18:21-22 insert, "and he left Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus, and he travelled by sea."

⁴¹Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988): 154.

⁴²In a classic overstatement, Carmody, *Biblical Woman*, 122, says, "The authority Priscilla shows in dealing with Apollos suggests that she enjoyed high status in the Pauline community at Ephesus. Far from being a back-bencher, she took the lead and set a talented, most likely strong-willed man straight." Note also Simon Kistemaker, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990): 668, that Apollos demonstrated remarkable restraint in consenting to come to the home of a tentmaker "and to receive instruction from a humble craftsman but also from a woman."

Spencer, relying on the word-order theory, wants to make the teaching of Apollos by Prisca in *public*. She says the verb used here "connotes a public declaration and exposition."⁴³ However, one must remember that Prisca and Aquila "invited him *to their home* and explained to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26). Note, "they" invited and "they" explained in a private or semi-private context. On the other hand, to suggest that Luke wants to stress that she was not involved in any *public* teaching is to read modern concerns back into the text.⁴⁴ The point is that Apollos received instruction. He had been persuasive in teaching that Jesus was the Messiah, but he knew only the baptism of John. They were able to explain to him the significance of Christian baptism. With better insight, he was in position to become a powerful proclaimer to the Jews (v. 28). Nothing in Acts 18:24-28 suggests that Prisca took the lead or was the primary instructor.⁴⁵ The plural verb (*they* instructed) leaves no room for House's view⁴⁶ that Aquila taught Scripture and Prisca merely encouraged. There is no reason to suppose that Luke intended this account to mean that a woman can teach a man only with her husband or that it must be in private.⁴⁷ There is no basis for the view that a woman can instruct only other women.

⁴³Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 107, however, seems oblivious to the devastating critique of illegitimate root usage by James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), and responsible word-study advocated by John F. A. Sawyer, *Semantics in Biblical Research* (Studies in Biblical Theology, 24; Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1972).

⁴⁴It is curious that hierarchicalist Werner Neuer, *Man & Woman in Christian Perspective* (trans. G. Wenham; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991): 110, 132, does not treat Prisca, but only mentions her in passing as a special friend of Paul and that "with Aquila gave private instruction in the Bible" to Apollos.

⁴⁵Against Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 154.

⁴⁶House, *The Role of Women in Ministry Today*, 139.

⁴⁷Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971): 539, correctly notes that ". . . shows that they were so important to the history of the Christian mission that Luke could not overlook them."

Throughout, Prisca and Aquila are portrayed as equals. Fiorenza⁴⁸ notes correctly that this "partnership-mission" appears to "have been the rule in the Christian missionary movement." Paul mentions that the "church met at their house" in 1 Cor 16:19 and Rom 16:5. In the absence of special church buildings in the early church, such house churches were common and posed no threat to society. They actually gave a sense of legitimacy to religious group meetings.⁴⁹ Nothing is known about the role of women in early Christian house churches, however, and any suggestion of Prisca's role in this regard is speculative, either that she presided at the meetings in her home or that she merely served as hostess. We only know that she was involved equally with Aquila in instructing Apollos.

What we need to avoid are extremes that read cultural preferences into the text. We need to refocus the question about Prisca and ask what, if anything, is paradigmatic about her for today's church. There is nothing to indicate that Luke intended Prisca to serve as a model either of a mere assistant to her husband or of a dominant female teacher. Actually, Prisca occurs in the NT as a highly-respected worker in the early church and competent in instruction. While women in the Greco-Roman world generally did not address public assemblies,⁵⁰ Prisca's sharing in the teaching of Apollos with her husband at their home would have been acceptable in that society.

⁴⁸Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Missionaries, Apostles, Co-workers: Romans 16 and the Reconstruction of Women's Early Christian History," *Word and World* 6 (1986): 431, also cites Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 3.6.53.3, that married women, as sisters, "might be co-missionaries in dealing with housewives."

⁴⁹See David C. Verner, "The Household in the Hellenistic-Roman World," *The Household of God: The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983): 27-81; Abraham Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983): 95-96.

⁵⁰Sterling, "Women in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, 1.72.

4. Summary

Some women of special ability and prominence served financially and influentially as "patrons." In this service, they were not designated, but were more self-appointed, working in accord with their capabilities and ingenuity. On the other hand, specially-designated widows also served.⁵¹ Other women in the NT served as "female deacons." Deacons, whether male or female, were not officers, but "designated servants." Any authority or power attached to the diaconate comes from tradition, not Scripture. No distinction was made between the service of female and male deacons in earliest Christianity. Around the second century, "widows" apparently merged with the "female deacons." Later, when only ordained males conducted worship,⁵² "widows/female deacons" became "official deaconesses" and their role changed from that found in the earlier NT churches.⁵³ As far as teaching is concerned, it was acceptable for an informed woman to teach a man. While both Prisca and Aquila were involved in instructing Apollos and the teaching occurred in their home, nothing from this text mandates that a woman can teach only with her husband or that such teaching must be in private. While "teacher" is a designated role in the early church (1 Cor 12:27-31; Eph 4:11-13), Prisca seems to have assumed this role on this occasion without special appointment.

⁵¹See Jean Daniélou, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (tr. G. Simon; London: Faith, 1961): 16-20.

⁵²Yet there is no NT reference to a professional body of priests in the church. See J. Massyngberde Ford, "Biblical Material Relevant to the Ordination of Women," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 10 (1973): 685.

⁵³Guy N. Woods, "Adult Gospel Quarterly, Gospel Advocate Series (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, Summer 1970): 19, observed correctly of 1 Tim. 3:11, "There is no support here, nor elsewhere in the scriptures, for the denominational practice of having official deaconesses in the church." Yet qualified women perform certain tasks and of them Woods writes, "it is not out of order to refer to women in this category as deaconesses. This is a scriptural term and denotes a scriptural work." However, his view of official male deacons has no support in Scripture either, only in tradition!