

WOMEN PASTORS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

by Rev. Kathryn Riss

The New Testament says very little about pastors. In fact, as a term for ministers, the word (*poimen*) appears only once in Ephesians 4:11. While the word is familiar to use from modern usage, we are uncertain as to the exact role of pastors in the New Testament or how they functioned in relation to elders, bishops and other leaders. Probably all these roles were fluid, being in the formative stages.

The meaning of the New Testament word "pastor" is "shepherd," and so we think of pastors as leaders who tend a flock. Psalm 23 speaks of the Lord as our Shepherd, teaching, leading, guiding and providing for us. Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd, setting a model for all true spiritual leaders who lay down their lives for the sheep. When Jesus called Peter the second time after His resurrection, He asked him to "feed my sheep." Thus, pastors are to nurture people and help them to grow.

While the New Testament does not tell us specifically what pastors did, we do know that both men and women provided spiritual leadership for churches which met in their homes. In the early church, almost all Christian meetings were held in private homes. Among these house-church pastors was Mary, the mother of John Mark, who later became a missionary with the apostles Paul and Barnabas. It was to her house church that Peter came in Acts 12:12 after an angelic visitor set him free from prison. The Bible says that many had assembled there and were praying, no doubt petitioning God for Peter's release. Their prayers were answered!

Another house church leader was Chloe, according to I. Corinthians 1:11. In that passage, Paul relates that "some of Chloe's household " had reported that there was strife among the Corinthian Christians. Those Chloe sent with this message to Paul were probably Christians who were members of her house church. They may have been relatives or household servants, or they may have been Christians who lives in the area and gathered at her home for worship. These believers would have come under Chloe's spiritual guidance, care and protection. But Chloe's influence extended beyond her own flock. Evidently, she had sent a deputation from her house church to Paul, who knew her or knew of her, to inform him of the need for correction in the Corinthian church. She was a trusted leader and source of reliable information for the apostle Paul.

Acts 16:14-15, 40 tells us about Lydia, Paul's first European convert to Jesus, who offered Paul hospitality in her home. Scripture relates that when Lydia was converted, her entire household was baptized and that her home became the first meeting place for European Christians. Lydia was a business woman who traded in valuable, dyed garments. The fact that Scripture mentions no husband or father indicates the high prominence of this woman. Since first-century Greek and Roman women were almost always under the legal guardianship of a husband or father, Lydia may well have been a wealthy widow or only daughter who inherited her parents' estate. Thus, she became the head of her own household. She either managed the family business or developed a business of her own after her husband's or father's death.

The Book of Acts says that Lydia's entire household was baptized upon her conversion to Christ. This follows the custom of ancient Roman families. Under paganism, household gods were believed to protect and help the family and its enterprises. Thus, it was the duty of members of these households, relatives, slaves, and their families to worship the gods adopted by the head of the household.

Roman households were often large since almost all businesses were home-based before the industrial age. Those who worked for Lydia in her business, and possibly others engaging in the trade who belonged to the dye-makers guild, would have been among her converts. By virtue of her position as head of household, Lydia had the opportunity and responsibility to lead all of its members to Christ and then to establish and lead them in the faith. This put her in a similar position to the modern-day pastor. To fulfill part of this responsibility, Lydia invited Paul to come and preach in her home.

Paul and Silas established their gospel mission headquarters in Lydia's house and no doubt preached there regularly. After their release from prison, Scripture tells us that they returned to Lydia's and, having met with the brethren, exhorted them. This may have been the first church planted on European soil, and its pastor was a woman.

Another New Testament woman who led a house church was Nympha (Col. 4:15). Paul sent greetings to her and to the church at her house. Some modern scholars try to get around this by saying that Nympha was "just" the hostess, not the pastor. If that were so, who did pastor her house church, and why would Paul so rudely fail to greet the pastor as well as the hostess?



Another woman house-pastor was Prisca, or Priscilla, as Paul often affectionately calls her. Romans 16:3-5 expresses his gratitude to her and her husband, Aquilla. This couple had a team ministry and worked with Paul in planting the gospel in Rome, Corinth and Ephesus. In his Roman letter, Paul sends greetings to the church that met in their house, which they pastored together.

It has often been pointed out by Greek scholars that Paul's practice of mentioning Prisca's name before that of her husband emphasizes that she was the more prominent leader. Just as today we would address a letter "Mr. and Mrs.," so in ancient times, the husband's name was customarily given before the wife's. Prisca must have been an outstanding Christian worker for Paul to have reversed custom by honoring her in this way.

The brief, personal letter II John is addressed to a church and its pastor, a woman with whom the apostle John evidently had warm ties. John opens the letter, "to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth. . ." "Children" was a term of endearment that John used for Christian believers. (I. John 2:1, 12, 18, 28). "Truth" was a term John often used in his writings for the revelation of Jesus (See, for example, John 1:14, 17; 8:32; 16:13; I. John 1:6-8; 2:4, 21; 3:19; II. John 4; III John 3-4.) The word "elect," while it usually refers to believers as chosen by God for salvation, can also be used to refer to the ordained clergy. The second-century church father Clement of Alexandria does this repeatedly in his Stromata book 6, chapter 13. John's use of these terms plus the general tone of the letter with its pastoral direction as in verse 10 demonstrate that II John was written to a Christian church, not just a family.

While scholars agree that II John was addressed to a church, most balk at the idea that the "elect lady" was its pastor. They try to get around this by spiritualizing these terms, saying that they are metaphors for the church. This approach ignores the universal Greek practice of naming a letter's recipient(s) at the beginning. Without an addressee or location, it cannot explain to whom or how the letter was delivered. It also ignores the plain sense of the text. Additionally, its logic is inconsistent because if both the "lady" and the "children" stand for the church, how could the letter be written to "the church and the church?" If so, to which church is it written? No one writes a letter to a symbol but to a real person or group.

Interestingly, both of the Greek words in II John 1 which are ordinarily translated into English as "elect" and "lady" were also used in the first century as women's names just as today we might name a girl "grace" or "Missy." A number of Greek manuscripts of II John 1 use initial capitals for either or both of these words, indicating personal usage.

In the second century, Clement of Alexandria identified the "elect lady" as a specific individual. He wrote that II John "was written to virgins. It was written to a Babylonian lady by name Electa." (*Clement of Alexandria, Fragments from Cassiodorus IV*, 1-2 tr. by William Wilson, *Fathers of the Second Century*, A. Cleveland Coxe, ed., New York: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885, vol. 2, p. 576.) Although he does not elaborate, it appears from this statement that Clement had heard of this woman and knew that she was the spiritual leader of virgins. Why he called her Babylonian is a mystery since Babylon had ceased to be a nation many generations earlier. Perhaps she was of Babylonian descent or came from pagan Rome, which Christians often derisively called "Babylon." Electa may have been the leader of an order of Christian virgins, or Clement may have assumed that her followers were virgins because of the growing emphasis on asceticism in his day, a half-century after the letter was written.

During the early and medieval periods of church history, it was very common for devout women to dedicate their homes for Christian worship and to attract other similarly minded people to join them. Usually, the converts who came under the pastoral care of such women were household members or women colleagues. In Electa's case, if Clement is correct, they were dedicated Christian virgins who constituted one of the order of the clergy in the ancient church along with widows.

This brief letter closes by conveying a greeting from the church of another woman-"the children of your elect sister greet you." This woman was evidently their pastor since John again uses the term "children" which in his writings means Christians under the care of a spiritual leader. Also, he calls her "elect" which either means ordained or chosen.

An interesting possibility exists that these two women pastors were natural sisters as well as sisters in the Lord and in His work. We know from the late third and early fourth century church historian Eusebius that in his later years, the apostle Philip and two of his four daughters who were prophetesses lived at Hierapolis in Asia. A third daughter lived in Ephesus, the city where John preached. Unlike the other apostles who were martyred decades earlier, the apostle John lived to a very old age, possibly over 100 years. Close ties existed between John, the church at Ephesus, and Philip and his daughters. It is possible that after Philip's death, John wrote his second epistle to one of Philip's surviving daughters still ministering at Hierapolis (the "elect lady" or "Lady Electa") and conveyed greetings from her sister's church at Ephesus. If so, we have in II John evidence that these daughters of Philip established and led Christian communities.

The fourth-century church historian Eusebius quotes a letter written by Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, to Victor, bishop of Rome between 189-198 AD. "For in Asia, also, mighty luminaries have fallen asleep, which shall rise again at the last day, at the appearance of our Lord, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall gather again all the saints. Philip, one of the twelve apostles who sleeps in Hierapolis, and his two aged virgin daughters. Another of his daughters, who lived in the Holy Spirit, rests at Ephesus. Moreover, John, that rested on the bosom of our Lord, who was a priest that bore the sacerdotal plate, and martyr and teacher, he also rests at Ephesus." Quite possibly, the "elect lady" and her "elect sister" of II John are two of these "mighty luminaries" who "lived in the Holy Spirit" and whom Polycrates and Eusebius commemorated. (*Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History*, book III, chapter. xxxi tr. by Christian Frederick Cruse, Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Book House, 1955, p. 116.)