

EXAMPLES OF WOMEN LEADERS

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Whenever the subject of hospitality is discussed, poor Martha's name is always brought up (Luke 10:38–42). Yet what Martha was doing was important, too. She was being a good hostess. She wanted everything to be just right for the most important and beloved person she knew. Her only desire was to serve Him and honor Him. And yet Jesus rebuked her, albeit gently. Why? It was because she, at least for the moment, put good and important things ahead of best and most important things. It was not that Jesus condoned laziness (and certainly nobody would accuse Mary of being lazy), nor did He condemn preparing for guests; but it was right for Mary, along with her sister, to put the spiritual things ahead of the material things.

Whenever I read or hear this passage, I am reminded of a salty old Christian lady who once said, "The next time I hear a preacher condemn women for being "Marthas," spending time preparing the house and a meal rather than concentrating exclusively on the Word of God, I'm going to feed him a sandwich for lunch!" She had a point. It does take time and effort (more than many men comprehend) to be a good hostess, and it is so easy to lose track of those most important things. As an example of the "Martha syndrome," my husband (as had my father) has preached at more than one church where a woman would miss Sunday morning Bible classes and worship in order to prepare a big meal for him/us. There can be no question that Jesus would administer the same (or possibly an even more severe) rebuke to her as he did to Martha. We would have preferred to have sandwiches!

We all remember the Shunnamite woman, who asked her husband if they could

build a guestroom for Elisha, so he could stop and rest as he traveled (2 Kin. 4:8–37). Apparently the idea was altogether hers; she was the instigator and leader, but she didn't push her husband. She was respectful, humble, and courteous. She asked.

Priscilla, along with her husband, Aquila, provided a place in their house for the church to meet (Rom. 16: 3–5). Mary the mother of John Mark did the same thing (Acts 12:12). We may tend to discount this as “no big deal,” but it required some effort on their part to prepare the house for their guests each time the church gathered. We are not told this definitely, but there are indications that they shared a meal after worship, also (1 Cor. 11:17–34). Even if they all brought food, the burden was on the hostess.

Lydia was apparently a prosperous business woman (see Pro. 31). We know she was in Philippi on business (Acts 16:13–40), but her home was in Thyatira. She was wealthy enough to have a house in Philippi also, which she offered to Paul and his company for the duration of their stay in Philippi.

Deborah (Jud. 4:1–24) was one of Israel's judges, and so far as I can remember, the only female judge. God chose these judges; they did not take the leadership upon themselves. Deborah sat under a tree, assuming a meek and humble position, while the people came to her to be judged. She referred to herself as a “mother in Israel,” not as an authority figure. She had to urge Barak to take the lead in the fight against Sisera; Barak refused to go unless she would come with him. She told him she would come, but warned him that he would receive no glory, for Jehovah would give the Canaanites into the hands of a woman—not Deborah, but Jael (vv. 9, 17–24).

Esther was elevated to the position of Queen of Persia/Media (Est. 2:17), but her leadership role was greatly subordinate to the king's. In fact, he could, just by extending

his scepter to her, grant her request; or, by withholding it, he could condemn her to death (4:10–11). By using the wisdom given her by God, accompanied by meekness, discretion, and incredible courage and faith, she was able—spurred on and motivated by her guardian Mordecai—to accomplish the deliverance of her people, the Jews, from the wicked Haman.

Philip had four daughters who were prophetesses (Acts 21:9–10). Anna was a prophetess, a widow, who devoted her full time to the work of God (Luke 2:36–38). All of these women had been endowed by God and the Holy Spirit with miraculous gifts, yet we never read of their prophesying in public when men were present (Anna prophesied about Jesus when Mary and Joseph brought Him to the temple as an infant, but not in a public proclamation).

Priscilla in a similar way participated in the teaching and correcting of Apollos (Acts 18:24–28). For that matter, Mary the mother of Jesus and Elisabeth the mother of John were also prophetesses, at least for a time, and for a special purpose (Luke 1:39–56). Huldah was another Old Testament prophetess, but from all we can learn she did not prophesy publicly. The people came to her (2 Kin. 22:12–20).

During World War II, all of the men who had attended worship in the small rural congregation where I was born had gone off to fight. (The church at that time was meeting in the schoolhouse, since they had no building of their own.) But my grandmother, her daughters, and a daughter in law kept the worship going nevertheless. They led the singing and the prayers. One of them would read a Scripture and comment on it. They served the Lord's Supper. My Grandmother had also prepared that; she baked the unleavened bread after she had caught, killed, dressed, and fried a

chicken for dinner, after she had fed the other chickens and gathered the eggs, after she had milked the cows and turned them out to pasture, after she had built a fire in her wood cookstove and cooked breakfast: bacon, eggs, biscuits—the works.

Miriam provides a vivid example of a woman who was a leader and even a prophetess, but that was not good enough. She wanted more. She attempted to place herself (and Aaron) on an equal footing with Moses. Jehovah rebuked her sharply, reminding her that He spoke to Moses face-to-face, not in visions and dreams as He would to mere prophets (and prophetesses!). Miriam's punishment was severe; she was stricken with leprosy. Moses demonstrated his meekness, love, and humility by begging God to heal her immediately; but she was forced to live outside the camp for seven days, just as any other person would have been, until she was clean—and perhaps chastened (Num. 12:1–16)!

When Dorcas died, the widows stood around weeping and showing Peter the coats and garments she had made for them while she was alive (Acts 9:36–41). She may have been a widow herself, but she was willing to give what she had in service to others in need.

A good leader is first of all a good follower. The centurion who came to Jesus for help (Mat. 8:5–13) illustrated this truth. He was a leader of soldiers, but he was also subordinate to those in positions higher than his. He was willing to be a follower of Christ and to submit to Him. A good leader is never pushy and dictatorial, but encourages others and brings out the best in them. For instance, the husband is the head of the wife, and the wife must submit to her husband. However, the husband's leadership is a position of responsibility as well as of authority. He must love his wife as

Christ loved the church, and cherish her in the same way he nourishes and cherishes his own body. He must put her needs ahead of his, giving honor to her as the “weaker vessel.” A man who does these things is a good leader, and rare would be the wife who would not want to submit to his leadership.

Sarah obeyed Abraham (1 Pet. 3:5–6), and yet Abraham spoke to Sarah with respect. He **requested** a favor from her rather than **ordering** her to do it (Gen. 12:11–13; 20:1–14). Jesus’ twelve apostles followed Him for three and a half years, listening to, learning from, and imitating Him. But when Jesus returned to Heaven, and when the Holy Spirit endued them with power from on High, those same twelve men (allowing for the replacement of Judas with Matthias) were thrust into positions of leadership and authority (Acts 1 and 2). They learned to be good leaders by following and observing the Master.

Men in the church, and sometimes in the home, often refuse to take the lead, forcing women to take up the slack. However, this failure on the part of men does not give women the right to usurp any authority. In the past, they have often found ways to get things done quietly and discreetly, while remaining in the background; they still can. Women are ingenious, resourceful, tenacious, persistent, and intuitive—gifts bestowed upon them by God.

CONCLUSION

All of these women that we have observed were leaders, but they remained quietly in the background, being also good followers. Christian women can do the same, as many have throughout years past.