

# Episode 158 Tell Her Story

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

## **Nijay Gupta**

Hi, my name is Nijay Gupta. I serve as Professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary in Chicago.

## **David Capes**

Dr. Nijay Gupta, Nijay. Great to see you, my friend,

## **Nijay Gupta**

David, good to see you again.

## **David Capes**

I know it's been a little while since we've had a chat over this microphone and over Zoom, but I'm glad to see you. You've been with us before on two podcasts. One on Paul and the language of faith in 2020. In 2022, we talked about your book *15 New Testament Words*, that was really terrific. And so this time we are talking about another book that you've written, (Man, you're writing a lot of books) called *Tell Her Story*. And here's the subtitle, (I love the subtitle) *How Women Led, Taught and Ministered in the Early Church*. And it's published by IVP Academic. First of all, congratulations on the book.

## **Nijay Gupta**

Thank you. Yes, you know, sometimes books you write are just part of your profession, like a commentary. And some of them are like passion projects, where you get to write on something you're really excited about, topically or something related to personal life. This is one of those books that touches my passions and interests in ministry. And my wife is in ministry. So just exciting that a book like this is getting some interest and starting some discussions.

## **David Capes**

So, you've come to this position after thinking about this for a number of years. Talk a little bit about that journey for you. How did it happen?

## **Nijay Gupta**

I grew up in Ohio, the heartland. And the church that I was a part of as a young person was a conservative Brethren church. Men were the pastors and elders and women often played supporting roles. And I didn't think anything of it. I was a convert from Hinduism. And I just assumed the Bible talks about this. It's just the way it is. Nobody seemed upset about it. Nobody was protesting it. I went to college, got involved in some campus ministry, similar scenario, where women are in more supportive roles. Men are up front with a microphone.

And it really wasn't until seminary that I started to rethink some things, when I started to encounter students from a variety of different denominations. I didn't even know they existed from Pentecostal denominations or Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal. And I started to meet women studying for ministry,

couples that are in ministry together. And I really started to wonder, where do they look in the Bible for supporting their view? I'll tell you a kind of a funny part of my story is, I was a very conservative Presbyterian. When I started seminary, I was a big fan of John Piper and Wayne Grudem. And Tim Keller. And so, I actually wrote my first systematic theology paper on why women shouldn't be pastors.

**David Capes**

Oh, I didn't know that. Wow!

**Nijay Gupta**

And I don't know why I chose that subject. I think that maybe I was trying to prove my credentials for that club. You know, what eventually became the Gospel Coalition. I don't know why, but I did. And then I started to meet these women in the M.Div. program. They had the same beliefs as I did. They trusted scripture, had a high view of inspiration and inerrancy, and all those things. And I had to start rethinking things because I was taught these women are liberal. They're putting culture before God. And they weren't. And I had professors that were supportive of women in ministry, and I thought, gosh, if these professors know the Bible through and through, where did they get this from?

So, I did about a year and a half deep study. I met my wife around that time. She was a seminary student, and we started to think through and study things together. And I read Gordon Fee and Ben Witherington. I remember reading F.F. Bruce, Walt Kaiser, Gordon Fee, Ben Witherington, Craig Keener, and Linda Belleville. If these very conservative, very pious scholars can support women in ministry then it's not really a conservative- liberal issue. I was always afraid I would fall into this pit of liberalism and just not be able to find my way out. Ben Witherington was kind of one of my heroes back then. And to meet the scholars who I have the highest level of respect and just to see the things they'd written. So, I ended up writing my final systematic theology paper on why women must be pastors.

**David Capes**

A little bit of evolution and development there!

**Nijay Gupta**

A little evolution there. I got an A on that paper, by the way, David.

**David Capes**

Good. I'll give you an A on the book too, as well. How about that?

**Nijay Gupta**

Thank you. I'll tell you, you know, people asked, what was it that changed your mind. It wasn't any one thing. It was more of that complementarianism, or a view that prohibits women from being pastors or lead pastors or elders. That view, I call it an edifice. Think of it like a Jenga tower of blocks. And what ended up happening is, as I read the scholars like R.T. France, and Walt Kaiser, a piece comes out that I thought was a really solid piece of that building. So, let's take the example of primogeniture, privilege of the firstborn. I kept hearing this argument when I was a teenager, Adam was made first. And that gives him priority. We call this primogeniture, but then I think R.T. France pointed out, God has a pattern of purposely not choosing the first. Whether it's Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, right?

There's this pattern where God's going to do the opposite of what you expect, because it's about His glory, and not our privilege.

And so that started to erode this idea that, okay, the disciples were men, the kings were men. But then you have Deborah, who is a very pious, successful, righteous leader in one of Israel's darkest times, one of the earlier chapters. And it's a great chapter, by the way. So, these things start to raise questions. Romans 16 has all these women who are in ministry. Phoebe and Junia, Tryphaena, and Tryphosa and Mary of Rome and Persis, And the sister of Nereus, the mother of Rufus. You know, all these people. And what ends up happening is it starts to pull blocks out of that Jenga tower. And you start to realize this complementarian edifice is getting really rickety. And then you add to that personal experience of women who are filled with the Spirit, who are gifted in leadership, like my wife, or like many of my students, and you start to think, why would we stop women from doing this? Because I think the old line is women are gullible, women are easily deceived. Women are better at nurturing; they aren't as intelligent. And in my own experiences that just isn't proven true. For a long time, my boss was a woman, and she was an excellent scholar and leader.

### **David Capes**

Yes, some of my best students over the years, probably yours too, have been women. But in terms of sheer intelligence, some of that really is leftover going all the way back to Aristotle. I actually spoke on the household codes this past Sunday. And Aristotle makes the statement, and this is true across the ancient world that women were considered somehow defective, inferior. They're defective men. If they could, they would be men. So that's the world into which Paul is speaking, and I think that's a part of what we have to keep in mind. And you help us keep that in mind through the book. A lot of your negotiation in the book is negotiating through Paul.

### **Nijay Gupta**

Well, one of the tag lines in my book is we spent a lot of time talking about what women can and can't do. But when we look at the New Testament, and we look at early Christianity, women were everywhere, doing virtually everything. And so let me give you just a little bit of backdrop, and then one example, and we can just take that as a springboard. But people ask me why did it take me almost 20 years to write this book? And part of it is that I was just getting my career going and still learning.

But I think a big catalyst was that famous cultural moment in 2019, when John MacArthur said about Beth Moore, "Go home". MacArthur was at a conference, and someone asked him, what are two words that come to mind when you hear the name, Beth Moore? Beth Moore is a popular Christian teacher, Bible teacher. And MacArthur said, "Go home". You could take all kinds of connotations about that. But the idea that she's causing trouble for Southern Baptists, so she needs to be quiet. She needs to focus on her home. However you take that, what I realized as I'm studying Paul, is women are often found outside the home. For example, Euodia and Syntyche are two Philippian Christian women, who Paul said contend with me side by side for the gospel, which is language of fighting and war. So, whatever they're doing, they're not sitting around baking cookies. Not that there's anything wrong with that. They're not folding laundry, not that there's anything wrong with that. They're out doing what we think of as frontlines ministry.

But just to give a quick example, one of the people that I give some time to talk about is a woman named Ninfa. They almost named her the most important Christian you've never heard of. Because she is somewhere in the Lycus\_Valley, modern day Turkey, Syria. And she is what we think of as an independent female leader of a house church, because Paul talks about Ninfa, and the church that meets in her home. And I used to think, oh, if you're a host, you're just unlocking the door, leaving some snacks and lemonade out and you're disappearing. Similar to if you're hosting a Young Life meeting. But in the ancient world, that wouldn't be true. If you're the host, it is a big deal. Think about what Jesus says to the people that host him poorly. You should have kissed my feet, you should have anointed me with oil. Hosts have a big responsibility, and leadership, because they're kind of like a small business CEO, versus just someone that happens to own a house. And so the Ninfas, or the Apphia says, who's partnering with Philemon, or the Priscilla and Aquila, are the women that seem to be heavily involved in ministry. And it's hard then to say today, hey, no, no, no, you can't preach, you can't do these things. And so I really wanted to shine a spotlight on the named women, leaders of the early church that most of us have never even heard their names before.

### **David Capes**

Yes. What difference do you think it would make if pastors and church leaders began talking about these women? In other words, celebrating their stories, doing what your book does, telling the story? You're able to go through a number of these, but there's still many, many more. So, what difference would it make, do you think, for the church, if that began to happen?

### **Nijay Gupta**

You know, I get this question a lot, because people ask, what is the church missing when it doesn't have a female preacher or teacher or leader or pastor, and I think about it this way, David. If a church has one pastor, whoever that pastor is, young, old, Indian, European, whatever it is, the congregation tends to associate God with their pastor in terms of personality and voice. It's just natural that you're going to experience God through your pastor. We get the word vicar from vicarious. They become an agent of God. You know, kind of like a priest. So, if it's just a male voice that people are hearing, naturally, they're going to associate God with being male. If it's an older person's voice, or a particular accent, they're going to associate God with that.

And we must remember that God is neither male nor female. Right? God has motherly qualities and fatherly qualities. And just as Paul talks about his own apostleship in those ways. So, I think we end up with a one dimensional understanding of God. And I think we're missing the fact that women can exercise amazing gifts in the church for our benefit. Let's take the example of preaching. There's just a rule that a preacher tends to preach to themselves, especially an immature preacher. So I tend to preach to the vices of my own personality. I struggle maybe with insecurity, or I struggle with shame. And I'll end up preaching a lot of sermons that have the same punch line that reflects the ways I want to grow as a Christian. But there's so many different kinds of Christians in the audience or the congregation. And so it takes different personalities, male and female, teaching, leading, preaching, to be able to give the full gospel to the whole people of God. We're really just delivering half the gospel if we just limit ourselves in that way.

### **David Capes**

Yes, really, really interesting. I'm in such agreement with so much of what you're saying and the concerns that I have for the church at this point. You have whole chapters dedicated to some of the people you talk about in the book, for example, Phoebe and Prisca and Junia. A lot of times people think of Junia as a male. Some of the earlier translations have her as a male. So when did that revelation kick in for you? That Junia is not a man, but Junia is a woman?

### **Nijay Gupta**

If I'm being perfectly honest before seminary, I probably never read Romans 16, where Junia is mentioned.

### **David Capes**

It's one of those chapters you jump over.

### **Nijay Gupta**

Yes, it's kind of the end credits. It feels like the end credits of a movie, and you don't really pay attention. There was a series of lectures that Beverly Gaventa gave and they're on YouTube. And she gave a lecture on the women of Romans 16. And I remember watching those lectures probably 10 years ago, and they just profoundly transformed my understanding of the contributions of early Christian women. So, I'd say I trace it to her. I would not have known that Junius with an S is a male name. And Junia with an A is a female name. But that is how it works when we look at the English translations. I thought you were going to ask why there are differences in translations. And you know this because you work directly with Bible translations. But I'm going to give you the short version of the story. In Greek text, it's generally unclear what biological gender, the person is that's named there. But Junia is a widely known name from that time. And Junias isn't. Junias is, hypothetically, a short version of the male name Junianas. But even Junianas is not a name from that time. It's just a speculation. And so it makes a lot of sense that her name is Junia. It could be a husband and wife, situation, Andronicus and Junia.

But here's what's interesting. There's a scholar named Eldon Epp who studied biblical manuscripts. That was his expertise. And he was able to trace that Junia was widely known as this person in Rome, throughout the patristic period, which is like third century, fourth century, fifth century, sixth century. And really, sometime probably in the 12th or 13th century, there was a tendency in the manuscript tradition to prefer transitioning it to a male name. It wasn't absolute. But there was a kind of preference that became dominant because she is referred to as an apostle. And there are probably some scribes or theologians that thought that's not possible. This must be a man. And it really wasn't until the 1970s and 80s with Bernadette Bruton and Eldon Epp, that there was this kind of full recovery of the female identity of this woman Junia who's pretty amazing.

Because she was not only an apostle, and she might have even walked as one of the disciples of Jesus. Some patristic writers speculate that she was part of the 70 that were sent out by Jesus Himself in Luke 10. But she also shared prison time, either with Paul or around the same time as Paul. And here's something interesting, David, that I learned that I don't find in a lot of other books on the subject. Women rarely went to prison, and they only went to prison for high crimes. You don't go to prison for stealing a loaf of bread or shoplifting. You go to prison for crimes that are considered a direct threat to

the Roman order. So Junia is doing something pretty bad in the eyes of Rome to get thrown in prison. And even the term that Paul uses isn't his normal term for going to prison, which means to be in chains. He uses one of my favorite Greek words, *sunachmalotos*, which means fellow prisoner of war. Which means she's being thrown into a serious incarceration situation. Now he is using it as a metaphor because they weren't actually in war with Rome. But it's this idea that she's doing what we call hard time. And David, you know this from studying Paul; it's probably the highest mark of a Christian in Paul's book to do hard time; to be in chains for Jesus Christ. He only says that about a few people Eristarchis and a couple other people, Epaphrus. There are only three people I think that he says have done hard time, Andronicus and Junia. A couple other people. This is the greatest mark. In fact, John Chrysostom says, blessed be the chains. He wants to kiss the chains. Better to have the chains on your hands than have the power of healing in your hands.

### **David Capes**

What a great wordsmith.

### **Nijay Gupta**

Yes, he was golden tongued.

### **David Capes**

Yes. Well, one of the things I didn't know, though I had looked through Roman 16 a number of times and found a lot of women's names. I didn't know that 10 out of 26 were women's names. I think that's remarkable. When you think about the kind of world into which early Christianity comes, it's not a matriarchal world. It's not really a world of equality. It's a world where it's strongly, at least in the public sphere, dominated by men.

### **Nijay Gupta**

You know, what's amazing is I could not find another list in the whole Roman world of nine women in one place with only positive things said about them. Now you might have a census, you might have a family tree, but nothing like this where it's not just a list of names. He's commending these people. I called it an honor roll. You know, he's saying this is the best of us. I was just at my son's eighth grade graduation. And they give out awards. Why do we give out awards? We're saying they're doing the kinds of behaviors that we think are the virtues and models that we should all emulate. That's why we give out these awards, right. And this is what Paul's doing. And I heard something really interesting from a scholar named Andrew Clark. He makes the argument that Paul is putting flesh onto his statement in Galatians, neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free. Because of that list of about 30 people in Romans 16, Paul intentionally names, Jewish names, and non-Jewish names. Herodion is a Jewish name, but a lot of the names in there are not Jewish names. Slave or free, some of the names are slave names like Urbanus and Ampliatus, because they're descriptive names. And some of the names probably are names of elites in that list. Phoebe is probably on the wealthier end. And what's interesting, David, is in most of Paul's letters, and you know this, he rarely names people at the end. And when he does it, maybe one or two people, so to name almost 30 people is certainly intentional. And all the commendations in there, which they would already know. Epaphnetus is the first Christian covert in Asia. He's not telling them things they don't know. He's commending them. And Luke Timothy Johnson pointed this out. If you put your thumb over all those names, based on the

commendations, you wouldn't know whether they're male or female, and that's unusual in the Roman world. In the Roman world, you would have a tendency to genderize the commendation. Women are sweet, faithful, good caretakers of the family, and men are rough and tough and brave and strong. And he doesn't do that. All of them get the same commendation. This is what they are. They toil for the gospel, and they work hard for the Lord. That's the most common commendation whether male or female. And I think that's helpful as we think about what ministry should look like.

### **David Capes**

This is a terrific book and a great conversation, Dr. Nijay Gupta. We're talking about his book, *Tell Her Story; How Women Led, Taught and Ministered in the Early Church*. I recommend the book. You've got to think about it. You've got to ponder it, read through the stories. Let those stories inform you about the women of the earliest churches. Dr. Nijay Gupta, thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel.

### **Nijay Gupta**

My pleasure.

### **David Capes**

it's always good to talk to Dr. Nijay Gupta. We're going to put information in the show notes about his earlier podcast. So be sure to check those out. Because they're always good. You know, one of the things we didn't talk about in the podcast is the fact that he concludes the book by talking about those passages in Paul's letters that are often used to limit women in ministry. And so, what about Paul prohibiting women from teaching in the church? That's a kind of an appendix to the book? And then he also says, what about submission text in New Testament household codes? He tackles both of those. Now, you may not agree with all of his conclusions, but it is definitely worth considering.

### **A Nugget of Wisdom from Dr. Nijay Gupta**

One of the earliest titles for Christians was *Chrestianoī*, because it was kind of a misunderstanding of the word Christian and *Chrestianoī* comes from even a common slave name, which means useful, but it could also mean good. And Christians actually came to embrace that mispronunciation. So, what we learned from that is, Christian people were supposed to be kind people. So, go and be kind