

Women of the Bible

As we seek the will of God for the role of women in the church, let us consider the witness of scripture as a whole. The sacred texts of the OT and NT record stories of many women who actively worked for the kingdom of God, who were given authority over men, and who proclaimed the gospel of Jesus. Here we highlight examples of women who acted confidently in particular situations and who fulfilled roles similar to those taken by men.

Old Testament women

Miriam, prophet and worship leader - Exodus 15:19-21



When the prophet Miriam leads her people in a song of praise after they have crossed the Red Sea, she is leading them in worshipping God. In song she also proclaims to her people the great things that God has done. Her song has been recorded in the Bible so that thousands of generations might also use it for worship and hear proclaimed to them the wonders that God has done.



Deborah, prophet and ruler of Israel - Judges 4 and 5

At a crucial, fragile moment in the history of Israel Deborah is appointed to serve as ruler and judge over all Israel. She has authority over women and over men, and God speaks his words to men through her. As a judge, or military leader, Deborah has God-given authority even over the male military commanders. This is so well understood that Barak, the army general, will not go to war unless Deborah goes with him in person. To him she represents the very presence of God. And, just like Miriam before her, Deborah is also a worship leader. Her great song of praise to God proclaims his mighty acts on behalf of his people. It has been recorded for use in worship by the people of God.



Huldah, prophet and proclaimer to king and priest - 2 Kings 22:1-20



During the reign of King Josiah the book of the law is rediscovered in the temple. After tearing his robes, King Josiah sends Hilkiah the high priest to find out the will of God for his people. He sends him to a woman, Huldah. Through Huldah, God speaks his word to the high priest and to four other men with him. Her first words are 'Thus says the Lord' which is the formula that prophets used to introduce God's word to the people. She announces both punishment and grace — the destruction of Judah and the sparing of the penitent king. Huldah is taken seriously; her right to speak with divine authority is not questioned. The high priest hears God speaking through her to the whole kingdom and heeds her words and reports them to the king.

Women of the New Testament

Elizabeth and Mary and Christ's incarnation - Luke 1:39-56

The first person to acclaim Jesus as Lord is Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist and Mary's relative. Immediately following this visit Mary gives to the Magnificat. This wonderful song of praise and hope for justice, like the songs of Miriam and Deborah long before, has been set down in the Bible for use in worship and proclamation. Every time Mary's song is sung or read in church to this day her words lead us in worship as they proclaim to us the great acts of God. Furthermore, Mary holds centre stage with Jesus, at the precise moment that the Word of God becomes incarnate in the world. As Eve's body was taken from the man Adam, so Jesus' body is taken out of the woman Mary. A woman carries the incarnate Word into the world. Never has a man been charged to take the body and blood of our Lord in such a dramatic manner, and, unlike Mary, never has a man been called upon to serve as the vessel through whom God gives Jesus to the world so uniquely for its life and salvation.

Jesus, anointed by a woman - Mark 14:1-9

Before ascending the throne of ancient Israel, a king was anointed by a prophet with oil applied to the head (1 Sam 10:1; 16:1-13). The word 'messiah' means the anointed one, and Jesus is the anointed one, or Messiah, par excellence. But in preparation for his enthronement as royal Messiah, ironically on a cross, Jesus is anointed with oil applied to the head, not by a prophet or a priest, but by an unnamed woman (Mark 14:3). And just as the disciples in Mark's gospel understand Jesus' ministry only in terms of power and glory, this woman knows him as the one whose path to glory passes by way of suffering and death. Unlike the twelve, she demonstrates extravagant self-giving, indicating her willingness to spend her life totally in service of her Lord (Mark 8:34,35; 14:3,4). So much does Jesus approve of his anointing by her (the role of a prophet) and her spending her life in his service (the role of a true disciple) that he foretells that 'what she has done will be told in memory of her' (Mark 14:9).



He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.



Jesus' model of ministry, the woman who washes his feet - Luke 7:36-50

At the beginning of Jesus' last great conversation in John 13 he gives his disciples a model of ministry. The model is that of a servant who washes feet or who waits at tables (Mark 8:35; see also 12:44). Jesus also points to a poor widow who gives her whole life (John 13:14,15; Luke 22:27). For this reason a pastor is also called 'minister', or servant (*doulos*). Luke tells the story of a woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. In this and other instances (e.g. Mark 1:31; Luke 8:2,3; John 12:2,3) Jesus is happy for a woman to serve him in the same way that he now encourages his disciples to serve one another. If serving is Jesus' model of ministry, culminating in his serving the world by his death on the cross (Mark 10:45), it is significant for the public ministry of the church that the gospels portray so many women as servants of their Lord. In choosing women to exemplify servant-hood, Jesus' clear message is that the leaders in the kingdom of God are to conduct themselves in a way that is different from anything they have previously experienced. It will be the way of the servant, a way that women know and fulfil.

Women of the New Testament

The parables of the woman and the dough and the woman and the lost coin - Luke 13:20,21; Luke 15:8-10

In one of many kingdom parables a woman mixes yeast into dough. Jesus uses both men and women as examples of those who mix his word into the world and are thereby employed to create the kingdom of God. Here, the creator of the kingdom is pictured as God the Divine Baker Woman (Capon: 121). Similarly, in Luke 15:8 Jesus' story of the lost coin depicts God as the Divine Housekeeper who seeks unceasingly to recover the lost coin, symbolising the lost sinner, and rejoices when she finds it. By making women the central characters in several parables, Jesus, like the writers of the Old Testament (e.g. Deut. 32:18; Hos. 11:3,4), freely employs feminine imagery for God's activity in the world.

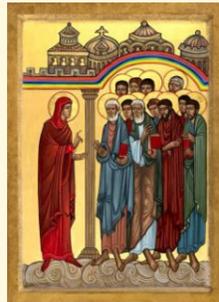
The Samaritan woman, one of the first Christian evangelists - John 4:1-42

At the well of Sychar Jesus is served by a Samaritan woman. His conversation with her is the longest recorded conversation with anyone Jesus meets during his earthly ministry. Jesus discusses theology with her, reveals to her that he is the Messiah, and doesn't seem to mind at all that through her public proclamation her townspeople come to faith in him. The disciples are so astonished that Jesus should be speaking with a woman that they are momentarily speechless. The townspeople, men and women, young and old alike, 'come to faith' on the basis of the woman's testifying words are chosen intentionally. She alone in John's gospel does what Jesus, in the high priestly prayer, prays that his disciples will do, namely, lead people to faith in him through preaching the word (John 17:20,21).



Mary Magdalene, the first person to whom the risen Lord Jesus appears, and the first person sent to proclaim the good news of the resurrection - John 20:1-18

On Easter morning Peter and the beloved disciple get to the empty tomb early. But Jesus does not appear to them. Jesus waits until they have gone until only Mary Magdalene is there. Mary Magdalene is the first person to receive an appearance of the risen Lord Jesus. Jesus acts counter to expectations by revealing himself first to a woman, and only later to his disciples. Then Jesus commands Mary Magdalene to proclaim his resurrection to the disciples. Mary Magdalene accepts this great privilege and responsibility. As a result, she is the first person ever to proclaim the good news of Easter. In the first century, women were not accepted as witnesses in a court of law. Yet Jesus entrusts to Mary Magdalene the greatest kingdom message ever, with the result that she became known in the early church not only as the apostle to the apostles but the apostle of the apostles, the preeminent apostle.



Pentecost prophets, both men and women - Joel 2:28, 29; Acts 2:16-18



On the day of Pentecost Peter quotes the prophet Joel, who looked forward to the day when daughters as well as sons, women as well as men would prophesy. In the book of Joel, God places women on a par with men as proclaimers of his word. And Peter applies this to the whole church on the day of Pentecost. It is this pivotal sermon, the first in the history of the church, which highlights the inclusivity of the proclamatory ministry of the church. The Holy Spirit, says Peter, is poured out 'on all flesh', so that both men and women are commissioned to continue Christ's ministry of proclamation.

Philip's four daughters, Christian prophets - Acts 21:8,9

It is undisputed that women proclaimed God's word as prophets in the early church. Near the end of Paul's third missionary journey, he and his travelling companions meet Philip the evangelist and his four daughters, each one of whom is a prophet in the first Christian community at Caesarea by the Sea.

Phoebe, Junia and Priscilla, co-workers with Paul in the work of the kingdom - Romans 16:1-16

St Paul himself reminds us that working as God's prophets was not the only leading role women played in the first Christian communities. Paul describes women as deacons (Phoebe in Romans 16:1), co-workers (Priscilla in Romans 16:3; see also Acts 18:26) and one specifically as an apostle (Junia in Romans 16:7). Right up to and including Erasmus in the sixteenth century, it was acknowledged that Junia was a woman apostle.



Phoebe



Junia



Priscilla and Aquila



Ermione, daughter of St Phillip

How are we to interpret 1 Timothy 2: 11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:33-37?

Paul's letters addressed to the church at Corinth and to the young pastor Timothy say that a woman must be silent in church and shall not teach or have authority over a man. Were these texts written to address a specific problem in these churches? How are these passages to be reconciled with the biblical records of the women of the Old and New Testaments who acted as prophets, apostles and proclaimers of the Good News? In seeking to find the will of God for the church today we are guided by the Bible, the Confessions and long-standing principles of biblical interpretation. As we consider the role of women as leaders in the church we consider all biblical accounts particularly those that demonstrate how God in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament fulfilled their message of salvation for mankind through women.

Women's ministry in the 21st century

The Lutheran church throughout the world has reflected on the biblical stories of women and recognised their witness of faith. In a letter to supporters of women's ordination in the LCA, Bishop Gerhard Ulrich of the United Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Germany writes "during these last few decades we have learned to take note of the life of these women witnesses of faith in a new way; they have inspired a theology which unlocked the message of the bible for both men and women in a way that was previously undreamt of. Our Lutheran churches realized that the church would miss out on a whole dimension of proclamation, if the gifts of women could not be heard in an authentic way".

Bishop Ulrich reports on the positive impact of women pastors on the mission of the church. He states "Women have been ordained for nearly 40 years, and account for approximately 50% of today's ordained ministers. Our experience shows that women have a positive influence on the external image of the church, as well as having a positive inward influence. Women pastors look at the world with different eyes and share a different perspective on faith and spirituality. They speak an understandable and relatable language, they approach people holistically and they transform our culture of leadership into a culture of participation. Both the pastoral as well as the theological evidence points in the favour of women's ordination."

This brochure has been prepared by the All Saints group on behalf of the LCA clergy and laity who support the ordination of women in the LCA. It is a summary of CTICR, 2005. 'A Case for the ordination of women and men', Lutheran Journal of Theology, 39/1,37-56. For further information on the theological arguments for women's ordination and motions submitted by St Peter's and St Andrew's for the 2013 LCA General synod please go to www.wmn.org.au