WOMEN’S AUTHORITY ROLES
IN PAUL’S CHURCHES:
COUNTERCULTURAL OR CONVENTIONAL?

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Gone are the days when scholars like Albert Schwegler in his 1846 History of Post-Apostolic Times would conclude that Paul’s entreaties to Euodia and Syntyche in Phil. 4:2 must be symbolic references to two ‘parties’ in Philippi because a literal interpretation, i.e. entreaties to two women, would give the passage a “strange character”.¹ Today, it is generally uncontested that certain women in Paul’s community exercised authority, and that this authority extended over men as well as women.

If we are to be specific in identifying such women, an examination of Paul’s letters brings six women leaders into view:²

¹ “So ist man von hier aus versucht, auch jene zwei rätselhaften Frauen-namen, statt für den Namen historischer Individuen, was der ganzen Stelle einen äußerst seltsamen Charakter geben würde, für typische Partheinamen zu halten”, Albert Schwegler, Nachapostolisches Zeitalter (2 Bände; Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck, 1846), 2. 133-135. I am indebted for this reference to J.B. Lightfoot, who does not quote its entirety, but whose translation, “strange meaning”, I have used here. See J.B. Lightfoot, St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1987), 170.

² Paul refers to thirteen women in all (Apphia [Phil 2]; Chloē [1 Cor 1:11]; Prisca [Rom 16:3-4; 1 Cor 16:19]; Euodia and Syntyche [Phil 4:2]; Phoebe [Rom 16:1]; Mary [Rom 16:6]; Tryphaena and Tryphosa [Rom 16:12]; Rufus’ mother [Rom 16:13]; an unnamed lady referred to as the sister of Nereus [Rom 16:15]; and Olympas [Rom 16:15]). The latter seven do not stand out as leaders. Mary is said to have worked hard among the churches (Rom 16:6); and the pair, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, are designated as “workers in the Lord” (Rom 16:12). Rufus’ mother, Julia, the sister of Nereus and Olympas are mentioned affectionately, but there is no evidence of their authority role or particular activity in the community.
Apphia (Phl 2):

It has been assumed that Apphia must be Philemon’s wife because her name follows his. This argument would be more compelling if Paul’s address named only these two. But in fact, it is more accurate to say that Apphia’s name occupies a median position in a list of three addressees. Furthermore, one would think that Paul might signal that Philemon and Apphia are a couple by linking them through complementary epithets as he does with Aquila and Prisca in Rom 16:3, “my fellow workers” (τούς συνεργούς μου). As it is, each of the three receive separate appellations: Philemon is the “fellow-worker”; Apphia is the “sister”; Archippus is the “fellow soldier”. But the person who is given the masculine counterpart of Apphia’s epithet is Timothy whom Paul calls “brother”. Actually, when one weighs the relative importance of the three epithets used for the addressees, it is Apphia’s that holds most prestige. And Paul only uses the epithet “sister” again with Phoebe from Cenchreae, a woman Paul describes as a deacon and a patroness/protectress (προστάτις) to many and also to him (Rom 16:1-2).

Finally, Paul’s address to these three continues on to include “the church that meets in your house”. Thus, the listing of Apphia and Archippus belongs to this recognition of the church organization in Philemon’s house. The deference to Apphia and Archippus then, would seem to function as a salutation to the main leaders of that otherwise faceless assembly.

Chloe (1 Cor 1:11):

Paul attributes the news about division in the Corinthian community from “Chloe’s people” (ὑπὸ τῶν Χλόης), John Hurd has argued that if the expression is translated “the family of Chloe” we

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3 E.g. H.C.G. Moule, Colossian and Philemon Studies (London: Pickering and Ingle, 1986), 304 n. 13; Eduard Lohse, Colossians and Philemon (trans. W.R. Poehlmann and R.J. Karris; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 190. For F.F. Bruce, “Apphia and Archippus ... were presumably members of Philemon’s household, probably his wife and his son” (The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984], 206). There is no rationale given for his conclusion.

4 This fact seems completely obvious to Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her (New York: Crossroads, 1987), 177.