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PARTNERSHIP IN THE GOSPEL: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH AT PHILIPPI

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In recent years a number of valuable specialized studies on the women in the Philippian church have appeared.[1] Each of them has concluded in one way or another that the female believers spotlighted in Philippians and in Acts 16, where the church at Philippi is born, played quite prominent roles in the development of that congregation that the apostle Paul uniquely commended for "your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil 1:5, NIV).[2]

By no means, however, have all the ways in which that importance is highlighted (or strongly implied) in the Biblical text been adequately understood or in some cases even noticed. And since Philippi is perhaps the classic NT case study on the roles of women in the founding and developing of a local congregation, Philippians must be seen as an important but underdeveloped resource in the ongoing intramural debate among evangelicals on the ministry of women in the Church.

Though this paper will not address the burning issues in this dialogue directly, it will seek to further explore the relevant question of the nature of women's "partnership in the gospel" by probing fresh angles provided by (1) structural and literary observation of Philippians (within the wider corpus of books that evangelicals generally agree Paul contributed to the NT) and (2) the flow of the narrative style of Acts 16:12–40, the specific passage on the founding of the Philippian church (within the overall flow of Acts).

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[1] A chronological short list of such notable studies includes W. D. Thomas, "The Place of Women in the Church at Philippi," *ExpTim* 83 (1972) 117–120; F. X. Malinowski, "The Brave Women of Philippi," *BTB* 15 (1985) 60–64; L. Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice: Paul's Letter to the Philippians and Luke-Acts as Received by First-century Women* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wikgren, 1988). Significant attention to the circumstances in Philippi is also found in such broader studies of NT women as E. M. Tetlow, *Women and Ministry in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist, 1980); E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); B. Witherington, III, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988).

[2] I initially made my case that "partnership in the gospel" is the overall unifying theme of Philippians; cf. A. B. Luter, "Philippians," *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* (ed. W. A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989). Cf. also recently A. B. Luter and M. V. Lee, "Philippians as Chiasmus: Key to the Structure, Unity and Theme Questions," *NTS* 41/1 (January 1995) 89–101.

I. EVIDENCE OF THE WOMEN DISCIPLES' IMPORTANCE IN PHILIPPIANS

There are at least eight lines of evidence in the Philippian letter that demonstrate the prominent roles of certain women in that congregation. Each individual point is significant in its own right. But taken together the eight following factors create a very strong pattern.

1. *Philippians is the only letter Paul wrote in which two women in the church being addressed are emphasized in the body*[3] *of the epistle*. As can be quickly seen in chart 1, Phoebe and Prisc(ill)a are both discussed briefly in Romans 16, as are Eunice and Lois in 2 Timothy. Phoebe, however, is not a member of the church in Rome (Rom 16:1), and Priscilla had traveled in ministry with Paul (Acts 18:1 ff.). Also, Lois and Eunice (2 Tim 1:5) were not members of the church at Ephesus and were almost certainly not even present there when 2 Timothy was received.

2. *Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2) are the only other members of the Philippian church who are clearly named, besides Epaphroditus (2:25; 4:18) and Clement (4:3)*. There is not strong enough reason to hold that *syzyge* (4:3) is a proper name.[4] Thus the simple proportion of two out of four church members named certainly emphasizes the women, Euodia and Syntyche, especially since Epaphroditus is apparently carrying the letter from Paul (2:25 ff.) and Clement is mentioned only along with the women in 4:3 (i.e. as another esteemed "fellow worker").

3. *The mention that Euodia and Syntyche were formerly "striving together in the gospel" (Phil 4:3) indicates that they had previously been models of the kind of behavior Paul was now urging (1:27) for the Philippian congregation*. This point is cast in stark relief when it is realized that "striving together" (*synathleō*) is found in the NT only in Phil 1:27; 4:3.

4. *The verses focusing on Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2–3) are parallel to the earlier challenge to unity (2:2–4) in the overall inverted structuring of Philippians*,[5] indicating they are the key to the disunity that had begun to

[3] The mention of several other women in the concluding greetings section of Romans 16 does not constitute the same kind of emphasis as is spoken of here. But that does not mean such references are inconsequential. They are simply less directly tied to the specific situation in the church.

[4] See the evenhanded discussion in P. T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 480–481.

[5] For independently researched overall chiastic approaches to the unity of Philippians cf. C. H. Talbert, "Philippians," *Mercer Commentary on the Bible* (ed. W. E. Mills; Macon: Mercer University, 1995) 1227–1234, and D. A. Black, "The Discourse Structure of Philippians: A Study in Textlinguistics," *NovT* 37/1 (January 1995) 16–49. I would like to express thanks for the gracious interaction of both of these scholars.

Chart 1

Focal Women in the Churches Addressed in Paul's Letters

CHURCHES	ROME	CORINTH	GALATIA	EPHESUS	PHILIPPI	COLOSSE	THESSALONICA	CRETE
RELATED LETTER(S)	Romans	1, 2 Corinthians	Galatians	Ephesians 1, 2 Timothy	Philippians	Colossians Philemon	1, 2 Thessalonians	Titus
WOMEN SPOTLIGHTED IN THE LETTERS	Phoebe (from Cenchrea) Prisca (known from Corinth and Ephesus)	Chloe (in passing) Prisca (in Ephesus)	none	Eunice Lois (in Asia Minor)	Euodia Syntyche (only epistle that names 2 women native to that church and in significant roles)	Apphia (Philemon 2)	none	none

trouble that church. Chart 2[6] clearly visualizes that 1:27–2:4; 4:1–5 are the third (C; C′) layer of the overarching chiastic structure of the letter.[7]

5. *The descriptions of Timothy and Epaphroditus in Phil 2:19–3:1a are in strong contrast to those of Euodia and Syntyche (4:2–3).* That point is made not only by the contrast in wording between the two passages. The layout in chart 2 also reveals that the positive examples of the D (2:5–16; 3:1b–21) and E (2:17–3:1a) layers of the inverted structure are set off as the solution to the problem laid out in the C layer (1:27–2:4; 4:1–5). Still, even as relatively recent troublemakers in the church at Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche are very significant in the overall mix of things.

Chart 2

A Chiastic Outline of Philippians

(1:1–2) Opening Greetings: previewing "partnership" theme, emphasizing servant-leadership

A. (1:3–11) Prologue: "partnership in the gospel" theme introduced with prayerful gratitude
  B. (1:12–26) Comfort/Example: Paul's safety and right thinking in the midst of a difficult guarded situation
    C. (1:27–2:4) Challenge: stand fast and be united, fulfilling Paul's joy
      D. (2:5–16) Example/Action: Christ's example of humility and suffering before glory, then related behavioral instructions
        E. (2:17–3:1a) Midpoint: caring models of gospel partnership, two of which are sent to help immediately
      D′. (3:1b–21) Example/Action: Paul's example of humbling and suffering before upward call/transformation, then instructions
    C′. (4:1–5) Challenge: stand fast and accentuate existing joy by the reconciliation of two past gospel partners
  B′. (4:6–9) Comfort/Example: the Philippians' guarded peace of mind and right thinking in the midst of an anxious situation
A′. (4:10–20) Epilogue: partnership from the past renewed, with expressed gratitude

(4:21–23) Closing Greetings: reviewing "partnership" theme, emphasizing oneness of the saints

6. *The repetition of "urge" in regard to both Euodia and Syntyche (4:2) creates an individualized sense of prominence.* P. T. O'Brien astutely comments:

[6] See the development of this outline in Luter and Lee, "Chiasmus."

[7] It should be noted here that at least eight of nine rigorous criteria for demonstrating extended chiasmus are met by this structuring of Philippians. C. Blomberg, the compiler of these criteria ("The Structure of 2 Corinthians 1–7," *Criswell Theological Review* [Fall 1989] 4–8), observed that it is rare for all nine of these criteria to be fulfilled. But a structure that meets the bulk of the criteria "stands a strong chance of reflecting the actual structure of the text" (ibid. 7).

> In a direct personal appeal for unity Paul names the two women and begs them to reach a common mind. The correctness of his appeal is evident in his use of the verb *parakalo*. . . . Further, *parakalo* is repeated and this heightens the effect, as Paul refuses to take sides but makes the same appeal to both. It is as if . . . he is exhorting each separately face to face.[8]

If they were not prominent in regard to the church and its present circumstances, "it is difficult to explain why their names were mentioned in a letter to be read publicly in church."[9]

7. *Counting these women along with "the rest of my fellow workers" (Phil 4:3) shows their prominence in regard to the wider ministry that Paul had begun in Philippi*. That point becomes even more substantial when it is realized that the only other usage of "fellow worker" in Philippians refers to Epaphroditus (2:25), whom the apostle commends as worthy of honor by the church at Philippi (2:29).

8. *It appears that Paul is utilizing a play on words on both the names Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2) to make his crucial applicational point for the entire church*. The name Euodia sounds to the ear exactly like the Greek word *euōdia* ("good smell") in 4:18,[10] ironically implying that Euodia should live up to her name as a pleasant aroma before the Lord. Also, Syntyche (4:2) is a name constructed to include the prefix *syn-*. In Philippians there are some fifteen *syn*-prefix terms, indicating a pattern of usage implying partnership and unity.[11] That there is also an implication for Syntyche to live up to her name here is made more likely by the clustering of this *syn*-terminology in 4:3.[12]

Thus in summary it is not too much to say that Philippians fairly shouts forth the importance of Euodia and Syntyche in regard to the past and present of the church at Philippi. Factors ranging from beautiful literary artistry to subtle puns all underline their prominent roles in both the joyful and not so happy times of that congregation. If anything, calling attention to their present problem-causing status (4:2–3; see 2:2–4) only serves to indicate how crucial these two women, and likely others,[13] were to the Philippian church at the time Paul addressed them.

[8] O'Brien, *Philippians* 477–478.

[9] Ibid. 478.

[10] R. P. Martin, *Philippians* (rev. ed.; NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1980) 152.

[11] Luter and Lee, "Chiasmus."

[12] The Greek words are *syzyge*, *syllambanou*, *synēthlēsan* and *synergōn*. No other verse in Philippians contains more than two *syn*-prefix terms. Interestingly that verse is 2:25, and the reference is to Epaphroditus, who will soon return to Philippi to help the church deal with the problems at hand (2:25–30).

[13] Given the prominence that will be developed below for Lydia and the formerly demon-possessed woman in Acts 16 as well as other potentially significant women from among those who were evangelized at the place of prayer outside Philippi (16:13–14, 16) or even the wife of the converted jailer (16:30–34).

II. EVIDENCE OF THE WOMEN DISCIPLES' IMPORTANCE IN ACTS 16

Likewise there are eight angles from which the prominence of some of the women involved in the planting of the church at Philippi can be seen in Acts 16:12–40. Again each point carries considerable weight by itself, but the cumulative case is weighty indeed.

1. *The church at Philippi is the only church founded in Acts in which two individual women are spotlighted.* Chart 3 shows that only the church in Jerusalem received two of Luke's focus points on women, one of which was negative and the other general because it is corporate. Priscilla is mentioned twice, but as Paul's mobile coworker in Corinth (Acts 18:2–3) and Ephesus (19:18–19). Thus the conversions of Lydia and the woman freed from demonic possession (16:14–18), modest though the mentions may seem at first glance, stand out as much in the narrative of Acts as do Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians.

2. *Similarly, these two women in Acts 16 are the first women singled out for character development on Paul's missionary journeys.*[14] It is probably of significance that Lydia is the first recorded convert as the Christian mission developed in Acts moves onto the European continent (16:11–15a). If nothing else, her conversion is a major milestone in the Christian witness as it moves slowly but surely "to the ends of the earth" (1:8), which in Acts moves through "distant lands" and terminates in Rome.[15]

3. *Relatedly, the strong phraseology "the Lord opened her heart" (16:14) reflects divinely-granted prominence as God intervenes to convert the foundational person in Philippi: Lydia.* Even if the conversion of many of the "brethren" (16:40) in the church at Philippi cannot be tied in any direct Scriptural sense to Lydia's, her faith almost certainly had an influential initial domino effect in her "household" (16:15) and within the women's "prayer meeting" (16:13, 16).[16]

4. *Lydia and the woman released from demons are two of the three "founding fathers" seen in the unfolding story of the founding of the Philippian church (Acts 16:12–40).* Further, since the jailer does not come to faith until sometime later (16:30–34) their foundational role is even more evident in this narrative.[17]

[14] It should be noted that brief references were previously made to "God-fearing women of high standing" (Acts 13:50, NIV), who persecuted Paul and Barnabas in Pisidian Antioch, and to Timothy's mother (16:1). But there is no detailed development of them as characters within the narrative of Acts.

[15] J. Polhill, *Acts* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 86; see also F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 36–37, esp. 37 n. 34; for a different perspective cf. also D. R. Schwartz, "The End of the *Gē*," *JBL* 105 (1986) 669–676.

[16] This term may mean either "prayer" or "place of prayer." See the helpful compact discussion of the textual variant in 16:16 and the implications of the term in Bruce, *Acts* 310 n. 34.

[17] Although there were almost certainly other men who came to faith before the jailer, the seemingly purposeful silence in the Biblical text leaves the impression that the Philippian congregation, among all the churches that the NT focuses on, was initially uniquely female-based.

Chart 3

Focal Women in the Churches Started in the Book of Acts

CHURCH(ES)	JERUSALEM	SAMARIA	SYRIAN ANTIOCH	ASIA MINOR	PHILIPPI	THESSALONICA	BEREA	ATHENS	CORINTH	EPHESUS
PASSAGE IN ACTS	Chaps. 2–7	Chap. 8	Chaps. 5, 11, 13	Chaps. 13–14	Chap. 16	Chap. 17	Chap. 17	Chap. 17	Chap. 18	Chaps. 18–20
WOMEN SPOTLIGHTED	Sapphira (negatively) Hellenistic widows (corporately)	none	none	none	Lydia (formerly) demon-possessed woman	leading women (generally)	leading women (generally)	Damaris (mention only)	Priscilla	Priscilla
TIME SPENT THERE	several years	weeks or months	approaching 2 years	several months	several months	about a month	weeks	weeks or months	over one and a half years	well over 2 years

5. *Lydia, as a successful businesswoman in purple goods (Acts 16:14) who had a large enough house to take in Paul's missionary band (16:15) and for the wider church to meet in (16:40), was at least financially "prominent."* Since she was transplanted at some point from her home area in Thyatira (16:14), there is no way of knowing how she was viewed in a social sense in Philippi. Still, she certainly would have been "respected" (i.e. prominent) in the well-to-do Philippian business community.[18]

6. *The focus on Lydia (Acts 16:14–15) definitely dovetails into the repeated mention of "leading women" becoming Christians in Thessalonica (17:4) and Berea (17:12).*[19] This pattern is also very much in keeping with what is known about the prominent women in Macedonia during that era from outside the NT. Tarn and Griffith summarize as follows:

> If Macedonia produced perhaps the most competent group of men the world had yet seen, the women were in all respects the men's counterparts; they played a large part in affairs, received envoys and obtained concessions for them from their husbands, built temples, founded cities, engaged mercenaries, commanded armies, held fortresses, and acted on occasion as regents or even co-rulers.[20]

If Luke, the Greek physician (Col 4:11, 14), was the author of Acts,[21] he certainly was aware of the societal prominence of Macedonian women.

7. *The conversion of Lydia and the initial mention of the demonized slave girl are included in the first section in Acts in which the author's perspective changes from "they" to "we" (16:10–17), implying that the author was an eyewitness*[22] *to their roles*. If this implication is correct, Luke was personally very impressed with the crucial roles of the Philippian women to the emerging church in that key city (16:12).

8. *The inclusion of τις ("a certain") before the naming of Lydia in 16:14 is a feature of emphasis in the style of Acts.*[23] Further, the wording "a certain woman named . . ." is the virtual counterpart of the description of the previous ground-breaking male convert, Cornelius, the Gentile centurion (10:1). Also it is probably to be understood as parallel to the wording "a certain dis-

[18] See e.g. L. Portefaix, *Sisters* 24 n. 115; C. J. Hemer, "Lydia and the Purple Trade," *New Documents* 3 (1978) 53–55.

[19] For a relevant discussion of the variants in the Greek text in 17:4, 12 see B. Witherington, III, "Anti-Feminist Tendencies of the 'Western' Text in Acts," *JBL* 103 (1984) 82–84.

[20] W. W. Tarn and G. T. Griffith, *Hellenistic Civilisation* (3d ed.; London: Edward Arnold, 1952) 98–99.

[21] A brief discussion in favor of Lukan authorship is found in Bruce, *Acts* 7; the opposite opinion is held by, e.g., C. K. Barrett, "Acts and the Pauline Corpus," *ExpTim* 88 (1976–77) 4.

[22] Following this reading of the evidence is, e.g., Bruce, *Acts* 7. An example of a specialized study taking a very different slant on the "we"-passages is E. Haenchen, "'We' in Acts and the Itinerary," *JTC* 1 (1965) 65–99.

[23] S. Levinsohn, "Participant Reference in Koine Greek Narrative," *Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation* (ed. D. A. Black; Nashville: Broadman, 1993) 32.

ciple," which introduces key characters like Ananias of Syrian Antioch (9:10) and Timothy (16:1). Most tantalizing of all, however, is the comparison with "a certain female disciple named Tabitha" (9:36; the only usage of the feminine form of "disciple," *mathētria*, in the NT),[24] implying that Lydia (16:14) is being introduced as a very important "female disciple waiting-to-happen," so to speak, somehow following after the pattern of Dorcas.

In summary, as in Philippians the women focused on in Acts 16 are seen as prominent beyond any reasonable doubt. In fact it is not too much to say that the author's portrayal of the church at Philippi "from the first day" (Phil 1:5) presents those women as absolutely essential partners in the foundational development of that congregation that Paul loved "with the affection of Christ Jesus" (1:8, NIV).

III. CONCLUSION

From the evidence that has been presented, three intertwined conclusions can be drawn: (1) Philippians and Acts clearly agree[25] in portraying the significance of key women in the church at Philippi; (2) Philippians tactfully but directly addresses a growing rift in which the prominent women, Euodia and Syntyche, are the central figures; and (3) Acts 16, in harmony with Phil 4:3, indicates that these roles of women in the Philippian church[26] had begun (i.e. with at least Lydia and the slave girl) in a very positive light.

There is thus no reason to suspect that the present-tense disunity and self-centeredness that Paul was targeting in Phil 2:2–4; 4:2–3 was either chronic or unfairly critical of women.[27] Unfortunately it is not known from the NT or extra-Biblical sources whether Euodia and Syntyche resolved their conflict and again became exemplary partners in the gospel (1:5, 27). Still, with Craddock[28] "we can hope Euodia and Syntyche were mature enough to accept" the admonition of Paul and the help of other concerned believers. All things considered, it is not improbable that "Paul's plea was heeded."[29]

Whatever happened, though, the short-term behavior of the apostle's long-term female coworkers (4:3) in no way undercuts the importance attributed to them. Rather, it merely communicates a sobering note of reality

[24] See the helpful discussion in B. Witherington, III, "Dorcas," *ABD* 2.225. For a much more detailed development of the wider significance of Dorcas and her ministry see A. B. Luter, "Tabitha/Dorcas: A Model Disciple?" (unpublished paper); "A Model Disciple: Dorcas" in A. B. Luter and S. Chapin, *Women as Christ's Disciples: Biblical Models for Modern Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

[25] This agreement is attributed by some (e.g. Portefaix, *Sisters* 135) to Luke's theology as overriding history in his writing or his less than objective portrayal of Paul as his hero. Though Bruce (*Acts* 15) agrees generally with Paul's "hero" status in Acts, he also strikingly asserts that Luke is the greatest Greek historian between Polybius and Eusebius (ibid. 16 n. 67).

[26] Portefaix, *Sisters* 168–170, discusses how Acts presents women of all social classes, lending dignity (and prominence) to all of them.

[27] What is said about Euodia and Syntyche is, e.g., obviously not nearly so strong as what Paul expressed about Hymenaeus and Alexander elsewhere (1 Tim 1:19–20; 2 Tim 2:17–18; 4:14–15).

[28] F. Craddock, *Philippians* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 70.

[29] Martin, *Philippians* 152, citing J.-F. Collange.

that reminds contemporary readers that even those who have distinguished themselves by contending together (4:3) as partners in the gospel (1:5) can still get mired in petty disputes[30] that, regardless of gender, may potentially polarize an otherwise quite healthy congregation.

It must be understood in no uncertain terms that key roles among God's people require modeling the kind of Christ-like attitude (cf. 2:5–11) and servant-leadership (Matt 20:26–27) actions that make for the edification, unity (Phil 2:2–4) and growing maturity (Eph 4:11–13) of all believers in the Church. With the exception of the relatively recent difference between Euodia and Syntyche that had been allowed to fester to a dangerous point, the focal women in the church at Philippi are just such positive examples of gospel partnership.[31]

[30] Craddock, *Philippians* 70.

[31] A more popular and expanded version of this material can be found as "Partners in the Gospel: Women in the Philippian Church" in Luter and Chapin, *Women as Christ's Disciples.*