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The Growth, Decline, and Transformation of the Diaconal Ministry and the Role of Women Deaconesses in the Early Churches

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Abstract: The objective of this article is to restore the credibility of the church within society by reestablishing its public role. Through the study of the lives and activities of women ministers in early Christianity, the research reveals that early Christianity initially granted equal authority to the ministries of diakonia (service to society) and the ministry of the Word, but gradually diminished the role of diakonia while stripping women of their status and authority. Therefore, to fully reinstate the genuine spirit of Christ, it is emphasized that the Korean church must regain the church's public presence and recover the spirit of Jesus within the scattered congregations that currently exist.

Keywords: diakonia; early Christianity; publicness of the church; women deaconesses

1. Introduction

This paper is an exploration of the ministry of women deaconesses in early Christianity through an analysis of biblical texts and various early Christian documents. It aims to shed light on the evolving perception of the Church regarding the Diaconal Ministry and the consequent transformations in the roles and status of female ministers. Moreover, it endeavors to provide guidance to the Presbyterian Church of Korea in its pursuit of a redefined role as agents of change and service in the world, rather than a sole focus on church-centered worship practices.

Today, the world is grappling with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, demanding innovative solutions for reshaping 21st-century civilization. If the changes brought about by this pandemic are inevitable challenges, then the question of how to respond to these challenges becomes crucial for reconstructing society post-pandemic.

In this context, the author argues that to regain the significant societal influence that the Church has lost during the pandemic period, contemporary churches in Korea must recapture the spirit of servanthood that the early Church embodied. This paper aims to explore the ministry of women deaconesses in the early Church, drawing insights from the primitive Church's understanding of the diaconate and the consequent transformations in the roles and status of women ministers.

In the early Christian centuries, women held prominent leadership roles in home-based congregations, rising to clerical positions using methods similar to those in Roman and Greek society seeking public office. They received training primarily through their roles as household managers, establishing authority in this domain. In the historical period spanning from 111 to 113 CE, Pliny the Younger, who held the esteemed position of governor in the region of Bithynia, corresponded with Emperor Trajan to seek guidance on the appropriate course of action regarding the Christian community. Within this written communication, Pliny documented his inquiry into the beliefs and practices of Christians, specifically recounting his interrogation of two female individuals known as “ministrae”, a term that can be linguistically equated with “diakonos” in the Latin language (Vyhmeister 2005, p. 137).



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However, by the third century, institutionalization transformed house churches into organized structures led by a monarchical bishop, leading to strong opposition against women's leadership roles over the following two centuries. During this time, polemical writings emerged advocating for male-only discipleship, citing support from prevailing Greco-Roman gender beliefs).

The research methodology employed in this study involves a dual approach combining document analysis focused on primary sources with historical research. Primary source materials include three primary sources: the *Didache* (Teachings of the Twelve Apostles), Hippolytus of Rome's *Apostolic Tradition*, and the *Didascalia*, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, to understand the nature of early Christian congregations (Burkitt 1930, p. 258). The scope of this study spans from the biblical era to the pre-medieval period, encompassing women who served in ordained roles within institutional churches.

Therefore, this study aims to shed light on the evolving worship practices and the roles of women in the Church throughout different historical periods, ranging from the biblical era to the early institutionalized Church. It underscores the need for contemporary Korean churches to revisit their core mission and reestablish themselves as Christian believers who serve the world as guardians of faith, rather than solely focusing on church-centered worship practices.

2. The Role of Women in the Bible Era

This chapter delves into the intricate relationship between the early Christian era, the diaconate's dynamic ministry, and the concept of "diakonia" or service, highlighting its profound influence on women's roles and their active participation in propagating the Gospel message, particularly through the transformative teachings and the inclusive approach of Jesus.

2.1. The Transformative Power of Diakonia

In the early Christian era, the dissemination of the Gospel was closely intertwined with the dynamic ministry of the diaconate. During this period, gatherings of believers revolved around the concept of "diakonia", or service. As Jesus traversed the region, individuals were drawn to him, not only to hear his teachings but also to witness his ministry, which encompassed the proclamation of the Gospel and the healing of the infirm. The New Testament narratives often depict Jesus performing miracles in intimate settings referred to as "oikos" or "oikia", signifying "home" and "family". This milieu naturally facilitated the active participation of women, slaves, and Gentiles in the propagation of the Gospel. Therefore, the Diaconal Ministry served as a potent instrument for bridging social gaps and conveying the Gospel, both through words and actions, in our contemporary world as rightly pointed out Stephanie Dietrich (Dietrich 2016, p. 320).

The author will first look at terminological clarifications. Kim Ok-soon pointed out that the heart of Jesus' Gospel message regarding the Kingdom of God lay the concept of "diakonia", signifying "to serve". This concept brought about a radical transformation in the status and role of women within the patriarchal Jewish society. Jesus identified himself as a "diakonos", one who serves at the table, and encouraged his disciples to transcend hierarchical power struggles and dominant structures by becoming "servants" ("diakonos") dedicated to serving and aiding others. This principle was manifested through the proclamation of the Gospel, communal meals, and the practice of "diakonia". Jesus, in his healing ministry, breached societal boundaries by employing the term "diakonein", which was commonly associated with domestic tasks typically carried out by women and slaves at the time. Consequently, Jesus dismantled societal barriers and acknowledged the leadership role of women within his disciple community (O. Kim 2015, pp. 488–89).

Karen Jo Torjesen pointed out the deliberate avoidance of the term "priest" by early Christians due to its association with pagan Greek and Roman religions. Instead, they employed a range of secular terms to describe their clergy, such as "diakonos" (minister), "apostolos" (missionary), "presbyteros" (elder), "episcopos" (overseer), "prophet", and

“teacher”. Over time, the titles of “bishop”, “priest”, and “deacon” became synonymous with key positions in the Christian church. Women held these positions during the early developmental phase of the church. The term “presbyter” (elder) was borrowed from the Jewish synagogue, which was governed by a council of elders. With the emergence of the bishop as the congregation’s leader, the presbyters worked under their guidance. The text noted a difference in translation between Catholic and Protestant scholars. Catholic historians translated “presbyter” as “priest”, while Protestant scholars retained the term “presbyter”, both indicating a fully ordained clergy member. However, when women held such titles, translators tended to diminish the importance of their roles. For instance, while male clergy members were often translated as “ministers”, women in similar roles were referred to as “deaconesses” (Torjesen 1995, p. 5).

2.2. The Role of Women as Leaders in the Bible Era

In the nascent period of Christianity, women played pivotal and multifaceted roles in shaping and advancing Christian communities. Before the development of a predominantly male hierarchy in the church, the earliest Christian communities operated as house-based groups where both women and men played leadership roles, particularly in the charismatic practice of prophecy (Miller 2005, p. 6). This is discernible in the community founded by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians. Barbara J. Machaffie has asserted that women were integral members of early Christian communities, participating in various roles, including evangelists, house church leaders, positions of leadership extending beyond house churches, as female prophets, and eliciting orthodox responses, including widows (MacHaffie 2006, p. 3).

Patricia Cox Miller indicated the role of women in early Christianity as teachers, prophets, martyrs, widows, deaconesses, ascetics, virgins, patrons, wives, mothers, and metaphors (Miller 2005, p. 1). Hyunju Bae said that the roles of women leaders in the New Testament era can be categorized into three apostolic categories: apostles as witnesses, charismatic missionary apostles, and officially commissioned apostles of the church (Bae 2009, pp. 75–77).

Firstly, Mary Magdalene emerges as a prominent exemplar who fulfilled the role of a disciple as a witness. Her steadfast companionship with Jesus, her service alongside him, her poignant witness to his crucifixion, and her unparalleled role as the first witness to his resurrection solidify her significance (Ruether and McLaughlin 1998, pp. 52–57).

Secondly, noteworthy charismatic leaders include the Jewish Christian couple, Andronicus and Junia. Similar to the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila, they functioned as a missionary team, exhibiting exemplary devotion. The commendation of Junia in Romans 16:7 as being “outstanding among the apostles” underscores her exceptional contributions. Notably, John Chrysostom’s writings extol Junia’s remarkable ministry and virtuous deeds, emphasizing her wisdom and the high regard in which she was held as an apostle (Wijngaards 2013, p. 26).

Thirdly, among the officially commissioned leaders of the church, Phoebe occupies a prominent position. Sent by the Corinthian church and endorsed by Paul to the Roman church as a leader, Phoebe was described by Paul as a helper of many, including himself, and he exhorted the saints to receive her with due honor and support (Wijngaards 2013, p. 213). Origen’s commentary on Romans 16:1–2 highlights Phoebe’s recognition as a ministerial authority and interpreter of apostolic doctrine (Wijngaards 2013, p. 217).

In the Eastern Christian tradition, the Mother of God is a powerful figure, owing both to her Christological importance and her role as intercessor and protector of faithful Christians (Behr-Sigel and Ware 2000, p. 280).

Additionally, women both within and outside institutional frameworks, such as the desert mothers and urban women, actively practiced their faith, pursued spiritual growth through asceticism and virtue, and challenged traditional teachings regarding women and sin. For example, in 1 Corinthians 14, 34 namely that women should be silent in the Church, but Alexandria’s Clement, in his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:5, provided evidence

of women co-laboring with apostles according to their respective ministries, challenging established interpretations.

In conclusion, early Christian women, in their capacities as disciples, witnesses, leaders, and co-laborers, made profound and multifaceted contributions to the formation and development of Christianity, effectively navigating the challenges posed by prevailing patriarchal norms and traditions.

3. The Growth of the Diaconal Ministry and the Role of Women in the 2nd and 3rd Century

The emergence of women deaconesses is distinctly recorded in the third century Syrian *Didascalia Apostolorum*, which delineates their responsibilities, including tasks that were considered inappropriate for male deacons, such as visiting women in their residences and anointing the bodies of female candidates undergoing baptism. Subsequently, starting from the fourth century onward, the nomenclature ‘deaconess’ gained prominence in the Eastern Christian tradition. These women were ordained through prayer and the laying on of hands, assuming a multifaceted ministry that encompassed the oversight of female participants in the liturgical assembly (Bradshaw 2013, p. 151).

3.1. The Growth of the Diaconal Ministry as a Sacred Ministry

In the early Christian community, two distinct types of venues, namely “domus ecclesiae” and “cimiteriums”, were essential for the performance of religious activities. Private residences, which were adapted to serve as house churches within the Christian context, typically comprised standard two-story Roman houses that were modified to accommodate the required functions. They lacked a specific architectural form and were often partitioned to serve their purpose. The sole surviving example of such a house church is found in Dura Europos (230 CE). Ancient wall paintings were stumbled upon by Captain M. C. Murphy’s troops while the British army was conducting patrols on the Syrian side of the middle Euphrates on 30 March 1920 (Peppard 2016, p. 12).

The architectural layout of the Dura Europos household church can be delineated into three distinct sections: the gathering space, the baptismal space, and the congregational space (J. Kim 2014, p. 88). In the initial phase, ordained deacons as ministers undertook a significant role within the ecclesiastical community by serving as the hosts for those entering the church, effectively functioning as custodians of the ecclesiastical inn. Their pivotal function was to discern the faith and disposition of individuals, thereby assuming the role of vigilant guardians of the congregation. Clad consistently in pristine white attire, embellished solely with a stole gracefully draped across their shoulders, they exemplified the embodiment of piety in all their endeavors (Gibson 1903, p. 12).

Within the baptismal space, women assumed responsibilities such as providing separate instruction for baptismal candidates who were not yet eligible for participation in the Eucharist. Furthermore, they actively conducted the anointing and baptismal rites. Baptized individuals would audibly profess, “One Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5) and assert, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28), underscoring the egalitarian nature of all believers in Christ (J. Kim 2014, p. 89). In the church order, candidates for baptism underwent a thorough examination of their conduct during their catechumenate period. If they had lived virtuously, honored widows, cared for the sick, and performed good deeds, they were deemed ready to hear the gospel before their baptism. This process was akin to the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and indicated an extended period of teaching and preparation before baptism (Bradshaw 1999, p. 143).

The widest area of the building, denoted as the congregational space, was established by connecting two rooms, providing a conducive environment for congregants to engage with the Word. It is inferred that an area designated for communion was likely present, with passageways and doors facilitating movement within this space (J. Kim 2014, pp. 88–89).

Deacons were ordained (Gibson 1903, p. 12) and required to serve others within the church with dedication, diligence, love, and a commitment to emulating the example of Christ and the Apostles. Their service was seen as both an act of service to the congregation and a demonstration of their faith (Gibson 1903, p. 79).

The role of women within the early Christian community finds notable exemplification in the context of baptismal ceremonies. Regarding Catechumens: it was recommended that the Church's leadership structure should have consisted of twelve elders, seven deacons, and fourteen subdeacons. Additionally, among the widows, the thirteen who occupied the foremost positions were to be acknowledged. A specific deacon, esteemed for their diligence and sound judgment among their peers, was to be selected to assume the role of hospitality and care for strangers within the ecclesiastical inn (Gibson 1903, p. 12).

During this era, people congregated in household churches or specific locales to partake in worship and to reaffirm their faith through baptism. Deacons, both men and women, played pivotal roles in these gatherings. They visited the homes of non-believers, shared the Word, offered prayers for the infirm, and administered the sacraments of baptism and anointing. Notably, references to women deaconesses can be traced back to the "Didascalia Apostolorum" from 3rd-century Syria. These deaconesses held distinct responsibilities, including visiting the homes of women and conducting baptisms for female candidates.

3.2. *The Growth of Women's Roles as Deaconesses as a Sacred Ministry*

As the 2nd century progressed, widows emerged as significant figures within the early Christian community, assuming diaconal responsibilities alongside overseers, elders, and deacons. These widows engaged in diverse ministerial roles and were formally recognized by the church, contributing substantially to the broader diaconal framework. Their roles extended beyond mere sustenance, encompassing social acknowledgment, solidarity, inclusivity, and hospitality, thereby fostering a profound sense of integration within the church community.

In the Apostolic Church Order, women hold significant roles. Three widows are appointed: two for prayer and one for assisting sick women. They must be ready for service, discreet in communication, and sober to perform their duties, highlighting their essential contributions to the church (Ferguson 1999, p. 229).

Didascalia Section 9:1–3 sheds light on the shift from Old Testament sacrificial practices to contemporary offerings, such as prayers and the Eucharist. The text portrays bishops as high priests and leaders deserving of honor akin to God, while deacons are likened to Christ, and women deaconesses to the Holy Spirit. Priests, widows, and orphans are to be accorded respect, akin to the veneration of the altar of God (Wijngaards 2013, p. 220).

In the Didascalia, Section 16 delineates the significance of appointing virtuous individuals, encompassing both males and females, to serve as deacons, contributing to a myriad of functions within the ecclesiastical framework. They are appointed as deaconesses and primarily serve in ministering to other women. Deaconesses are particularly essential when it comes to activities involving women, such as anointing female candidates for baptism and instructing them on maintaining the purity of their baptismal seal. Additionally, deaconesses are tasked with visiting believing women in heathen households, tending to the sick, and providing necessary care and support, including bathing those in the process of recovery from illness. Their role is significant in ensuring the well-being and spiritual guidance of women within the community (Gibson 1903, pp. 78–79), including teaching new female converts (Ferguson 1999, p. 234).

Early Christian widows actively engaged in public duties, charitable acts, care for the vulnerable, support for prisoners, and the provision of teachings within households. Within the early Christian context, these widows seamlessly integrated prophetic and missionary expressions with acts of compassion, thereby highlighting the intrinsic link between diaconal engagement and the proclamation of the Gospel (Chae 2013, p. 187).

The prominence of widows is further substantiated by numerical data. Bishop Cornelius of Rome's list from 251 AD reveals a significant presence of widows within the Roman diocese, underscoring their elevated status and substantial involvement in ministry (Malone 2008, vol. 1, p. 167). Notably, Didascalia Section 9:5–8 underscores the importance of both the bishop and deacon sharing a unified purpose and understanding, echoing the Gospel's teaching that leadership entails service and self-sacrifice. This ethos persisted within the church gatherings prior to the Edict of Milan (Wijngaards 2013, p. 220).

4. The Decline of Diaconal Ministry and the Role of Women after the Edict of Milan

As the third century unfolds, another biblical archetype emerges, that of the Old Testament Levite, which serves to define the liturgical aspect of the deacon's role. While certain sources, including later Eastern traditions, conceive of the diaconate as constituting a part of the priesthood vested in bishops and presbyters, others, including later Western traditions, exclude deacons from the priesthood proper.

4.1. *The Decline of the Diaconal Ministry as a Secular Ministry*

Once the Christian church gained legal recognition, it embarked on constructing basilicas for public worship. These basilicas served political functions in Roman culture, where public officials presided. Architecturally distinct from pagan temples, they were deliberately different to avoid pagan associations. The presence of prominent women in these public and political spaces contradicted Roman gender norms (MacHaffie 2006, p. 17).

With the church gaining favor among the Roman Empire's elite, there was a gradual shift in its understanding of ministry and organizational structure. By the fourth century, the church became more hierarchical, establishing a superior ministry for teaching and sacramental functions over an inferior laity. It adopted the Roman Empire's civil service as an organizational model, concentrating power in the offices of bishop and presbyter, selected by those in positions of authority. Due to gender biases against women in authoritative roles, women could not be chosen as bishops or presbyters within the Christian community (MacHaffie 2006, p. 17).

The 4th century stands as a pivotal era distinguished by a flourishing phase of liturgical development, particularly within the domain of baptismal practices. However, a notable transformation occurred in the 5th century with the advent of infant baptism, ushering in a shift from a diverse array of adult practices to a more uniform approach. This shift was driven by the theological conviction of salvation for baptized infants and resulted in the streamlining and expediting of the baptismal process. As a consequence, the significance of adult catechetical education diminished. While this homogenization of ecclesiastical functions and liturgical practices contributed to institutional stability, it concurrently played a role in the gradual decline of female clergy roles.

Early textual accounts provide limited elaboration on the liturgical or pastoral duties of deacons. However, their primary pastoral responsibilities included general administrative support for the bishop, particularly managing the church's finances and overseeing its care for the indigent and infirm. Concurrently, liturgical functions revolved around assisting the bishop, especially during the Eucharist, where their roles encompassed the preparation of Eucharistic elements (bread and wine) and the facilitation of communion. Additionally, some ancient ecclesiastical traditions grant deacons the privilege of reading the Gospel during the Eucharist and assign them the role of reciting various intercessory prayers and liturgical supplications.

John Calvin, in his ecclesiological framework, incorporated the office of deacon alongside pastors, teachers, and elders, forming a fourfold ministry that he believed mirrored the apostolic church's structure. In the Reformed tradition, deacons assume administrative and pastoral roles, primarily focused on the care of the sick and the needy, rather than serving as liturgical ministers (Bradshaw 2013, p. 152).

4.2. *The Decline of Women's Roles as Deaconesses as a Secular Ministry*

As the church grew and structured, it became more patriarchal, excluding women from leadership roles. They were confined to ascetic communities and a subordinate diaconate due to factors like the influence of authoritative patriarchal texts (MacHaffie 2006, p. 14). During the third to fifth centuries, church orders aimed to establish church governance authority.

The era of institutional stability also witnessed the standardization of ecclesiastical regulations across various regions. Scholars argue that these orders consistently prohibited women from teaching and baptizing. Of particular note is "The Apostolic Constitutions", believed to have been composed around 381 AD (Schenk 2017, p. 69). There exists a significant document known as the "Apostolic Constitutions", which encompasses a comprehensive set of regulations for the church, including its ecclesiastical structure. This document serves as a compilation of earlier records such as the "Didache", "Syrian Didascalia", and "Apostolic Tradition", amalgamating and synthesizing their content (Seo 2002, p. 196). Below are the differences between "Didascalia" and "The Apostolic Constitutions". Consequently, while much of its content parallels that of the Didascalia, there were several notable modifications.

First, the Didascalia promotes acknowledgment priests, deacons and deaconesses as coequals in ministry, contrasting with the Apostolic Constitutions that elaborate where deaconesses and deacons support priests, each possessing role distinctions among priests, deacons, overseers, and lay believers. Second, The Didascalia affirms the singular commitment of the female diaconate to the service of female catechumens, while the Apostolic Constitutions delineate that female deaconesses and deacons administer anointing to the bodies of female catechumens subsequent to the anointing of their foreheads by male overseers or priests in the Baptismal space. The following passage is the Apostolic Constitutions III, 16, 4.

(III, 16, 4) You therefore, bishop, according to the type [of Christ, the Anointed], shalt anoint the head of those that are to be baptized, whether they be men or women, with the holy oil, to symbolize spiritual baptism. After that, either you, bishop, or a priest who is in your charge, shall baptize them in the water, speaking the sacred calling-down prayer [*ἐπικλῆσιν*] over them, mentioning them by [their] name, [the calling down] of Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit. And let the male deacon receive the man, and the woman deacon [*ἡ δίακονος*] the woman, so that the conferring of this inviolable seal may take place with decency. And after that, let the bishop anoint those who have been baptized with chrism. (Wijngaards 2013, p. 234).

Moreover, there existed numerous writings that expressed opposition to women performing ecclesiastical functions, particularly those associated with the priesthood. The following passage is the Apostolic Constitutions 3.9 (1 and 4);

(3.9(1) And about a woman's baptizing, we are informing you that there is no small danger to the women who attempt it. Therefore, we do not advise it. For it is dangerous, or rather, it is illegal and impious.

(3.9(4) And if in what came earlier, we did not allow women to teach, how can we assent to their being priests, which is contrary to nature? For this is an error of Gentile atheism to ordain women as priests to the goddesses; it is not in the dispensation of Christ (Miller 2005, pp. 65–66).

Notable among these writings were the Apostolic Constitutions 'Panarion' written by Epiphanius. His "medicine chest" against heresies, emphasized the rejection of women serving as priests (Shoemaker 2008, p. 372). This passage is the Epiphanius's Panarion, Section V, "Marian Cult," 79.

First, For to begin with, to whom is it not immediately obvious to investigate the whole scope of the past, that their teaching and behavior are devilish, and their undertaking a deviation? Never at any time has a woman been a priest. Eve herself, though she had fallen into transgression, still did not dare to undertake anything so impious. (79.2,3)

Second, In the New Testament, if it were ordained by God that women should be priests or have any canonical function in the church, Mary herself, if anyone, should have functioned as a priest in the New Testament. [...] But it was not God's pleasure that she be a priest. (79.3,1)

Third, Successors to the episcopate and presbyterate in the household of God were appointed by this bishop and their apostles, and nowhere was a woman appointed. (79.3-4) (Miller 2005, pp. 66–67).

Taking a closer look at this text from a different perspective, it suggests that it may shed light on actual historical developments within the context of the document. The forceful and impassioned criticism directed towards women indicates an expansion in the sphere of women's activities and a corresponding increase in their influence. It becomes evident that certain individuals played an active role within the church, showcasing exceptional capabilities and effectively assuming priestly responsibilities. Notably, there were instances where petitions were made for the inclusion of women in priestly roles, drawing upon the precedent of Philip's four daughters' ministry. Consequently, the lively involvement and robust voices of female clergy within the early church structure can be seen as emblematic of the tensions between prevailing male leadership and female advocates striving to elevate the status and roles of women through ecclesiastical reform.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Evaluations

Thus far, we have examined the process of the formation, development, and subsequent weakening of women's roles in the early Christian Church. During biblical times, women were actively engaged as recognized leaders in church ministry, and in the 2nd to 3rd centuries, they served as clergy. Prior to official Christian recognition, there was minimal differentiation in the roles of men and women in the clergy, particularly in the context of baptismal ministry. However, with the solidification of the ecclesiastical hierarchy following Christian recognition, the status of women deaconesses and female clergy gradually diminished, subsequently concealing the records of women's dedication and contributions that had contributed to the growth and development of the Church. Based on this study summarizing the growth, decline, and transformation of the Diaconal Ministry and the role of women ministers in the Early Churches yields the following findings.

Firstly, the historical evolution of Christian ministry has revealed a significant transformation from its early origins as a daily service performed by disciples who were shaped through worship and catechesis, actively sharing their faith through words and acts of mercy. However, the institutionalization of Christianity as a state-authorized religion in the fourth century gave rise to a hierarchical and clergy-dominated church structure that endured until the 20th century. Despite the Reformation's efforts, notably led by Martin Luther, to rekindle ancient practices and reintroduce the concept of the universal priesthood of all believers, the clergy-centered model of Christendom continued to dominate in most Protestant traditions after the 16th century. In this hierarchical framework, bishops, pastors, priests, and other clergy members held central roles in church ministry, serving as the primary conduits for spiritual grace, while the laity assumed more passive roles, relying on the clerical system. This transformation echoed Luther's critique of the late medieval church's dominance, which he termed the "Babylonian captivity of the church". Today, a modified form of this captivity endures, restricting Christian ministry to activities sanctioned by the institutional church or confined within church premises, thereby impacting the vitality of the church's mission (Nessan 2023, p. 749).

Secondly, the historical exploration of women's roles within early Christian communities underscores their initial prominence as deaconesses, apostolic witnesses, and leaders. However, as the 4th century brought about changes in liturgical practices and church regulations, their status declined. By the 6th century, women deaconesses encountered further limitations. This narrative highlights the intricate interplay among gender dynamics, ecclesiastical structures, and ministry in early Christianity. Despite the evolution of their roles and the challenges they faced, women's contributions remained a vital and enduring facet of Christianity's history, serving as a source of inspiration for ongoing discussions on gender equity and leadership within the tradition.

5.2. Suggestions for Transforming Modern Churches

In the rapidly evolving landscape of the modern world, the role and relevance of religious institutions, particularly churches, have come under scrutiny. As societal norms, technological advancements, and cultural paradigms continue to shift, there arises a pressing need for churches to adapt and transform to effectively engage with their congregations and fulfill their spiritual missions. This paper delves into a range of suggestions and recommendations aimed at revitalizing and modernizing various aspects of contemporary church practices.

Firstly, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive historical study of the significance of the Diaconal Ministry as a clergy role in the early Christian church. When the early church recognized the Diaconal Ministry as central to God's mission perspective and practiced pastoral ministry of service, women held diverse roles within the church. The church gained societal trust and experienced growth through the assumption of public responsibilities. However, as the church increasingly emphasized the strengthening of its organizational structure and sought separation from society, it gradually lost its social influence, leading to its portrayal as a self-serving entity by society. Therefore, contemporary Korean churches should foster discussions among believers to activate the Diaconal Ministry in their daily lives, rather than emphasizing a church-centered faith, and they should intensify dialogues concerning the church's social responsibilities.

Secondly, within Christianity, the organizational structure of decision-making assemblies that determine the church's direction should operate under a rational and equitable system. The multifaceted discussions within the realms of feminist liberation theology and early Christian ecclesiology highlight the evolving and inclusive nature of the Church's mission. These discussions call for the dismantling of oppressive structures such as patriarchal hegemony and clericalism (Ruether 2014, p. 94). The theological perspectives and arguments of influential decision-makers in significant church matters wield substantial influence over the overall structural changes within the church. Therefore, assemblies primarily composed of middle-aged men lead to the marginalization of pressing issues related to various minorities, including women, youth, and the disabled, in ongoing historical and theological dialogues within Christianity. Consequently, contemporary Christian theology should establish an equitable system to critically assess and reevaluate the motivations and theological assertions of decision-makers, enabling the church to effectively address the diverse global requests and challenges it faces.

Thirdly, alterations in the status and roles of women as clergy within the church have profoundly influenced the expansion of women's status in contemporary churches. The historical narrowing and distortion of the scope of women's ministry throughout church history have posed hindrances to the development of women's identity and status in modern times. Consequently, the discourse surrounding women within global Christianity has increasingly taken on a gendered perspective, treating women's theology, space, discourse, subjectivity, and politics as if they were exclusively the domain of women. Nevertheless, the enduring principles of Early Christianity, rooted in the preparation and calling of the baptized for daily service, continue to hold relevance today. The concept of the diaconate, encompassing all believers, functions as a vital catalyst for Christian social engagement. It reinforces the concept that ordinary Church members are the principal agents of transforma-

tion, with the Church's activities aimed at nurturing their identity in Christ and revitalizing the Church itself (Nessan 2023, p. 741). Therefore, to reform the patriarchal structure of contemporary Korean churches and adapt to the challenges of the new era, in-depth discussions should revolve around the training of female leaders within the church and the expansion of their roles.

In conclusion, the modern church can reinterpret the function of the church with a new paradigm by inheriting the spirit of the early Christian community. This entails the recovery of Missio-Dei missions, which transitioned the church from being a "gathering church" to a "sending church. However, if we could change the identity of the Diaconal Ministry by shifting the paradigm to focus more on life after worship, it is expected that there can be significant changes in the church's utilization and the lives of Christians today.

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