

Dr. Craig Keener, Romans, Session 17,

Romans 16:7-20

6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

All right, let's jump right in. We're going to look at a letter. It's almost 2000 years old, sent by the Apostle Paul to this tiny community right in the heart of the Roman Empire, and buried, I mean, hidden in plain sight in the final chapter in this long list of names is a detail that just might flip everything we thought we knew about leadership in the early church.

Yeah. And that one little detail brings up a question that's, well, it's pretty shocking. Could it be, is it even possible that the Bible names a woman as an apostle? You know, one of the most foundational leadership roles in the entire movement.

That's exactly what we're going to dig into. And here it is. This is the verse that starts it all.

Romans 16 verse seven: Paul is sending his greetings to two people, Andronicus and Junia. And then he says they are outstanding among the apostles. So who on earth was Junia, and what does that phrase actually mean? So this one name, Junia, it's not just a name.

It's like a key that unlocks this huge historical and theological puzzle. To figure it out, we've got to unpack the language, the context, the history, everything surrounding this single controversial verse. Okay.

To really get to the bottom of this, it all boils down to two big questions. First, was this person, Junia, actually a woman? That's the big one. And second, what does outstanding among the apostles really mean? Does it mean she was one of them or just that the other apostles thought she was great? All right, let's tackle that first question.

For centuries, people argued the name was Junius, a man's name. But honestly, the scholarship on this today is just overwhelming. Junia was a woman's name in ancient texts, period.

They found zero exceptions. And that idea that Junius was some kind of male version, it just doesn't work linguistically for Latin names. So the evidence is crystal clear.

Junia was a woman. Okay. So she's a woman.

Check. But what about that second question? Was she an apostle? Now you probably hear apostle, and you immediately think of the 12 disciples, right, Peter, James, John, but Paul actually used that term for a much broader group of foundational leaders, people like himself, James, Silas, Timothy. And when you look at the grammar of that phrase, outstanding among the apostles, it really, really suggests she was part of this group, not just some outsider they all respect.

So look, when you put the pieces together, the name is clearly female, and the title apostle was used for this wider circle of leaders. The most straightforward reading is exactly what it sounds like. Junia was a prominent female apostle in the early church.

Simple as that. I mean, that is a huge discovery, but it immediately makes you ask the next logical question, right? Was Junia a total fluke, a complete one-off, or was she part of a bigger pattern of female leadership that maybe we've just been missing? We'll get this. Right here in the same chapter, Paul talks about Phoebe.

He calls her a diakonos, which we often translate as deacon or minister. And let's be clear, this isn't some helper role. This is one of the main titles Paul used for his own ministry and for his closest male colleagues.

And then there's Prisca, whom he mentions with her husband Aquila. Paul calls them his synergos, his fellow workers. Again, not a minor title.

This is the other key term Paul used for his most trusted ministry partners. So think about it. We've got a female apostle, a female minister, and a female fellow worker, all mentioned in the same chapter.

That's starting to look like a pattern. And you know what? This pattern of women in leadership wasn't even new for them. If you look back into the Old Testament, you find Deborah.

She wasn't just a prophetess. She was the judge over all of Israel. I mean, that's the highest leader in the land, speaking for God and ruling the nation.

Or how about Huldah? There's this incredible moment when the King of Judah finds a lost scroll of God's law. He's terrified and wants to know what it means for the whole country. So who does he send his high priest to talk to? Not the prophet Jeremiah, who was right there, but Huldah.

Her word was taken as the authoritative word of God. The King listened to her. And for the early church, this wasn't just some dusty old history.

This was prophecy coming true right before their eyes. At the very birth of the church, you have the apostle Peter quoting the prophet Joel. He stands up and declares that in this new era, God's Spirit would be poured out so that both your sons and your daughters would prophesy.

Okay, now I know what you might be thinking. This all sounds great, but what about those other verses? The ones where Paul seems to say the complete opposite, that women should keep silent in church. And that's a totally fair question.

We have to tackle the counterevidence head-on if we're going to be honest about this. This is where understanding the difference between a universal forever command and a specific instruction for a specific situation is absolutely crucial. Many scholars point out that the command in one Corinthians 14 seems to be about stopping disruptive questions during a service and the one in one Timothy two.

That's in a letter. That's all about warning against false teachers who are specifically targeting and misleading women. So in both cases, it's very possible.

This was a targeted solution for a local problem, not a blanket rule for all time. And here's the real clincher. In his own letters, Paul clearly assumes women are speaking in church.

Just a few chapters before he says, "Keep silent in first Corinthians, he's giving instructions for how women should be dressed when they pray and prophesy in public. You literally cannot prophesy while being silent. So that right there tells us the issue is way more complex than just one verse.

So we have this pattern of female leadership, right? But it seems like it's especially concentrated in this one letter to the church in Rome. Why? What was so special about that community? This brings us to the final and maybe the most fascinating piece of the whole puzzle. I mean, the social snapshot we get of the early Roman church from this chapter is just incredible.

It was so diverse. You've got names Paul greets that were common for slaves, right alongside people connected with Herod's royal family and even the emperor's inner circle. This was not some backwater group.

They were complex and seriously well-connected. And that context, that context is everything because it reveals this crucial insight: it's probably not a coincidence that the two places where Paul names the most women in ministry, Rome and Philippi, happen to be two of the most gender progressive places in the entire Roman Empire at that time. This connects all the dots.

It seems like Paul didn't have this single rigid universal rule for how every church should be structured. Instead, it looks like in places where the culture around them was more open to women in public roles, the church let those leadership gifts shine and be recognized. And that leaves us with a final timeless question.

What this deep dive into a 2000-year-old letter really suggests is a powerful principle for today. It asks us to think about this. Could it be that the number of leaders we have in any community isn't some fixed number, but that it actually grows or shrinks based on one simple thing?

Whether or not we're willing to welcome their gifts.