

Did You Know?

#3

Did you know that at the dawn of Christianity, there were women who led some of the Pauline communities? Scripture gives us several names: Prisca (called Priscilla in the Acts of the Apostles), Phoebe, Lydia, and Nympha. Who were these women?

Romans 16:1-7 is a gold mine of information about women leaders. Here we find mention of both Prisca and Phoebe. Paul praises Prisca, along with her husband Aquila (who is normally mentioned second in the pair, highly unusual for that day or this), as co-workers and ones “who risked their necks for my life” (Romans 16:3-4). This couple was Jewish, originally from Rome, where they became followers of Jesus and leaders of a house church during the 40’s. (This meant that their home was big enough to gather some 40 people early on Sunday morning for worship. And most likely either or both of them led the prayers, the telling of the Story and the Breaking of the Bread.) When the Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome in the year 49, their trade of tent making led them to Corinth. For outside Corinth, every May and June, the Isthmian games were held, in honor of the god Poseidon. And people came from all over, in need of the tents they could supply. It was here that they first met Paul, also a tent maker. Paul recognized Prisca’s gifts for preaching and teaching, and urged the couple to join him in his missionary outreach to Ephesus. (Prisca’s gifts for teaching must have been legendary, since it is noted in Acts 18:24-26 that Prisca taught the brilliant, but young, Apollos, a native of Alexandria.) They worked with Paul in Ephesus; in fact, it was here that they saved Paul from the midst of a riot. And Acts 18:19 implies that Prisca and Aquila remained there as leaders of a house church, while Paul traveled on to Caesarea. We know that they eventually made their return to Rome, establishing yet another house church, where they received the letter of Paul to the Romans, probably in the year 58.

Who delivered that letter? None other than Phoebe, deacon of the house church of Cenchreae (very near Corinth), according to some scholars. A woman deacon? Yes, Paul uses the term 12 times to refer to charismatic servant leaders, also gifted at preaching. Only once does the term describe a woman, and Phoebe is that woman. She is also named by Paul as “benefactor” to him and many others (Romans 16:2). The Greek equivalent, “prostatis,” means someone with authority, a patron who offers the honor of her position to another. In the case of Phoebe, the Gentile, it is thought that she was well connected with the government and court system of her town. She was an independent woman, with position and influence, enough to assist others.

It is in the Acts of the Apostles (16:11-15, 40) that we encounter Lydia, “a dealer in purple cloth.” Once considered wealthy because her product was associated with royalty, it is now thought possible that she was a freed slave from the region of Lydia in what is today western Turkey. For slaves were commonly given only one name, the region of their origin. At any rate, she was a hard working woman, the head of a working household. A Gentile, she made her way to a new life, in the Macedonian city of Philippi, a Roman colony on the trade route between Asia and Rome. Always on the alert for signs of God in her life, Lydia found a temporary shelter among a group of Jewish women who gathered for prayer every Sabbath. But one particular Sabbath would change her life forever! For it was on *this* day that three men joined these women, and one of these men was Paul. (He had been urged in a dream to leave Asia behind and set

sail for this European town of Philippi.) And on this day, as she listened to the passionate preaching of Paul, her heart was set on fire. Baptism was what she needed and wanted for her and her entire household. Once baptized, she urged him, "Come and stay at my home!" Those words have Eucharistic overtones, for they were only uttered one other time in Scripture... by two disciples to Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Lydia's home became a house church, the recipient of Paul's letter to the Philippians. And we know from his letter with what affection and joy he embraced this most intimate of all his communities. Truly, Lydia was one remarkable woman! She knew how dangerous it was to be associated with the tiny, emerging Christian cells, the multiplying Body of Christ. But, true to the color purple, her "red badge of courage" was mingled with the blue of Wisdom. She was Paul's first European convert, opening up Christianity to Gentile women, just as the Council of Jerusalem (as found in chapter 15 of the Acts of the Apostles) had opened it up to Gentile men. And her household, one of four to be baptized in the Acts of the Apostles, was the only one headed by a woman.

As for Nympha, we only know this. In the letter to the Colossians (which is located in present day western Turkey), we hear this. "Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea [very near Colossae], and to Nympha and the church in her house." (See Colossians 4:16.) Doesn't it make you wonder who she was? Doesn't it make you wonder how many other women leaders didn't make it into Scripture at all?