

Tell Her Story

*How Women Led, Taught, and
Ministered in the Early Church*

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

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Part One: Before the Women Leaders of the Early Churches

1 Deborah: Prophet, Judge, Mother over Israel

1. How did you feel reading Nijay's portrait of Deborah as a wise and skilled national leader? Did this bring up any personal response in you? How do you think other women in your life would respond to this chapter?
2. Deborah's life has many parallels with Moses and Samuel, and her partnership with Barak, Israel's general, is positive. How would your church respond to drawing out these points of comparison in a sermon? Does Deborah's position and status feel threatening to our religious institutions today?
3. Describe the similarities and differences between Deborah's song and Mary's song (Lk 1:46-55). How do these women envision God's faithfulness?
4. Deborah was a Mother of Israel. Who are the women who have mothered your faith? Can you name women who have mothered your church? Can you name women with extensive influence who mother Christians on a national or global level?

2 Going Back to the Beginning: Genesis 1-3

1. Are you persuaded that Genesis 1 presents men and women as equal partners and co-rulers? Describe any part of Nijay's explanation that was particularly helpful for you.
2. How does the use of *ezer* to describe the woman in Genesis 2 reshape your view of the often-translated word "helper"? In what ways are women similar to and different from God, who is also described as *ezer*?
3. How have you heard the concepts of "desire" and "rule" in Genesis 3:16 taught? How would your church respond to Nijay's explanation of these words?
4. How would you explain the consequences listed in Genesis 3 to someone who is not part of the Christian faith? How do different nonreligious groups in your community view the relationship between men and women?

3 Women in the New Testament World

1. Roman patriarchy elevated men over women. A "flat" view of women uses this gender elevation as *the* categorical lens to view every aspect female life in the ancient world. A flat view of women does not see any option for influence beyond gender. A dynamic view of women recognizes that social class, status, patronage, social power, legal protection, the home as a place of business, and the ability for

women to participate in commerce greatly influenced women's interaction with both men and women in every situation. Has the flat view of women previously shaped your understanding of the New Testament? How have you heard this view taught?

2. Is there a particular example of a woman using class, status, or patronage to her advantage that resonates with you? (e.g., Byrrhena, Manlia Gnome, Livia, Vestal Virgins, Campia Severina, Fulvia)
3. Consider the three myths about women that Nijay dismantles:
 - Myth 1: Wives were always under the legal authority of their husbands.
 - Myth 2: Women could not own property.
 - Myth 3: Women lived private lives in the home.How would you explain the more complex reality of legal authority, property ownership, and the home to someone with a "flat" view of women?
4. Why is it significant for Christians to understand that Jewish women were leaders in synagogues? How would your church respond to this information?

4 The Women in Jesus' Life and Ministry

1. How are women in your church encouraged and equipped to follow the lead of the women in the New Testament? Think through the examples cited in this chapter. Whether you are male or female, is there a particular woman whose faith could be a model for your own?
2. Nijay points out that women paved the way for Jesus, Jesus addressed the lives of women, Jesus cared about women, Jesus had meaningful conversations with women, and Jesus was ministered to by women. How might the women in your city or neighborhood respond to hearing specific emphasis of these points by your faith community?
3. Imagine what it would have been like in the first century to hear the story of Jesus and realize that it requires a foundational trust in the testimony of women. Who might have rejected the gospel outright because of this? Who might have been especially drawn to it?
4. Consider Mary as the "living link from the incarnation, through the life and ministry of Jesus, and into the ministry of the Spirit-empowered apostles" (p. 67). How would you explain the significance of Mary's participation in Jesus' life and the early church?

Part Two: The Women Leaders of the Early Churches

5 The Early Churches

1. What do you know about what a service or gathering looked like in the early church? What comes to mind when you think of those first few years of church meetups? Where did they meet, and what did they do?
2. We don't know exactly how these first house churches were organized, but one clue we have is that church organization likely drew from Judaism and how synagogue communities were put together. Another "affinity group" that inspired church organization was the existing associations in Greek and Roman culture. Think about church services you've been to in the last few years. What other organizations or communities do they remind you of?
3. What does leadership look like in your church? "Paul's tendency was to refer to leadership as giving care and oversight, not wielding power and authority" (p. 80). Why do you think Paul created this principle? What could he have been guarding against?
4. *Tell Her Story* surveys the leadership roles of the early churches, with some of the leadership titles not always clear to us today or consistent with how contemporary churches are staffed. How do you feel about these early churches not having a "lead pastor"? What other surprises did you uncover in this chapter, especially in regard to deacons, overseers, and elders?
5. **Consider Paul's list of over two dozen early church leaders, many of them women.** Have you ever noticed Paul's listing of names in Romans 16? Nijay mentions these names in the introduction, and they're often skipped over, much like some of the Bible's genealogies. Here's a fun exercise: Read this list of names from Romans 16 and circle the ones who you think are women. How many of these leaders are women? (Check your list against the one at the end of this guide.)

Phoebe – Prisca (Priscilla) – Aquila – Epaenetus – Mary – Andronicus – Junia – Ampliatus – Urbanus – Stachys – Apelles – Aristobulus – Herodian – Narcissus – Tryphaena – Tryphosa – Persis – Rufus – Rufus's mother – Phlegon – Hermes – Patrobas – Hermas – Philologus – Julia – Nereus's sister – Olympas – Timothy – Lucius – Jason – Sosipater – Tertius – Gaius – Erastus – Quartus

6 Women Co-laborers in Ministry Leadership

1. While the majority of women were active in their homes, managing their family, running the household, and contributing to the family business, there is a growing area of biblical scholarship and history that is uncovering examples of women active and successful in business and many different forms of leadership, including

local government. In Romans 16, Paul lists over two dozen individuals, many of them women and very likely in church leadership. Think about women you know, whether friends or acquaintances. What sort of work do they do, both paid and volunteer? What sort of leadership positions do they occupy, whether direct and paid or volunteer, or indirect (by influence or mentorship)? Are these roles all the same, or do they represent a variety of roles occupied by a variety of women?

2. A worshiper of God and a pagan named Lydia is mentioned in Acts 16:11-12. Paul seems to home in on her, recognizing her as an important businessperson and local leader in Philippi. She must have had a large house, as the apostles were invited to receive hospitality there and accepted. Nijay finds it fascinating that we know more names of the women in the Philippian church than the men. What might this emphasis mean for this particular early church?
3. Paul mentions a woman named Apphia in the book of Philemon, calling her a sister. When used with a named individual, “brother” or “sister” appears to be his way of talking about a ministry colleague. This is a title of honor and respect for a faithful leader. In your church, in what way are faithful leaders recognized? What can you do to notice and lift up those faithful leaders who might be overlooked, especially because they are women?

7 Phoebe, Paul’s Trusted Proxy

1. Phoebe is one of the women mentioned in Romans 16, with a quick note by Paul: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon [*diakonos*] of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.” Have you ever wondered about Phoebe and what Paul means by commending her? What is Paul asking the Roman churches to do here? What does her role as a letter carrier mean?
2. The word *diakonos* carries the meaning of a servant of God. What do you think of when you hear the word *servant*? Is this what Paul means here? How did the Roman world, and even city authorities, fit into Paul’s use of the word? What could this mean for Phoebe when he uses the word as a title and a description of her service?
3. Like with Apphia, Paul calls Phoebe “sister.” Nijay describes some of the layers of meaning in this term on page 123, where he explains how this language takes on more of a technical meaning in “commendation passages” like this one—Paul is recognizing their peer status and proclaiming, “this person is just like me.” What does it mean to be a peer? Who are some of your peers? What role do they play in your life?

8 Prisca, Strategic Church Leader and Expert Teacher

1. Prisca had deep insight into baptism and explained it more fully to Apollos. Set aside time to investigate baptism (or another Christian practice), learning about different traditions and the spiritual significance of this doctrine. How would you explain baptism to a friend unfamiliar with the Christian faith? In what ways does your own faith mature as you commit time to learning and teaching others? How does your gender, financial position, geographic location, and education help or hinder your ability to communicate Christian concepts to those around you?
2. Prisca, Aquila, and Paul supported themselves financially, which gave them some freedom of movement, and their shared occupation and faith brought camaraderie. How does your daily life help or hinder your freedom and your friendships? How have your freedom and friendships been influenced by different stages in your life? Could you make career and relationship changes that would benefit you and share the love of Christ in the process?
3. If you are newer to leadership, have you thought about approaching a woman leader in order to learn more, and maybe even develop a more intentional mentoring relationship? Or if you are a more experienced leader, have you considered putting yourself out there as a mentor, getting to know younger men and women in the church and making yourself available to them, much like Prisca did?
4. Grab a sheet of paper and draw a chart representing the ministry work of Prisca and Paul. Keep an eye out for points of similarity. Here's an example to get you started:

	Prisca	Paul
Day job	Tent/awning maker. Self-employed.	
Ministry activities		
Ministry locations		
Travel		
Risks taken		
Personal qualities		
Leadership qualities		
Relationships with other leaders		

After working on this chart, is there anything that surprises you about Prisca? If you met her today at a local church, what do you think she might be involved in? What responsibilities might she be carrying out?

9 Junia, Venerated Apostle and Imprisoned Hero

1. Junia is perhaps the most well-known woman leader in the early church, but it hasn't always been that way. What was the confusion with Junia's name? Was this information new to you? How do you feel about the dynamics of biblical translations and the variations that can happen with translating and interpreting passages?
2. Women leaders have been very encouraged by this short phrase about Junia and her husband: "They are outstanding among the apostles" (Rom 16:7 NIV). Not only is Junia described as an apostle, but she also survived being imprisoned for her faith. What did Junia likely give up as a result of her faith and her leadership in the early church? Have you known a couple that partnered together in ministry like Junia and Andronicus?
3. *Apostolos* is the Greek form of our word "apostle." In the context of early Christianity, the word tends to imply taking the good news of Jesus Christ out in the world, as Paul, Peter, and others did. What is the closest similar concept or ministry title we have in the church today? And how do we measure "success" for this ministry title? What do you think made Junia and Andronicus "successful" from the way Paul talks about them?

What About . . . ?

What About Paul Prohibiting Women from Teaching in the Church?

What About the Submission Texts in the New Testament Household Codes?

1. How do you feel when you read 1 Timothy 2 and the New Testament household codes? How has it affected you to hear preaching or discussion of these texts?
2. Are you persuaded that 1 Timothy 2 is a specific instruction to Timothy relating to a particular false teaching that was influencing the Ephesian community? What aspects of Nijay's explanation bring clarity for you?
3. Household codes were directives that described proper household management. Ancient philosophers used them to describe power and how to maintain order in the house. This order was seen to benefit the city and country. Compare and contrast the Greco-Roman household codes with the New Testament household codes. How do you feel about the New Testament writers appropriating ideas from

their surrounding culture? Do contemporary Christian writers and teachers appropriate secular culture in similar ways today?

4. Nijay uses a metaphor of chemotherapy to help explain the presence of patriarchal rule in the New Testament. Does this metaphor resonate with you? How would you describe the household codes to someone outside the faith who finds them hurtful?

ANSWER (chap. 5, question 5): the names of the women of Romans 16 are in bold

Phoebe – **Prisca (Priscilla)** – Aquila – Epānetus – **Mary** – Andronicus – **Junia** – Ampliatus – Urbanus – Stachys – Apelles – Aristobulus – Herodian – Narcissus – **Tryphaena** – **Tryphosa** – **Persis** – Rufus – **Rufus’s mother** – Phlegon – Hermes – Patrobas – Hermas – Philologus – **Julia** – **Nereus’s sister** – Olympas – Timothy – Lucius – Jason – Sosipater – Tertius – Gaius – Erastus – Quartus

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