

The Editor  
HBC magazine

Dear Editor,

Thanks for publishing Dan Hatfield's articles about accepting women in ministry.

Dan made the point that we are all one in Christ Jesus. This is a clear message from the Bible about our standing in Christ. But there is another message from the Bible which is often overlooked, especially by those who quote the two specific passages in which Paul says that women should not exercise authority or a teaching ministry in certain churches – he tells the Corinthians this, in relation to their own church, and he tells Timothy this, in relation to certain churches for which Timothy has a responsibility.

What is easily overlooked is that there is significant evidence which tells us that Paul worked alongside women as his fellow-workers in his apostolic ministry. We know this from the letter he wrote to the Roman Christians, but because the clues are hidden in the greetings towards the end of the letter, it is easy to miss them. The list of greetings in chapter 16 includes greetings for a number of women, all of whom were influential in the early church. I will just pick out one greeting, because it is important. In Romans 16:4 Paul writes:

*"Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was."*

This is the NRSV translation. If you look at the NIV translation you will see there that "Junia" appears as "Junias." The Good News Bible has "Junias" but has either "June" or "Julia" in the margin. In fact, if you look at a number of translations you will see that some have "Junia" and some have "Junias" – some others have a note in the margin about this.

So what, we might well ask? Well, the point is this. What the translators have to do is translate the name which appears here. Is it a man's name or a woman's name? Is it Junias or Junia? The best evidence that we have indicates that Paul here is talking about a Junia.

"Junia" is a woman's name: when the early scribes who were copying the Greek manuscripts began to write the accents that indicated how a word should be pronounced, they wrote the word in a feminine form. The woman's name "Junia" occurs more than 250 times in Latin and Greek inscriptions found in Rome alone, let alone the rest of the Roman world. John Chrysostom, the Greek-speaking preacher of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, wrote his commentary on Romans with no doubt in his mind that Junia was a woman – in fact, from the time of the early Church Fathers right up to the Middle Ages it was taken for granted that she was a woman!

"Junias" (the masculine form which some Bible translators have written) would be a man's name. It

has not so far been found anywhere in inscriptions from the ancient world.

So here is Paul writing about a woman and saying that she is "prominent" among the apostles. She and Andronicus (probably her husband, though we cannot be sure) actually have the rank of apostle in the church of Paul's day. There were the original twelve apostles, as we know, but there were apostles beyond that original number (James, for example, the brother of Jesus). Here is a woman, Junia, among that number.

Where does this leave us with the passages in which Paul forbids women to teach or to exercise authority? They clearly conflict with this "background" information. If Paul meant that in no circumstances should we allow women to lead, teach and minister, how could he describe Junia in this way as an apostle? Earlier in the same list of greetings (at verse 3) he calls Prisca, the wife of Aquila, his "fellow-worker" – precisely the same word that is used later at verse 9 of chapter 16 for Urbanus and at verse 21 for Timothy. It is Paul's regular work for fellow-preacher and teacher (as for Apollos in 1 Corinthians 3:9).

So what about those verses which say that women should not teach or exercise authority? Almost certainly when Paul was writing those instructions to Timothy and to the Corinthian church there were particular local factors in their situations which meant that he felt he must give those particular instructions. We do not know what they were. We could guess that there are some particular problems for the churches in Timothy's area which are related to the prominence of women in the various Eastern cults, some of which we know led to particular sexual excesses. But the truth is that we do not know.

One of the problems we have with the New Testament letters is that we are, as it were, listening to one half of the telephone conversation. It is difficult to interpret these passages and I do not pretend to know the complete answer. But it is dangerous to say that these instructions are absolute prohibitions: if they are then the rest of the evidence from the Bible makes no sense.

Where there are things that are difficult to interpret, we need to turn to the rest of the Bible and look to see how these things line up with other teaching. Here, the instructions have to be set alongside what Paul is saying elsewhere about women. He is saying these things about their being fellow-workers and apostles as taken for granted - this is especially powerful. I respect those who believe different things from me about the ministry of women, but I cannot agree that the evidence from the Bible, when it is set out in full, supports what they are saying.

Yours sincerely,

Geoffrey Williams