

Women Leaders in the Early Church

Rev Dr Sally Douglas
Senior Lecturer in New Testament Studies
Pilgrim Theological College, University of Divinity

A Sample of New Testament References

Women in the Gospels

- Jesus discusses theology with a woman in John's Gospel, and she is the first person to whom Jesus reveals his identity as messiah. (John 4:1-42). She is an 'apostle' to her community according to Origen (Origen, *Commentary on John's Gospel*).
- Women who *follow* Jesus and *serve/provide* for Jesus; the Gospel authors tell us that these women have followed Jesus since the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and continue to follow Jesus all the way to the cross. (Matt. 27:55; Mark 15:41; Luke 23:49)
- Women are given the apostolic command by the risen Jesus, or by the angels, to tell the male disciples that Jesus had been raised. (Matt. 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-10; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:11-18)
- Jesus defends a woman and her disruptive actions as prophetic, stating that they will be remembered, and saying to the male disciples 'let her alone' (Mark 14:3-9)

Women in the Epistles

- In **Galatians**, Paul declares that 'there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28)

Various **women leaders** are greeted by **Paul** in his letter to the **church in Rome**, including: Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphoena, Tryphosa, Persis, Julia, Nereus' sister and Rufus' mother. Indeed, in this list in Romans, Paul describes:

- Phoebe a **deacon/minister** *diakonon* Romans 16:1
- Prisca 'who works with me in Christ' (Romans 16:3-4)
- Mary 'who has worked hard among you' (Romans 16:6)
- Junia, who is '**prominent among the apostles**' (Romans 16:7)
- In 1 Corinthians, Chloe 'and her people' are named by Paul (1 Cor 1.11)
- In Colossians, Nympha and those who meet in her home are greeted (Col 4.15)

Acts

- In Acts the author states : 'Now in Joppa there was a **disciple whose name was Tabitha**, which is Dorcas in Greek' (Acts 9.36)

...

Early Church texts

1 Clement (a text cherished in the early church, read aloud in worship, and listed as canonical in the fifth Century Codex Alexandrinus)

- In **1 Clement**, this first century letter from the Church in Rome to the Church in Corinth women's equality is celebrated (1 Clem 33; see Gen 1:27), women's God given gifts of prophecy are declared (1 Clem 12), women's speaking is expected (1 Clem 21), and women's salvific actions and leadership are proclaimed (1 Clem 55).

Further Reading

click on the titles for more information

Bond, Helen and Taylor, Joan *Women Remembered: Jesus' Female Disciples*
(London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2022)

Douglas, Sally. *Rewilding Prayer: God Beyond Gender, Faith Beyond Formulas*
(Eugene: Cascade Books, 2025).

Douglas, Sally. *Jesus Sophia: Returning to Woman Wisdom in the Bible, Practice, and Prayer*
(Cascade Books, 2023).

Douglas, S. 'Jesus' Impact on Understandings of Gender: Attending to First-Century Dialogue' in *The Impact of Jesus of Nazareth: Historical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspectives* (Sydney: Sydney College of Divinity Press, 2021), 155-178.

Haines-Eitzen, Kim. *The Gendered Palimpsest: Women, Writing, and Representation in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 1983, reprinted 1996).

Torjesen, Karen, Jo. *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).