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Women and Early Christianity: Female Authority Opposed

EARLY CHRISTIAN WOMEN AND ECCLESIAL AUTHORITY

That women exercised authority in the first-century Christian churches is reflected in Paul's letters, Acts, and other early Christian writings. The seven undisputed letters of Paul are the earliest Christian manuscripts we have and constitute strong historical evidence for women's influence and authority in the early church. Of the twenty-eight individuals identified in chapter 16 of Paul's letter to the Romans, ten are women. They are, respectively, Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus's mother, Julia, and Nereus's sister. Peter Lampe deduces that women may have been more active than men in the first-century Roman church because Paul uses the verb "to work" (κοπιᾶω) four times, always in relationship to a woman but never in relationship to a man.¹ The four women so described are Mary, Persis, Tryphaena, and Tryphosa. Lampe notes that the Greek word "to work" (κοπιᾶω) is "a technical term in missionary language" and points to "Galatians 4:11 and 1

1. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 166.

Cor 15:10 where the word is predicated of Paul himself.”² Four other women of authority who are associated with Paul include Lydia (Acts 16:11–40), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2–3), and Nympha (Col 4:14–16). In addition to Prisca, Lydia, Euodia, and Syntyche, four more women must be considered: Phoebe, Junia, Nympha, and Tabitha.

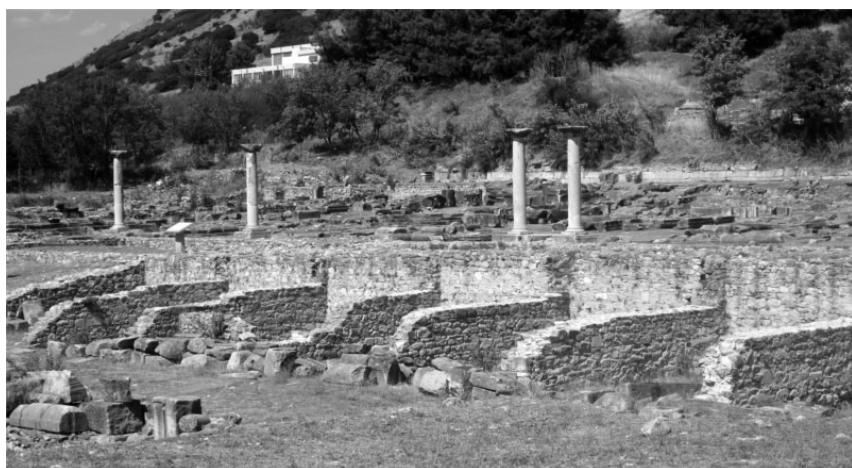


Figure 2.1. Shops at Philippi. Lydia may have sold her purple dye goods near here. Photo by author.

PHOEBE

Paul had never visited the church of Rome when he wrote the letter to the Romans. To provide credibility for himself and his official envoy, Phoebe, he names all of the people in the Roman community who know him and can testify to his reputability. He begins his letter:

I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well. (Rom 16:1–2).

2. Ibid., 166n41.

Phoebe's title, *diakonos*, is commonly mistranslated as "deaconess," despite the masculine ending in Greek. There were fourth-century deaconesses, but their ministry was far more circumscribed than the first century *diakonos*. While the exact meaning of *diakonos* in the first-century church is unclear, it is significant that the title is the same one Paul uses for his own ministry (1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 6:4). We know this title was also used for male office holders in early second-century Christianity, and there is evidence to suggest there were women with similar roles. Some believe the two female slave *ministrae* tortured by Pliny the Younger in Asia Minor may have had roles similar to the *diakonoi*, but this is uncertain.³

The second-century letter of 1 Timothy 3:11 is also thought to refer to women deacons.⁴ The *diakonos* office seems to have been an important position in the Pauline mission. Schüssler Fiorenza believes the evidence is such that "Phoebe is recommended as an official teacher and missionary in the church of Cenchreae."⁵ Yet her other title is probably more important. She is called a benefactor (*prostatis*) to Paul "and many others." Phoebe was an independent woman of wealth who, like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna before her, financially supported the missionary outreach of the early church. She is one of many female patrons whose support and leadership permitted Christianity to spread rapidly in the Hellenist world.

JUNIA

"Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives, who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was" (Rom 16:7). Junia and Andronicus are a missionary couple that Paul identifies as "prominent among the apostles." For centuries, Junia's name was translated in a masculine form, Junias, because transcribers could not believe a woman would bear the title

3. See Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, eds., *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 27. Noting that Pliny's letter says nothing about the women's function or status in their communities, the authors write: "It is probably best to conclude that *ministra* signifies a reasonably well defined and acknowledged role in the community and to recognize that we can say nothing very exact about it."

4. MacDonald, "Reading Real Women," 208.

5. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 171.

apostle, even though virtually all early Christian writers, from Chrysostom to Origen to Peter Lombard, assumed that Junia was a woman apostle. Eldon Jay Epp's exhaustive textual analysis found no male name Junias exists in ancient sources, while the female Junia is common.⁶ Paul tells us they are his relatives who were imprisoned with him, most likely because their itinerant missionary work led to the same persecution he frequently experienced.

NYMPHA

Another important female head of a house church named in the New Testament is Nympha: "Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans." (Col 4:15–16). It is ironic that the deuteropauline author of Colossians acknowledges Nympha as leading a house church, since a main point of the letter is to impose Greco-Roman hierarchical order and subordination in Christian households. As a leader of a house church, Nympha ministered to the church at Laodicea. Two centuries later, a council at Laodicea forbade women leaders to enter the sanctuary or be installed in the church.⁷ According to Ute Eisen: "We must presume that these women both led the assembly and presided at the Eucharist."⁸ Is it possible that these fourth-century women were ministerial descendants of Nympha?

WIDOWS AND SECOND-CENTURY WOMEN WHO EXERCISED AUTHORITY

TABITHA

Widows played an important role in early church expansion. They supported the church's mission as patrons and converted others to the Jesus movement. The support of wealthy widows for poorer wid-

6. Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

7. Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 143.

8. *Ibid.*, 122.

ows and orphans was a powerful evangelizing witness in a culture that regularly exposed unwanted babies to die. In Acts 9:36–43, we read of Tabitha, “a disciple” who led a house church in Joppa, just thirty miles northwest of Jerusalem. She fell ill and died, leaving “all the widows . . . weeping and showing tunics and other clothing she had made for them” (Acts 9:39). Luke shows Peter hastening to Joppa where, after her prays over her, Tabitha is raised from the dead. Because she is the only woman given the grammatically feminine title of “disciple” (*mathetria*) in the entire New Testament, some commentators suggest Tabitha was one of the women in Jesus’s Galilean discipleship. The masculine form, *mathetes*, “is a term chosen by evangelists to describe followers of Jesus including the Twelve.”⁹ Peter may have known her well.¹⁰ Since no male relative is anywhere in evidence, Tabitha may have been a widow herself. Bonnie Thurston suggests she was a leader of a congregation of widows at Joppa and a foremother of the “order of widows” prominent in the church into the third century.¹¹

GRAPTE

In the second century, the Roman author of *Shepherd of Hermas* had a vision in which he was told to write “two little books and send one to Grapte and one to Clement.” Grapte must “instruct the widows and the orphans,” and Clement is to send the other book “to all the foreign cities.” Hermas is also asked to read the book “to this city [Rome] along with the elders that preside over the Church.” Clement is remembered in church history as a leader and communicator for the other house church leaders of Rome. Since Rome did not embrace the monarchical episcopacy as quickly as other urban communities, Clement’s letter was sent to Corinth on behalf of all the house churches of Rome, not on his own behalf. The Roman church was led by a “plurality of presbyters” during this time, not a

9. Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 120.

10. *Ibid.*, 121.

11. *Ibid.*, 122.

monarchical bishop.¹² It is notable that Shepherd of Hermas sharply reprimands Rome's *diakonoï* who "despoil the living of widows and orphans," in contrast to Grapte who cares for and ministers to them. As Lampe sees it, Grapte "was entrusted with this work by all the communities of Rome."¹³

Both Grapte and Clement are identified as leaders whose responsibilities involve all the house church communities at Rome. While Clement is remembered in church history, Grapte is not. Many early writings attest that care of widows and orphans was an ethical priority for early Christians. What is less obvious is that this ministry was often, if not usually, carried out by women. A pattern emerges in which we find wealthier widows caring for other widows and, like Tabitha, welcoming them into their households. This pattern persists well into the fifth century, as early church orders attest.¹⁴ These communities of widows, including the "widows called virgins"—named by Ignatius of Antioch in the second-century *To the Smyrnaeans*—became centers of evangelization and hubs of female leadership.

TAVIA, ALCE, THE "ELECT LADY," AND OTHER WOMEN LEADERS IN ASIA MINOR

Ignatius of Antioch greets several female heads of house churches by name in his letters to the churches of Asia Minor. In addition to the "virgins called widows" and "households of brothers with their wives," he singles out "Tavia and her household" and Alce "who means a great deal to me" in *To the Smyrnaeans* (13.1). In *To Polycarp*, Ignatius again greets "Alce, my dearly beloved" and the "wife of Epitropus with all her house and her children" (8.3). Since Epitropus is not greeted directly, it is likely that either she is widowed or Epitropus is not Christian.¹⁵ The second Epistle of John in the New

12. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 397–407.

13. *Ibid.*, 401.

14. See Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976); and Francine Cardman, "Women, Ministry, and Church Order in Early Christianity," in Kraemer and D'Angelo, *Women and Christian Origins*, 300–322.

15. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 247–48.

Testament is addressed to “the elect lady” and her “elect sister” in Asia Minor. Schüssler Fiorenza disputes the theory that the female names are symbolic for churches in Asia Minor:

These expressions are best understood as honorifics for the women leaders of house churches, since *kyria* or *domina* is a familiar title for the materfamilias and “sister” is used as a missionary title by Paul. . . . Since 3 John is also addressed to the head of a house church, nothing prevents us from assuming the same for 2 John.¹⁶

The “elect women” of John’s Epistle, Alce, Tavia, the “virgins called widows,” and Epitropus’s wife are just a few of the highly influential women who exercised authority in Asia Minor in the second century.¹⁷

ATTEMPTS TO CURTAIL THE FEMALE EXERCISE OF AUTHORITY

COLOSSIANS AND EPHESIANS

Both of these epistles from the canonical Christian Scriptures are considered “deutero-Pauline” because a majority of scholars believe they were written not by Paul but by later interpreters of his teachings. Nympha, the head of a house church in Laodicea, is the only woman named in either text. These two letters contain what biblical scholars call “household codes,” which were meant to advise on appropriate behavior, particularly that of women, children, and slaves. Even though Paul’s letter to the Galatians celebrates a new equality (“there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female”), the household codes view a woman’s submission to her spouse as ideal behavior (Col 3:18; Eph 5:22).

But why? Could it be because early Christian ideals of equality in

16. Ibid., 248.

17. Robert M. Grant, “The Social Setting of Second-Century Christianity,” in *The Shaping of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries*, ed. E. P. Sanders, vol. 1 of *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition* (London: SCM, 1980) 16–29, as cited by Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 248.

Christ were playing themselves out in the actual behavior of Christians, including Christian women? MacDonald writes:

It has frequently been suggested that the greater correspondence between the ethical exhortations concerning household relations and the ethic of Greco-Roman society that emerges in deuterio-Pauline literature [Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus] was the result of an attempt to offer an apologetic response to those who critiqued Christians for the effect they had on the household and on the behavior of women.¹⁸

Women preaching and evangelizing, slaves and freed persons converting their counterparts in other households, Christian rituals conducted in private, domestic space—all of these behaviors attracted censure from the larger society. As a result, early churchmen sought to quell criticism by controlling the behavior of Christian households, and particularly the behavior of women. We shall see this pattern repeat itself many times over the next three centuries.

PASTORAL EPISTLES (1 AND 2 TIMOTHY, TITUS)

“Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent” (1 Tim 2:11–12). This injunction from 1 Timothy is the most widely quoted justification for restricting women’s leadership in the early church. Some denominations cite it even to this day in an attempt to silence Christian women. The letters of Timothy and Titus have been called the Pastoral Epistles because they are concerned with governing the life of the existing church “flock.” Scholars date the Pastorals to the early or mid-second century and believe they originated in the Aegean area of Asia Minor, perhaps near Ephesus. Most agree they were written not by Paul but by churchmen who viewed themselves as interpreters of his teachings.¹⁹ For MacDonald:

18. MacDonald, “Reading Real Women,” 246.

19. Robert A. Wild, “The Pastoral Letters,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 892–93.

One of the major priorities of the Pastoral Epistles is the management of women's behavior. In general, the Pastoral Epistles offer abundant material for illustrating that New Testament texts should be read with an understanding of the cultural values of Greco-Roman society; they reflect common stereotypes about the nature of the female character, such as the tendency for women to gossip (1 Tim 5:13) or their inclination for being easily duped (2 Tim 3:6).²⁰

It is apparent that 1 Timothy 5:3–16 is much concerned with controlling the behavior of widows, particularly young widows. Contrary to Paul's recommendation of celibacy for widowed men and women (1 Corinthians 7), young widows are to "marry, bear children, and manage their household so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us. For some have already turned away to follow Satan" (1 Tim 5:14–15). Enrolled widows were expected to observe celibacy, but the author of 1 Timothy does not encourage this for young widows because "when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle but also gossips and busybodies saying what they should not say" (1 Tim 5:11–13). Timothy's negative description of women "gadding about" is polemical and mimics stereotypes from Greco-Roman culture. The text instructs the community to enroll only "real widows," that is, women past the age of sixty who have married only once and have no children or relatives to care for them. Further, they are to have "shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted and devoted [themselves] to doing good in every way."

Using a skewed interpretation of Genesis, 1 Timothy subjects women to the authority of men: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" (1 Tim 2:13–15). This extreme—indeed doctrinally incorrect—statement is contrary to Paul's teaching that belief in Christ is the way to salvation, not childbearing. The self-evident strength of 1 Timothy's attempt to control female behavior prompts MacDonald to surmise:

20. MacDonald, "Reading Real Women," 246.

The activity of the widows is apparently understood by the author of the Pastoral Epistles as one of the reasons why the community has been experiencing slander. The desire of the young women to remain unmarried, and their active movements from house to house have apparently contributed to the community being viewed as suspicious. As the early Christian groups moved into the second century CE, hostile reactions of outsiders increasingly tended to ignite into physical violence.²¹

CHANGING ROLES OF WOMEN AND THREATS OF VIOLENCE

The early Jesus movement's wholehearted embrace of a more inclusive social ethos particularly with regard to the leadership of women—even slave women, such as the female *ministrae* attested by Pliny the Younger—was shocking to many in the Greco-Roman culture. As the movement grew in influence, it attracted censure from opponents who lodged accusations of treason with local authorities. When Christian women and men refused official demands to sacrifice to the emperor, death inevitably followed. Most persecutions were local outbreaks instigated by citizens who opposed the new religion. Empire-wide persecution was rare.

Since family stability equated to stability of the empire, a religious sect that tolerated a woman's refusal to marry because of a commitment to virginity, or worse, a married woman's embrace of celibacy, was seen as a threat to the public order. One prominent early critic was Celsus, for whom "the Christian family is at the very heart of the growth of a troublesome new movement."²² In Celsus's view, Christians encouraged insubordination and convinced the "foolish, dishonorable and stupid and slaves, women and little children," not "to pay any attention to their father and school teachers" and "leave father and their school masters, and go along with the women and little children who are play fellows to the wooldresser's shop, or the cobblers' or the washer woman's shop."²³ Celsus's critique coincides with evidence from Christian texts that the early Jesus movement

21. *Ibid.*, 248.

22. Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman's Place*, 221.

23. Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.55 (Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953]), as cited in Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman's Place*, 222.

expanded through house churches and small business networks such as those of Lydia, Prisca, Grapte, and Paul. Evangelization was conducted person-to-person, house-to-house by women who reached out to other women, children, freed persons, and slaves. Women's quiet exercise of authority in the context of everyday domestic life is one oft-unheralded key to Christianity's rapid expansion.

Elite women were also attracted to the new movement. The Roman matron in Justin Martyr's *Apology* exemplifies the dangerous dynamic that could result when a higher-status woman became a Christ believer but her husband did not.²⁴ Justin describes a matron who lived a sexually licentious and drunken lifestyle alongside her husband until she "came to the knowledge of the teachings of Christ." After trying and failing to persuade her husband to change his ways, she wants to divorce him, "considering it wicked to live any longer as a wife with a husband who sought in every way means of indulging in pleasure contrary to the law of nature, and in violation of what is right." Her Christian friends dissuaded her for a time. But when her husband "conducted himself worse than ever," the matron decides that she can no longer share the same bed and gives him a bill of divorce. Enraged, her husband denounces her as a Christian to the authorities and a trial is set. She asks the judge to postpone her trial until she can put her financial affairs in order and he grants her request. (That she has finances to put in order indicates she is a wealthy woman of status.) Frustrated, the husband denounces the matron's Christian teacher, Ptolemaeus, who is summarily thrown into prison, tormented, and eventually executed along with two Christian spectators who publicly protested his unjust treatment.

Justin's text never names the woman herself nor mentions what happens to her. Lampe suggests she may have been a woman of high status named Flora, "to whom a Valentinian Roman teacher wrote a letter: the letter of Ptolemaeus, which Epiphanius preserved in his 'medicine chest, against heretics' (*Panarion Haer.* 33.3–7)."²⁵ Justin's description of what happened to Ptolemaeus and his companions is

24. Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 2 (Roberts-Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 [Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1886], reprinted on Early Christian Writings, <http://tinyurl.com/yd6ese5f>).

25. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 239.

one of the first authentic Roman martyrdom accounts in existence.²⁶ The story of the Roman matron exemplifies the threats faced by the early communities when women converted and sought to live their new faith with integrity in a culture that saw the patriarchal household and patriarchal marriage as central to its identity.

APOCRYPHAL ACTS OF THE APOSTLES— ACTS OF THECLA

An all but invisible chapter in the history of women in the early church can be recovered from the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. Written from the mid-second to early third centuries, these popular stories were told and retold in the Hellenistic communities of the eastern Mediterranean. Although five of the six “Acts” are named for male apostles, (Thomas, Peter, Paul, John, and Andrew) all of the texts (including the Acts of Xanthippe, a woman) feature female protagonists whose decision to embrace the celibate lifestyle recommended by Paul leads to persecution and upheaval. Steven L. Davies believes “these Acts may have come from a community of women grappling with the demands of male authorities who are armed with presumed Pauline quotations that they keep silent.”²⁷ Contemporary scholarship makes a persuasive case that the apocryphal Acts originated in female oral traditions in Asia Minor and Greece.²⁸ By comparing aspects of the stories with historical evidence from the same time period, it is possible to recover something of the history of actual women behind these traditions. Virginia Burrus explains:

If we know from Pliny’s letter to Trajan that persecutions of Christians in second-century Asia Minor were initiated not by the Romans but by the local communities, then we have some grounds for believing that the chastity stories’ presentation of the initiation of persecution of Christians by families and local communities is historically accurate.²⁹

26. *Ibid.*, 238.

27. Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (London: Feffer & Simons, 1980), 66.

28. Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*; Dennis Ronald McDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

29. Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 81. Burrus cites Pliny, *Letter to Trajan* X: “An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. . . . I judged it all the more

It is interesting that the female heroines of the apocryphal Acts are all women of high status. While this could be due to the tendency of folktales to exaggerate, there is good reason to surmise an underlying historical kernel, since “by the late second century, Christianity had begun to reach the upper levels of Greco-Roman society, and there its greatest and earliest success seems to have been among women.”³⁰ The stories were shaped by the female tellers’ “concern to legitimate their [celibate] lifestyle and beliefs and by their need to break away psychologically from their dependence on their husbands and families.”³¹ Burrus suggests the conversion stories introduced a new lifestyle in which celibate women created “an alternative society based on abolishing traditional social relationships including sex roles and class distinctions.”³² In such a society, perpetual virginity was a positive alternative to mandatory marriage into a patriarchal system. Freely chosen celibacy could be a healthy response to spousal oppression and/or the subjugation of women.³³ Although the apocryphal Acts are thought to derive from female oral traditions, five of the six Acts are named for men. This is probably because female authorship was not accepted by the culture, and a woman had “few alternatives other than to attribute her ideas to an absent man.”³⁴

Dennis R. McDonald and others convincingly argue that the Pastoral Epistles were written in response to the wildly popular Acts of Paul and Thecla, one of the apocryphal Acts that was widely accepted by the early church well into the fifth century.³⁵ According to Sheila E. McGinn, the Acts of Thecla originally circulated as a woman’s oral tradition but was later “domesticated” by a male author from the mainline church of Asia Minor who sought to give Paul more prominence, thereby transforming it to the Acts of Paul and Thecla.

necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called *ministrae*. But I discovered nothing else.”

30. Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 100.

31. *Ibid.*, 108.

32. *Ibid.*, 116.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Davies, *Revolt of the Widows*, 105.

35. See McDonald, *Legend and the Apostle*; and Sheila E. McGinn, “The Acts of Thecla,” in *Searching the Scriptures*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 800–828.



Figure 2.2. Sixth-century fresco of Thecla at her window (left), Paul (center), and Thecla's mother, Theokleia, (right). Theokleia is commonly mistaken for Thecla in this fresco, but the Greek inscription is clear. This depicts the scene from the Acts of Thecla in which Theokleia complains that her daughter does nothing but sit at the window listening to the preaching of Paul. Photo courtesy of Ephesus Foundation.

In the second and third centuries, “magic and miracle, dismissed today as superstition, were taken to be a part of reality.”³⁶ Illness and misfortune were commonly attributed to the work of malign spirits, and being afflicted with such a “demon” did not necessarily imply moral failure or sin. Early church writers such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian wrote at length that Christians’ charismatic preaching power was more effective than pagan magic. Christian prayer, says Tertullian, can “extort the rains of heaven, recall the souls of the departed from the very path of death, transform the weak, restore the sick, purge the possessed, open prison bars, loose the bonds of the innocent.”³⁷ Like all of the apocryphal Acts, the Acts of Thecla is steeped in these early understandings of miracle and charismatic power.

As the story goes, after being inspired by the teaching of Paul, our

36. Davies, *Revolt of the Widows*, 17.

37. Tertullian, *De oratione* 29, as cited by Davies, *Revolt of the Widows*, 21.

heroine Thecla breaks her engagement, takes a vow of chastity, and risks her life preaching Christianity (see figure 2.2). She is twice condemned to death but miraculously escapes: when Thecla is exposed to wild beasts, a female lioness dies protecting her from the other beasts. Thecla then baptizes herself “in the name of Jesus Christ,” whereupon a flash of lightning and a cloud of fire signal divine approbation. Before freeing her, the governor asks why she has not been harmed. Thecla proclaims the power of Christ as “the city shakes” with the shouted acclamations of women praising God. McGinn spells out what this folktale might have meant to the women who loved and retold the story:

It is not simply the loud noise that “shakes the city,” but the content of the acclamation: God protects and delivers a woman who opposes the sex-role definitions of the city, showing God’s power over the culture as a whole. Female chastity and divine power are victorious over male law and aggression.³⁸

Thecla seeks out Paul, who finally recognizes her prophetic gift and commissions her to “go and teach the word of God.” She does exactly that and, after other adventures, is last seen in Seleucia, where “she enlightened many with the word of God.”³⁹

Pointing to a contemporaneous Greek legend about Hagnodice, who was allegedly the first female Greek physician, McDonald suggests: “Apparently the [Hagnodice] story was told to legitimate the existence of women in that profession, just as the story of Thecla was used to support a role for women in teaching and baptizing.”⁴⁰ McDonald makes a good case that behind the legend there existed a historical Thecla. All first-millennium authors presumed her existence and revered her as a saint, some calling her a protomartyr and apostle. Further, Francine Cardman believes “it is likely that Thecla represents . . . many women of the first and early second centuries who publicly preached and baptized, claiming the authority of Paul for their ministries.”⁴¹ She notes that Tertullian’s early third-cen-

38. McGinn, “Acts of Thecla,” 818.

39. Acts of Paul and Thecla 2.43 (M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1924], reprinted on Early Christian Writings, <http://tinyurl.com/ydeofur4>).

40. McDonald, *Legend and the Apostle*, 19.

41. Cardman, “Women, Ministry,” 302.

turey *On Baptism* rejects the claim of a woman (she unfortunately goes unnamed) who was teaching and baptizing. Tertullian denounces “certain Acts of Paul . . . [that] claim the example of Thecla for allowing women to teach and baptize.” He quotes 1 Corinthians 14:35 and asks: “How could we believe that Paul should give a female power to teach and to baptize, when he did not allow a woman even to learn by her own right?”⁴²

Many scholars doubt Paul’s authorship of 1 Corinthians 14:35 since it is not consistent with Paul’s presumption that Corinthian women prophets will pray and prophesy in the assembly (1 Cor 11:5). As is often the case in ancient writings, the more male church writers rail against any given female ministerial behavior, the more likely it is that such behavior was having an impact. For Cardman: “The continuing memory of Thecla challenged the developing structures of ministry in the churches. It is not difficult to imagine women telling and retelling the story of Thecla to authorize their own ministries.”⁴³

PROPHECY AND THE MONARCHICAL EPISCOPACY

Prophecy was an important and valued leadership role in the early church. Paul tells us that prophets are second only to apostles in the exercise of spiritual leadership:

Now you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it. Some people God has designated in the church to be, first, apostles; second, prophets; third, teachers; then, mighty deeds; then, gifts of healing, assistance, administration, and varieties of tongues (1 Cor 12:27–28).

There were many female prophets in early Christianity. Paul instructs the women prophets at Corinth to cover their heads while prophesying, perhaps to differentiate their ministry from female prophets in other cults. (Note that he does not tell them to be silent and stop prophesying.) Luke’s Gospel shows us the prophet Anna, who recognizes the infant Jesus as the redeemer of Israel, and Elizabeth, who prophesies to Mary about her unborn child. In the book of

42. Tertullian, *On Baptism* 17 (Ernest Evans, *Tertullian’s Homily on Baptism* [London: SPCK, 1964]), as cited by Cardman, “Women, Ministry,” 302.

43. *Ibid.*

Acts, we learn about Philip's four prophetic daughters (Acts 21:9). The fourth-century church historian Eusebius attributes the apostolic origins of the provincial churches in Asia Minor to their ministry, thereby acknowledging that at least some women were transmitters of apostolic tradition. The Didache, an early worship manual, names prophets as leaders of eucharistic celebrations.⁴⁴ As we have seen, these were often held in the homes of prominent women.

Prophetic women played important roles in guiding and building up the earliest church communities, often through inspired proclamations in liturgy. As seen in the book of Acts, Paul's letters to Corinth and Thessalonica, and the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla, Christian prophecy was common throughout the Mediterranean world.⁴⁵ Didache 11.8 names an important criterion for judging true prophecy: "But not everyone who speaks in the Spirit is a prophet, except the one who has the behavior of the Lord." In other words, prophets must practice what they preach. The text notes that false prophets will stay too long in one place or ask for money.

Montanism was one of many prophetic movements in the early church. Founded by the prophet Montanus in what is now west central Turkey, the sect included two influential female prophets, Priscilla and Maximilla. Montanism was later deemed heretical by the mainstream church, though some scholars doubt that orthodoxy was the real issue. The prominence of women leaders and "competition between radically different church structures" were more likely sources of heresy accusations.⁴⁶ According to Schüssler Fiorenza: "The Montanists, as well as many other church groups, stressed the authority of the Spirit, that is, the authority of the prophets or ascetics, over against the authority of the non-charismatic local officers."⁴⁷ Ammia is another prophetic Montanist woman who lived in Asia Minor at the end of the second century. Eusebius claims her as part of the mainstream orthodox church and includes her in a succession list of recognized prophets: Agabus, Judas, Silas, the daughters of

44. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 298.

45. *Ibid.*, 297.

46. *Ibid.*, 302; and Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings*, 157, 195.

47. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 303; and Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings*, 157–58.

Philip, and “Ammia in Philadelphia.”⁴⁸ Other female prophets named in the apocryphal Acts of Paul include Theonoe, Stratonike, Eubulla, Phila, Artemilla, Nympha, and Myra, who tells Paul not to lose heart because his enforced exile “will save many in Rome and will nourish many with the word.”⁴⁹ Whether these names are actually historical women may not be as important as the fact that, like Thecla, they represent the many female prophets ministering in Asia Minor.

As Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and John’s Gospel attest, all Christians receive the Holy Spirit and, at least in principle, “have equal access to authority, leadership, and power.”⁵⁰ Since all Christians were spirit-filled, Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that communal worship in the early Jesus movement may have been characterized by rotating leadership: “This practice . . . would explain why the New Testament never identifies a presider or leader at the eucharist, and why non-canonical writings understand the prophet as such a eucharistic leader.”⁵¹

In the second and third centuries, hierarchical governance, led by a monarchical episcopacy, gradually replaced early Christian prophecy movements. In the first century, prophets and apostles such as Paul, Prisca, Aquila, Junia, and Andronicus travelled from place to place to establish and build up nascent Christ-believing communities. Local leaders such as the *episcopoi*, *presbyteroi*, and *diakonoi* remained stationary and eventually acquired more authority than itinerant prophets, apostles, and teachers.⁵² Some second-century bishops, such as Polycarp of Smyrna, Papias of Asia Minor, and Melito of Sardis, were also gifted with prophetic revelations. Gradually the function of prophecy was claimed by monarchical bishops to strengthen their authority. Soon, the bishops’ authority replaced that of prophets, until “only the official hierarchy could speak ‘with God’s own voice.’”⁵³

48. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 300.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*, 286.

51. *Ibid.*, 299.

52. These are Greek titles that translate into English as bishops, priests, and deacons, respectively. However, as used in the first century, these titles are not synonymous for the offices of bishop, priest, and deacon as understood today.

53. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 302. Gail Corrington Streete (“Women as Sources of Redemption and Knowledge in Early Christian Traditions,” in Kraemer and D’Angelo, *Women and Christian Origins*, 345) sums it up well: “These two opposing strains to Christianity

CHURCH ORDERS AND OFFICIAL ROLES FOR WOMEN

From the third to the fifth centuries, early church documents, known as church orders, sought to establish lines of authority for church governance. Each appealed to the authority of the apostles as a means of bolstering their credibility, though by the third century this was clearly a rhetorical device rather than grounded in historically retrievable linkages.⁵⁴

For our purposes, it is important to note that early church orders appealed to the authority of the apostles rather than to the genuine letters of Paul, whose memory was evoked in the Acts of Paul and Thecla. Scholars have long been aware that early church orders are not only descriptive of early communities but prescriptive insofar as they tell us what church leaders wanted to see in governance as opposed to what was actually happening. When church orders repeatedly prohibit women from teaching and baptizing, they illuminate the reality that women were doing both and the practice was probably widespread. Significant documents in this context include *Apostolic Tradition*, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, *Apostolic Constitutions*, and *Testamentum Domini*. These texts disclose how much time and energy was spent trying to control the behavior of independent Christian women, especially widows. They attest that from the third to the fifth centuries, older women (over age fifty to sixty) whose husbands had died were formally enrolled or appointed to the office of widow in both the Eastern and Western church. Some were enrolled to receive subsistence support from the community while others were appointed for specific church duties.

While the third-century *Apostolic Tradition* (Rome?) specifically instructs church leaders not to ordain widows, the late fourth-century

in the second to the fourth centuries (the New Prophecy and its followers and those bishops and their followers who called themselves orthodox) both claimed scriptural warrant for their beliefs. The first held that scriptural precedent validates both the charismatic gift of prophecy and clerical leadership for women, while the other found scriptural counter-examples to close both prophetic and institutional power to women. The latter voice was the one that prevailed."

54. See William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, 3 vols. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970–79), 2:127: "The [*Apostolic Constitutions*] pretends to be of Apostolic origin, written out and sent around to all bishops and priests by St. Clement of Rome. In that respect it is a forgery of the grosser and more impious sort. Here the use of Clement's name is not merely a congenial literary device. It was done with deliberate intent to deceive."

Testamentum Domini (Syria, Asia Minor, or Egypt) devotes a whole chapter to ordained widows, includes them in the hierarchy of the church, and attests that their ordination is the same as that of other major clerics.⁵⁵ A diversity of views clearly existed (perhaps reflecting differences in Eastern and Western customs) as to what ministerial roles official widows had. As these texts prescribe, the responsibilities of both enrolled and ordained widows were prayer, petition, theological instruction, and the anointing of women at baptism. The *Testamentum Domini* also mentions that widows examined (“tested”) deaconesses. Other duties included visiting and caring for the sick and receiving offerings.

The analyses that follow, however, suggest that the ministry of widows may well have been broader than these early documents indicate. Epigraphical evidence for the order of widows is found in Italy in the catacomb of Priscilla, where we find this second-century inscription: “The widow Flavia Arcas, who lived eighty-five years. Flavia Theophila, her daughter, erected (this epitaph) to the sweetest of mothers.” Other widows identified from their tombstones were Regina, whose daughter commemorates her in the Rome cemetery of St. Saturninus, and Laurentia, the mother of Pope Damasus (366–384). We know that women were enrolled as widows because the title *χήρα* (widow) was engraved on their tombstones. Inscriptions from this period did not use the term widow for women whose husbands had predeceased them.⁵⁶

APOSTOLIC TRADITION

Between 210 and 220, Hippolytus of Rome is believed to have written the *Apostolic Tradition*, a composite document that sought to regulate liturgy and the hierarchical organization of church ministries.⁵⁷ Recent scholars question the origins and dating of this document, though not the historical figure of Hippolytus of Rome. The treatise

55. Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women*, 153–54.

56. Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 144.

57. Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers*, 1:166. The *Apostolic Tradition* also contains an early eucharistic prayer that was reinstated as Eucharistic Prayer II in the Catholic Mass after the document’s discovery in the early twentieth century.

may have emerged at a time when the church of Rome was arguing whether Christians who sinned after baptism could be reconciled to the community, the nature of the divinity of Christ, and whether it was proper to recognize unions between upper-class women and men of lower status. Callixtus, a Roman deacon who would later become bishop of Rome, differed from Hippolytus on these issues, believing in forgiveness and the propriety of marital unions between unequal partners. Widows and other women of means had considerable influence in the Rome of Hippolytus's day.

Wealthy, socially elite women were having difficulty finding Christian husbands since most men of their social class persisted in their non-Christian beliefs and it was illegal for a high-status woman to marry a male slave or freedman. Although she could legally marry a socially inferior freeborn man, she would simultaneously lose her *clarissima* (noblewoman) status and all the rights that adhered to it. Rather than marry a non-Christian man of equal status, many wealthy Christian women chose to live in permanent concubinage with lower-status Christian men. According to Lampe, this arrangement, "received the blessings of Callistus. . . . In this way he prevented two things: mixed marriages with pagans and the social decline of Christian women. Both were in the interests of the community."⁵⁸ After Callixtus was elected bishop of Rome, Hippolytus refused to remain in communion with the larger church.⁵⁹ The *Apostolic Tradition* details the selection, ordination, and duties of the clergy, including ordination prayers for each office. It creates a definite ranked order among ministers, with presbyters being subject to bishops, deacons subject to presbyters, and subdeacons subject to deacons. Cardman suggests this hierarchy was emphasized because Hippolytus was himself a presbyter and wanted to be clear about Callixtus's lowly status as a deacon.⁶⁰

While the *Apostolic Tradition* identifies appointed widows as clergy, it sharply delineates between offices that require ordination (bishop, priest, deacon) and those that require only acknowledgement (widows and virgins). This directive effectively marginalizes women's

58. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 121.

59. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1967), 88.

60. Cardman, "Women, Ministry," 306.

ministries and restricts their opportunities for leadership. For the first time, priestly ordination rituals and prayers are prescribed: “When a presbyter is to be ordained, the bishop shall impose his hand upon his head, while the presbyters touch the one to be ordained.” But, when it comes to the order of widows, the *Apostolic Tradition* three times repeats a directive that widows are not to be ordained but only appointed:

When a widow is to be appointed, she is not to be ordained, but is designated by being named such. . . . A widow is appointed by words alone, and is then associated with the other widows. Hands are not imposed upon her, because she does not offer the oblation and she does not conduct the Liturgy. Ordination is for the clergy because of the Liturgy; but a widow is appointed for prayer, and prayer is the duty of all.⁶¹

The text advances a circular argument for excluding women: “Women do not perform liturgical ministry because they are not ordained; therefore they do not need to be ordained (indeed, may not be) since ordination is for liturgical ministry, which they do not do.”⁶² According to Cardman:

The widows described here are recognizable descendants of those in the Pastoral Epistles and seem to be a source of difficulty for some of the clergy in Rome. . . . The adamant reiteration signals the importance of the issue for Hippolytus, as well as the likelihood that widows were being ordained in the Roman church at the time, a practice that he was determined to halt.⁶³

Interesting exceptions are confessors who have “been in chains for the name of the Lord.” If a Christian is jailed or tortured but not executed for following Christ, he (or she?) is regarded as already having the “honor of the presbyterate by the fact of his confession” of faith.⁶⁴ One wonders if such a rule would have applied to women confessors, since many women were also imprisoned and tortured. The *Apostolic Tradition* was not particularly influential in the Western

61. Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers*, 1:169.

62. Cardman, “Women, Ministry,” 307.

63. Ibid.

64. Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers*, 1:168.

church,⁶⁵ probably owing, at least in part, to the political circumstances under which it was created. If Hippolytus is the author, his opposition to church approval for the marriages of wealthy Christian women to Christian men of lower rank may have made his teachings unpalatable to those outside his own community. It is another irony of church history that the writings of a man who publicly opposed the bishop of Rome should later be held up as a model of “apostolic authority.”

DIDASCALIA APOSTOLORUM
(TEACHINGS OF THE APOSTLES)

The *Didascalia* reflects the pastoral situation of some church communities in Syria and Palestine in the late third century. It concerns itself with the conduct of the laity, the need to observe important doctrinal and disciplinary precepts and avoid heresy, and the organization of ministry and leadership in the church. Urging a ministry organized around the local bishop, it enumerates the requirements for bishops in considerable depth, emphasizing their authority over the other ministers and the laity and delineating the duties of deacons and deaconesses. It has relatively little to say about presbyters, perhaps implying that their role was as yet undefined.⁶⁶

The *Didascalia* pays an extraordinary amount of attention to the conduct of widows, making a pointed contrast between “good” and “bad” widows. Among the worst faults of the widows is that they “run about asking questions”⁶⁷ and they “wish to be wiser and to know better, not only than the men, but even than the presbyters and the bishops.”⁶⁸ They are instructed to “have no other care save to be praying for those who give, and for the whole church” and are forbidden to receive donations without permission.⁶⁹ This directive

65. Cardman, “Women, Ministry,” 308.

66. *Ibid.*; I am indebted to Francine Cardman’s helpful summary of the scope of the *Didascalia* throughout this essay.

67. *Didascalia Apostolorum* 15.3.10 (R. Hugh Connolly [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929], reprinted on *Early Christian Writings*, <http://tinyurl.com/ydefsawf>; all translations taken from here).

68. *Ibid.*, 15.3.8.

69. *Ibid.*, 15.3.5.

effectively “prevents them from establishing close relationships with benefactors [and] . . . deprives the widows of the power implicit in providing the donor the opportunity to exercise charity.”⁷⁰ Cardman summarizes: “Circumscribing the widows’ role in this way ensures that the bishop will retain control over the system of donations and distribution and thus over both benefactors and beneficiaries.”⁷¹ Significantly, whenever the needy are invited to a supper, the *Didascalia* describes a top-down distribution system for those in church orders, and widows are at the bottom of the food chain:

But how much (soever) is given to one of the widows, let the double be given to each of the deacons in honour of Christ, (but) twice twofold to the leader for the glory of the Almighty. But if anyone wish to honour the presbyters also, let him give them a double (portion), as to the deacons; for they ought to be honoured as the Apostles, and as the counsellors of the bishop, and as the crown of the Church; for they are the moderators and councillors of the Church.⁷²

Widows are enjoined to silence and forbidden to teach, baptize, fast with, pray over, or lay hands on anyone without being commanded to do so by the bishop or the deacon. The repeated and insistent proscriptions of women baptizing and teaching tell us that they were doing both. To justify the prohibition, the document argues that Jesus was baptized by John, not by his mother,⁷³ and that he did not commission the women disciples to teach:

It is neither right nor necessary therefore that women should be teachers, and especially concerning the name of Christ and the redemption of His passion. For you have not been appointed to this, O women, and especially widows, that you should teach. . . . For if it were required that women should teach, our Master Himself would have commanded these to give instruction with us.⁷⁴

Instead, the *Didascalia* instructs, “But let a widow know that she is the altar of God; and let her sit ever at home, and not stray or run

70. Cardman, “Women, Ministry,” 310.

71. *Ibid.*, 311.

72. *Didascalia Apostolorum* 15.2.27.

73. *Ibid.*, 15.3.9.

74. *Ibid.*, 15.3.6. See also Cardman, “Women, Ministry,” 310.

about among the houses of the faithful to receive. For the altar of God never strays or runs about anywhere, but is fixed in one place.”⁷⁵ Still, says Cardman: “The reality of church life, however, did not conform to the *Didascalia*’s orderly vision. Nowhere is it less accurate than with regard to widows. Despite the efforts of the Pastoral Epistles to restrain them, the widows remained a disruptive force in the evolution of ministerial structures.”⁷⁶ The *Didascalia*’s dramatic effort to prevent widows from teaching and baptizing while restricting their access to grateful, wealthy benefactors suggests they were active and successful evangelists. While sharply criticizing uppity widows, the *Didascalia* approves the public ministry of female deacons, who were more subject to hierarchical control and who may have been enlisted to counter the widows’ influence. Female deacons were forbidden to baptize but permitted to teach women, visit them when ill, and anoint their bodies at baptism.

APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTIONS

The *Apostolic Constitutions*, an eight-volume work, originated in Syria in the late fourth century. It compiles and enlarges upon several earlier works including the *Didache*, the *Apostolic Tradition*, and the *Didascalia*, while adding some new material of its own.⁷⁷ The first six books reprise and revise the *Didascalia*, updating it to reflect church orders in Syria. It vehemently addresses the intransigence of women continuing to preach and baptize. The document amplifies the *Didascalia*’s hierarchical divine order for the post-Constantinian church, instructing Christians to honor the bishop who “sits for you in the place of God Almighty.” The male deacon is likened to Christ, the male presbyter represents the apostles, and the female deacon is likened to the Holy Spirit.⁷⁸ Widows are notably absent. One should not, however, surmise that women deacons escaped subordinate status by being likened to a type of Holy Spirit. The

75. *Didascalia Apostolorum* 15.3.6.

76. Cardman, “Women, Ministry,” 310.

77. Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers*, 2:128.

78. *Didascalia Apostolorum* 15.2.26.

Apostolic Constitutions clarify that she is to do nothing on her own authority: "Let also the deaconess be honoured by you in the place of the Holy Ghost, and not do or say anything without the deacon; as neither does the Comforter say or do anything of Himself, but gives glory to Christ by waiting for His pleasure."⁷⁹ The *Constitutions* also rule that no woman was to visit a bishop or a deacon without a deaconess along. One wonders what underlying issues might have prompted this decree. Sexual abuse cannot be ruled out. Book 8 calls for suspension of bishops, presbyters, and deacons who are guilty of fornication and for anyone who "offered violence to a virgin not betrothed, and keeps her."⁸⁰ The *Apostolic Constitutions* omits the *Didascalia's* inadvertent admission that widows were laying on hands in what today is known as the sacrament of the sick. Gryson concludes: "By dropping the reference to their power of blessing, and by refusing to mention them after the bishop, presbyter, and deacon, the *Constitutions* actually strip the widow of everything which suggested the idea of an ecclesiastical function in the *Didascalia*."⁸¹ Like the *Didascalia*, the *Apostolic Constitutions* forbids a woman to teach in church or baptize—enjoining her

to own herself to be the "altar of God," and let her sit in her house, and not enter into the houses of the faithful, under any pretense, to receive anything; for the altar of God never runs about, but is fixed in one place. Let, therefore, the virgin and the widow be such as do not run about, or wander to the houses of those who are alien from the faith.⁸²

These repeated injunctions attest that by the late fourth century, women were still baptizing, teaching, and evangelizing, as they had been doing since the second century. The increased vehemence of

79. *Apostolic Constitutions* 2.4.26 (James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7 [Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1886], rev. and ed. Kevin Knight for New Advent, <http://tinyurl.com/y96at8mb>; all translations taken from here).

80. *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.5.47.25 (italics original): "Let a bishop, or presbyter, or deacon who is taken in fornication, or perjury, or stealing, be deprived, *but not suspended; for the Scripture says: 'You shall not avenge twice for the same crime by affliction.'*" Ibid., 8.5.47.67: "If any one has offered violence to a virgin not betrothed, and keeps her, let him be suspended. But it is not lawful for him to take another to wife; but he must retain her whom he has chosen, although she be poor."

81. Gryson, *Ministry of Women*, 59.

82. *Apostolic Constitutions* 3.1.6.

the prohibition suggests women's exercise of ministerial authority had continued unabated and was probably quite common:

Now, as to women's baptizing we let you know that there is no small peril to those that undertake it. Therefore, we do not advise you to it; for it is dangerous, or rather wicked and impious. . . . For the principal part of the woman is the man, as being her head. But if in the foregoing constitutions we have not permitted them to teach, how will anyone allow them, contrary to nature, to perform the office of a priest?⁸³

The author of *Apostolic Constitutions* understands the ministry of baptism as exclusive to a priesthood to which a woman could never aspire because of her supposedly subordinate nature in the order of creation. Like the *Didascalia*, *Constitutions* restricts widows' contact with benefactors. Osiek and MacDonald see such attempts as "a conscious attempt on the part of church authority to control women's patronage as well as men's and to break the network of personal patronage that had been the backbone of social relationships."⁸⁴

Yet, female patronage power did not disappear. Women patrons provided burial spaces for poor Christians into the fourth century, and wealthy widows such as Olympias commanded considerable respect as major benefactors to the church. But in the meantime, the widows of the *Apostolic Constitutions* were placed at the bottom of the pecking order. Adding insult to injury, they were now subject to women deacons, with appropriate punishments if they did not comply:

The widows therefore ought to be grave, obedient to their bishops, and their presbyters, and their deacons, and besides these to the deaconesses, with piety, reverence, and fear; not usurping authority, nor desiring to do anything beyond the constitution without the consent of the deacon: as, suppose, the going to anyone to eat or drink with him, or to receive anything from anybody. But if without direction she does any one of these things, let her be punished with fasting, or else let her be separated on account of her rashness.⁸⁵

Though placed ahead of the widows, ministerial responsibilities for

83. Ibid., 3.1.9.

84. Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman's Place*, 218.

85. *Apostolic Constitutions* 3.1.

female deacons are more restricted than in the *Didascalia*. They have now been reduced to doorkeepers and assisting presbyters at female baptism: “A deaconess does not bless, nor perform anything belonging to the office of presbyters or deacons, but only is to keep the doors, and to minister to the presbyters in the baptizing of women, on account of decency.”⁸⁶

TESTAMENTUM DOMINI

In marked contrast to other church orders, the *Testamentum Domini* not only ordains widows but shows them seated alongside the bishop at liturgy, in a more prominent place than presbyters and deacons: “Let the position of the bishop be near to the place that is called the front stage. Likewise, let the place of the widows, who are said to have precedence in sitting, be in the same place.”⁸⁷ Though dating and authorship are uncertain, scholars estimate the original text was written in Greek sometime in the late fourth or early fifth century in Syria, Egypt, or Asia Minor, with Asia Minor thought to be most likely.⁸⁸ In this church order, female deacons have a minimal role, limited to greeting and overseeing female churchgoers as they enter the assembly. Still, during the Eucharist, widows and deaconesses are both named among those who celebrate the sacred rites behind the veil, as was customary in the East. Female presbyters (elders) are also named as members of the clergy, though they do not exercise liturgical leadership and their primary function seems to have been prayer. Widows, rather than female deacons, have a prominent role to play during female baptism: “Let the women [to be baptized] be anointed by the widows who sit in front, while the presbyter recites over them the formula. And also at the baptism let those widows receive the woman wrapped in a veil while the bishop offers the formulas of profession; and again while he offers the formulas of renunciation.”⁸⁹

The *Testamentum Domini* makes it plain that ordained widows

86. *Ibid.*, 8.2.28.

87. *Testamentum Domini* 1.19, as cited in Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women*, 150.

88. Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women*, 150.

89. *Testamentum Domini* 2.8, as cited in Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women*, 153.

exercised wide-ranging pastoral responsibilities for ministering to other women. They taught female catechumens, visited sick women, instructed the ignorant and encouraged women pursuing a celibate spiritual path. Gryson writes, “She is not a subordinate minister, not just an assistant; on the contrary, she has a pastoral responsibility, being especially charged with the care of souls.”⁹⁰ But first and foremost, widows in the *Testamentum Domini* were honored for their ascetic lives of contemplation and prayer and “persevering at the altar night and day.”⁹¹ The admonition for widows to “be silent in Church and assiduous in prayer” is slipped in between their duties of admonishing “those saying superfluous and vain things” and visiting sick women on Sundays “taking with her one or two deacons to help them.”⁹²

One wonders why two deacons needed to accompany her. It may have been for propriety’s sake or to ensure that she did not accept gifts without supervision. Unlike earlier church orders, there are no heated chastisements for baptizing, teaching, accepting benefactions, or moving from house to house. Instead, as previously enjoined by the *Apostolic Constitutions*, the widows of the *Testamentum Domini* are praised for their stable, silent, ascetic lives oriented around “the altar of God [that] never runs about, but is fixed in one place.”⁹³ While the *Testamentum Domini* demonstrates that at least some churchmen in Asia Minor had succeeded in taming the daughters of Thecla, other contemporaneous writings paint a different picture. A late fourth-century manuscript, *The Anonymous Dialogue Between a Montanist and an Orthodox*, not only forbids women to speak in the churches but also prohibits them from writing books. “But we do not permit women to speak in the assemblies, nor to have authority over men, to the point of writing books in their own name.”⁹⁴ While female authors were apparently considered heretical by the “Orthodox,” women teaching in church still attracted heated opposition.

90. Gryson, *Ministry of Women*, 68.

91. *Testamentum Domini* 1.40, as cited in Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women*, 153.

92. Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women*, 154.

93. *Apostolic Constitutions* 3.1.6.

94. Gryson, *Ministry of Women*, 76.

This means, of course, that women were doing that very thing or there would have been no need for a rule.

In the late fourth century, John Chrysostom distinguishes between women teaching in public and in private, the former forbidden and the latter permissible. Still, he inveighs against women who “endeavor to thrust themselves into [the sanctuary]” even though the divine law has excluded them: “For the blessed Paul did not suffer them even to speak in the church. But I have heard some say that they have obtained such a large privilege of free speech as even to rebuke the prelates of the Churches, and censure them more severely than masters do their own domestics.”⁹⁵ Gryson concludes: “Not only, therefore, are women not admitted into the sanctuary, but they are not supposed to interfere in any way in ecclesiastical affairs.”⁹⁶ From the early second to the fifth century, churchmen repeatedly invoke 1 Timothy 2:12 when they prohibit women from teaching, baptizing, or exercising authority in the church. That these mandates continue for four centuries suggests not only that women continued to exercise ministerial authority but that the issue of women’s leadership was no more settled in the early church than it is in some Christian denominations today.

WOMEN DEACONS

Although male church leaders sought to curtail the wide-ranging ministry of widows, there is ample literary and archaeological evidence for ordained female deacons. Many scholars, however, suggest that ordaining female deacons allowed male leaders to control what public ministries women could and could not perform.⁹⁷ The earliest references to deacons in the New Testament are found in Paul’s letters. According to Osiek, the opening lines of Paul’s letter to the Philippians “contain a reference found nowhere else in the greetings of his letters: he and Timothy greet not only the holy ones or saints in Philippi, but add a greeting to their *episcopoi* and *diakonoi*.”⁹⁸ The

95. John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* 3.9, as cited by Gryson, *Ministry of Women*, 84.

96. Gryson, *Ministry of Women*, 85.

97. Cardman, “Women, Ministry,” 310–11.

98. Carolyn Osiek, *Women in the Ministry of Paul* (Cleveland: FutureChurch, 2010).

Greek word *episcopos* (overseer) does not yet mean what later came to be the office of bishop but “is more likely a reference to the leaders of house churches, groupings of believers that met in private houses for worship and other means of nurturing their faith life.”⁹⁹ The term *diakonoι* is “a general word for official representatives, ministers, attendants, and agents. Here it refers to a designated group of persons who provide some kind of assistance in the community.”¹⁰⁰ As we have seen, there is good reason to believe that two women, Euodia and Syntyche, were among the *episcopoι* and *diakonoι* at Philippi (Phil 4:2).

Thanks to the work of scholars such as Osiek, Macy, and others, we now know that titles for church officials—such as bishop, priest, and deacon—in the first millennium are not equivalent to the meaning of these titles today. For example, in some third and fourth century communities, deacons served as important administrators of church properties whose authority was second only to that of the bishop.¹⁰¹ By the twelfth century, the separate ministry of deacon was subsumed into the priesthood, becoming a preliminary step to ordination. Only at the second Vatican Council did the separate ministry of permanent deacons reemerge. Women deacons are specifically identified in two places in the New Testament: Romans 16 and 1 Timothy 3:11. In the first two verses of Romans 16, Paul writes:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon [*diakonos*] of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor [*prostatis*] of many people, including me.

In the first century, the use of the masculine singular title *diakonos* for a female leader does not have the specificity of meaning that it acquired in later centuries. Therefore, it can be translated as either minister or deacon, but not deaconess, since this title did not emerge until later. The title *diakonos* is thought to connote an official leadership function such as minister, attendant, or envoy. The latter is

99. Ibid.

100. Ibid.

101. John Wijngaards, *Women Deacons in the Early Church: Historical Texts and Contemporary Debates* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 12.

the likely meaning in the letter to the Romans since most scholars believe Paul’s recommendation of Phoebe to the Christians in Rome indicates that she is the carrier of his letter to that community. However, Phoebe’s other title, “benefactor” or patron (*prostatis*), is probably more significant since it reveals that she is among the many wealthy women patrons who hosted house churches and provided financially for Paul and other evangelists in the burgeoning Christian missionary movement. Phoebe’s important leadership in the early church is inexplicably deleted from the lectionary when the Romans 16 text is read on week thirty-one, year one.

The first letter of Timothy describes qualifications for *diakonoι*, concluding with what is probably a reference to women deacons.

In the same way, [male] deacons (*diakonoι*) are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything (1 Tim 3:8–11).

While it is possible that the wives of deacons are meant, it is likely that the text refers to women deacons ministering in Timothy’s community. John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and Theodore of Mopsuestia are three early commentators who understood the text to refer to female deacons.¹⁰²

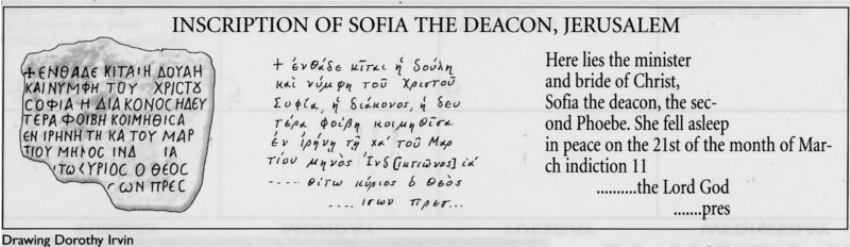


Figure 2.3. A reproduction by Dr. Dorothy Irvin of an inscription found on the Mount of Olives in Israel that dates to the fourth or fifth century. Used with permission.

102. Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women*, 18–20.

WOMEN DEACONS IN THE EAST

The office of female deacon or deaconess was more prevalent in the East than the West. We first see the Greek title *diakonos* with a masculine grammatical ending given to the Phoebe in Romans 16. It has been falsely assumed that *diakonos* was replaced with the feminine deaconess (*diakonissa*) by the third century. However, *diakonos* and *diakonissa* are both used for women deacons in literary sources and archaeological inscriptions until the sixth century.¹⁰³ For example, a fourth century tombstone on the Mount of Olives has a Greek inscription that reads: “Here lies the minister and bride of Christ, Sofia the Deacon, a second Phoebe. She fell asleep in peace on the 21st of the month of March . . .” (see figure 2.3). It is notable that for both Phoebe in the first century and Sofia in the fourth, the title *diakonos* with a Greek masculine ending is used. The Christian community in Jerusalem apparently understood Sofia’s ministry to be part of a three-hundred-year-old tradition dating back to the Phoebe of Romans 16. Madigan and Osiek surmise that “Phoebe and other unnamed women deacons like her in the first and perhaps second century belonged to an office or function that was not distinguished by sex.”¹⁰⁴ Phoebe’s first-century leadership probably bore little resemblance to those of later deaconesses. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* goes to great lengths to restrict the role of widows, while approving the public ministry of female deacons, allowing them to teach and anoint but not to baptize. The *Apostolic Constitutions* further restricts the ministry of women deacons by forbidding them to teach. Since church rules (canons) are often prescriptive as well as descriptive, literary and archaeological data often provide evidence for more expanded roles for women than one would expect. For example, Olympias, Dionysia, and other women deacons assisted in the liturgy, financially supported and advised male church leaders, served the poor, and, most often, taught women and anointed them at the time of their baptism. There is ample archaeological evidence

103. Ibid., 3.

104. Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women*, 5.

of other female deacons who ministered from the first to the sixth centuries in Palestine, Asia Minor, Greece, and Macedonia.¹⁰⁵

WOMEN DEACONS IN THE WEST

The literary and archaeological evidence for female deacons in the West does not appear until the fifth century, when texts proscribing women presbyters also appear. Western conciliar documents plainly indicate the displeasure of churchmen over women's ordination to the diaconate or any other office. Canon 26 of the Council of Orange, held in November 441, forbade the ordination of female deacons. In 517, the Council of Epaon abolished "the consecration of widows who are called women deacons."¹⁰⁶ However, texts written by male church authorities are one thing and the actual ministry of women is quite another. Literary references to women deacons in the West, while not abundant, are definitely present over a seven-century period. They are found in wills, letters, and chronicles of women deacons. For example, Remigius, the bishop of Reims (433–533), left a will bequeathing part of a vineyard to "my blessed daughter, Helaria the deaconess," well after the Council of Epaon forbade such a ministry.¹⁰⁷ In the mid-sixth century, the Frankish queen Rade-gund was ordained a deacon by Bishop Medard, a bishop of Noyons and Tournai. Other women deacons in the West known to us by tombstone inscriptions include Anna, a sixth-century woman deacon from Rome; Theodora, a female deacon from Gaul buried in 539; and Ausonia, a sixth-century woman deacon from Dalmatia. In 753, the archbishop of Ravenna, Sergius, "consecrated his wife, Euphemia, a deacon (*diaconissa*)."¹⁰⁸ And in 799, Pope Leo III was greeted by the entire population of Rome including "holy women, women deacons (*diaconissae*) and the most notable matrons" upon his return to that city.¹⁰⁸

Abbesses in the Western church were sometimes deacons as well.

105. See Eisen, *Women Officeholders*.

106. *Ibid.*, 145–46.

107. Gary Macy, "Women Deacons: History," in *Women Deacons, Past, Present, Future*, by Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig, and Phyllis Zagano (New York: Paulist, 2011), 13.

108. *Ibid.*, 17.

Some commentators on canon law in the ninth and tenth centuries simply assumed that abbesses were deacons.¹⁰⁹ Despite persistent early efforts to suppress women deacons in the West, Pope Benedict VIII wrote a letter in 1017 conferring on the bishop of Porto in Portugal “in perpetuity every episcopal ordination not only of presbyters but also of deacons or deaconesses (*diaconibus vel diaconissis*) or subdeacons.”¹¹⁰ This privilege was continued by subsequent popes up to the time of Bishop Ottone, the bishop of Lucca in Italy (1139–46). Abelard and Heloise—twelfth-century theologians—both referred to Heloise as a deacon.¹¹¹

ORDINATION RITES FOR WOMEN DEACONS

For centuries, scholars have agreed that the earliest Eastern ritual used to ordain female deacons is the same one used for male deacons. Jean Morin, a seventeenth-century liturgical expert, catalogued a large collection of ordination rites in Greek, Latin, and Syriac:

Three of the most ancient Greek rituals, uniformly one in agreement, hand down to us the ordination of women deacons, administered by almost the same rite and words by which deacons [were ordained]. Both are called ordination [*χειροτονία, χειροθεσία*]. Both are celebrated at the altar by the bishop, and in the same liturgical space. Hands are placed on both while the bishop offers prayers. The stole is placed on the neck of both, both the ordained man and the ordained woman communicated, the chalice full of the blood of Christ placed in the hands of both so they may taste of it.¹¹²

The bishop ordained a female deacon in the presence of the “presbyter, the deacons and the deaconesses” and the *Apostolic Constitutions* contains a fourth-century ordination prayer that reads:

O, Eternal God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, creator of man and of woman, you who have filled with your Spirit Miriam and Deborah, Anna and Huldah; you who have not deemed it unworthy that your only begotten Son be born of a woman; you who instituted women as

109. *Ibid.*, 29.

110. *Ibid.*, 17.

111. *Ibid.*, 29.

112. *Ibid.*, 19.

guardians of the holy parts of the tent of the covenant and of the temple; You, even now, look upon this [female] servant of yours elected to the diaconate; grant her the Holy Spirit and purify her from all sins of the flesh and of the spirit: so that she might fulfill the task entrusted to her for your glory and for the glory of your Christ, with whom and with the Holy Spirit, glory and adoration be to you and forever and ever.¹¹³

It is significant that the phrase “cleanse her from all sins of flesh and spirit” does not appear in ordination prayers for male clergy. Cardman comments: “Uncleanness of flesh or spirit is thus a peculiarly female liability. It can be overcome to some degree by the gift of the Holy Spirit in ordination, but must be kept under control by the deaconess’s obedience to the bishop and other clergy who have authority over her.”¹¹⁴

The earliest ordination ritual in the West is found in an eighth-century liturgical book by Bishop Egbert of York. It contains a single prayer used for ordaining either a male or female deacon. The prayer reads:

Give heed, Lord, to our prayers and upon this your servant send forth that spirit of your blessing in order that, enriched by heavenly gifts, he [or she] might be able to obtain grace through your majesty and by living well offer an example to others.¹¹⁵

Other rituals for the ordination of female deacons appear in ninth-, tenth-, and twelfth-century sacramentaries and pontificals. By the thirteenth century, the ordination rites for women deacons were eliminated from the Roman pontifical and do not appear again.

In the twentieth century, protestant denominations began ordaining women to the diaconate and to the priesthood, but in the Roman Catholic Church women’s ordination is not permitted. In 1974, Cipriano Vagaggini, OSB, Cam., (1909–99) published a fifteen-thousand-word document about the possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate. Vagaggini was a member of the Vatican’s International Theological Commission (ITC) at the time and Pope Paul VI reportedly requested his research. At issue was whether or not

113. Cipriano Vagaggini, *Ordination of Women to the Diaconate in the Eastern Churches*, ed. Phyllis Zagano (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 36.

114. Cardman, “Women, Ministry,” 317.

115. Macy, “Women Deacons,” 20.

female diaconal ordinations were the same as male diaconal ordinations. At the study's conclusion, Cipriano Vagaggini responded in the affirmative:

It seems to me certain that in the history of the undivided church the Byzantine tradition maintained by nature and dignity the ordination of deaconesses belonged to the group of bishops, presbyters, and deacons and not to the group of lectors and subdeacons. . . . Theologically, in virtue of the use of the Byzantine Church, it appears that women can receive diaconal ordination, which, by nature and dignity is equated to the ordination of the deacons.¹¹⁶

In 1987, Vagaggini was asked to prepare a presentation on his work to the Vatican's Synod on the Laity; however, there was no mention of his work in the final synod document, *Christifidelis laici* (1988). In 2002, the ITC issued a study document advising that "the question of including women in the restored diaconate is something that the church's 'ministry of discernment' should decide."¹¹⁷ At this writing, the vigorous discussion about the place of women in the Roman Catholic Church, and especially within ordained ministry, continues unabated. Citing the need to follow their consciences and the call of God, nearly two hundred Catholic women have accepted excommunication by being ordained outside the official canons of the church, first to the diaconate and then to the priesthood. Both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have frequently spoken about the necessity of giving women more space in the church. Yet what that "space" might be remains obscure.

THE DECLINE OF FEMALE DEACONS

By the twelfth century, women deacons had become very rare, though they persist in some Eastern rites into the modern period.¹¹⁸ A twelfth-century Greek canonist, Theodore Balsamon, wrote: "In times past, orders of deaconesses were recognized and they had access

116. Vagaggini, *Ordination of Women*, 61.

117. Phyllis Zagano, introduction to Vagaggini, *Ordination of Women*, 10.

118. Phyllis Zagano, "It's Time: The Case for Women Deacons," *Commonweal* 139, no. 22 (December 12, 2012): 8–9.

to the sanctuary, but the monthly affliction banished them.”¹¹⁹ In the fourteenth century, another Eastern canonist, Matthew Blastares, acknowledged that while women deacons had existed, they were later forbidden “because of the monthly flow that cannot be controlled.”¹²⁰ In the West, even though Pope Gregory I (590–604) said that menstruation should not be an obstacle to women attending church, the purity rules eventually prevailed. In the end, women deacons would be banned at least partly because of their normal biological functions.

Another significant event leading to the demise of women deacons in the West came in the mid-twelfth century when the definition of ordination underwent a dramatic shift. In the first millennium, a Christian was ordained, consecrated, or blessed to perform a specific job or ministry needed by the community. Gary Macy writes:

Ordination did not give a person, for instance, the irrevocable and portable power of consecrating the bread and wine, or of leading the liturgy; rather, a particular community charged a person or persons to play a leadership role within that community (and only within that community) and that person or persons would lead the liturgy because of the leadership role they played within the community.¹²¹

In the twelfth century, the definition of ordination came to signify that recipients were given an indelible character marking them as different from other Christians. Now the priest and only the priest received the power to consecrate bread and wine. Further, the indelible character and power to consecrate was portable and could be exercised anywhere, in any community. Ordination now authorized only ministries that related to service at the altar, so only the orders of priest, deacon, and subdeacon were recognized. Finally, “all of the other earlier orders were no longer considered to be orders at all.”¹²²

A highly influential late twelfth-century Western canonist, Huguccio of Bologna, wrote that even if a woman were to be ordained it would not “take” because of “the law of the church and

119. Macy, “Women Deacons,” 31.

120. *Ibid.*

121. *Ibid.*, 33.

122. *Ibid.*, 34.

sex.”¹²³ In other words, the fact of being biologically female prevented women from being ordained, and what is more, because they were biologically female, they never could have been truly ordained in the first place. Therefore, all past female ordinations were not ordinations at all, at least according to the new understanding of ordination. Given that male ordinations in previous centuries also entailed a different understanding of the meaning of orders, one could argue that those male ordinations did not “take” either, a point that seems to have escaped our esteemed canonists.

By the early thirteenth century, the ancient tradition of women deacons had been defined out of existence in the West. One wonders if it is more than mere coincidence that as women deacons were being extinguished, a new movement of ministerial women was coming to birth. These were independent female communities, known as Beguines, that operated outside the control of male church leaders. The Beguines served as prototypes (although not without persecution) to the later meteoric rise of women’s apostolic religious communities. Like their foremothers (and still today), these women religious attracted the ire of clerics, perhaps because their advocacy for the marginalized often unsettled the status quo.

EVIDENCE FOR WOMEN PRESBYTERS

Formerly, archaeologists and other scholars interpreted inscriptions of female deacons, priests, and bishops exclusively as the wives of these officeholders, rather than a female holding the office. The title *presbyter*a was also thought to indicate an elderly or senior woman rather than a female priest. Recent scholarship is more nuanced, acknowledging that in some contexts, such as 1 Timothy 5:1–2, the terms *presbyteroi* and *presbyter*a refer to elderly male and female persons, while the *presbyteroi* of 1 Timothy 5:17 probably refer to an authoritative position.¹²⁴ Even though *presbyter*a can sometimes mean the wife of a male presbyter, the title was also used for women who were neither elderly nor the wives of priests.

123. Ibid., 36.

124. Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women*, 163.

Madigan and Osiek find that “while synods and councils, both East and West, repeatedly condemned the practice of women presbyters, the epigraphical and literary evidence suggests their ongoing existence, even if in small numbers.”¹²⁵ Dorothy Irvin explains:

The word *presbytera* is not the word that was used for a woman priest of any Greek or Roman religious cult. *Presbyter*, a Greek word meaning “elder” was one of the New Testament designations of ministry that became normative, together with deacon and bishop. In the Latin-speaking areas of the early Church, a feminine ending was added to form the title of women holding this office.¹²⁶

In English, the word was shortened to “prester” and eventually to “priest.”¹²⁷ Ute Eisen’s careful study of tombstone inscriptions and literary attestations found that women with titles such as *presbytera*, *presbytides*, and *presbiterissa* functioned in both the Eastern and Western churches from the second to the ninth centuries.¹²⁸

EXAMPLES OF WOMEN WITH PRESBYTERAL TITLES IN THE EAST

Ammion the Presbyter, Epikto the *Presbytis*, Artemidora the Presbyter: these epigraphic titles for women leaders date from the second to the fourth century. They were found in Asia Minor, Greece, and Egypt respectively. Artemidora’s inscription was actually a label for her mummy: “(Mummy of) the presbyter Artemidora, the daughter of Mikkalos (and the) mother Paniskiaina. She has fallen asleep in the Lord.”¹²⁹ In addition to tombstone evidence, Eisen cites contemporaneous literary sources including Epiphanius’s *Panarion against Eighty Heresies* (ca. 374–77) and Canon 11 of the Synod of Laodicea (ca. 341–81). Both documents provide historic evidence that the practice of women ministering “at the altar” was widespread enough to attract

125. *Ibid.*

126. Dorothy Irvin, “The Archaeology of Women’s Traditional Ministries in the Church 100 to 820 AD,” in *Calendar 2003* (St. Paul, MN: Self-published, 2003).

127. *Ibid.*

128. Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 116–34.

129. *Ibid.*, 126.

censure, and that the suppression of their ministry was based on the belief that women are subordinate to men.

Epiphanius sought to demonstrate women's inferiority by citing Scripture selectively (Gen 3:16; 1 Cor 11:8; and 1 Tim 2:12–15) while dismissing other Scriptures (Gal 3:28 and Gen 1:27) that point to female equality. Epiphanius wrote especially against groups that ordained women as priests and bishops (Quintillianists, Pepuzians, Priscillianists) and linked them with the Montanists who were eventually deemed schismatic. This condemnation may have led to the erroneous conclusion that only schismatic groups permitted female clergy. But the Synod of Laodicea attests that ordained women presbyters, called *presbytides*, acted as presidents of their congregations. Canon 11 from the synod forbids such women presiders to be installed in the church. Says Eisen: "In light of their location . . . within the higher clergy we must presume that these women both led the assembly and presided at the Eucharist."¹³⁰ Canon 44 of the synod also forbade women to enter the sanctuary. Eisen concludes: "We thus find that until some time in the fourth century there were women presbyters . . . active in the Church in Asia Minor. They were found not only in schismatic groups, as Epiphanius tried to show, but also in the Great Church, as attested by Canon 11 of the Synod of Laodicea."¹³¹

EXAMPLES OF WOMEN WITH PRESBYTERAL TITLES IN THE WEST

Kale, *presbytera*; Leta the *Presbytera*; and Flavia Vitalia, the holy presbyter: these three inscriptions were found in Sicily, Italy, and Yugoslavia respectively and date to the fourth and fifth centuries. Leta and Kale may have been among the women priests to whom Pope Gelasius I objected in his letter to bishops in southern Italy and Sicily (ca. 494 CE):

Nevertheless we have heard to our annoyance that divine affairs have come to such a low state that women are encouraged to officiate at the

130. Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 122.

131. *Ibid.*, 123.

sacred altars and to take part in all matters imputed to the offices of the male sex to which they do not belong.¹³²

Gelasius's objections notwithstanding, the inscriptions point to the reality that a number of Italian and Sicilian communities valued their female presbyteral leaders. Flavia Vitalia is described as a *matrona*, indicating a married freeborn woman described as "holy" (see chapter 4).

CONCLUSION

Early Christian evangelists, both male and female, spread the gospel message primarily in urban settings of the Roman Empire such as Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Carthage, Corinth, Alexandria, and Athens. These cultural settings were far removed from the agrarian roots of the Galilean Jesus movement whose subsistence communities valued and integrated women's work in the struggle to survive. As the Jesus movement spread, it attracted diverse social cohorts, including slaves, freed women and men, and the freeborn poor, as well as many high-status women and a few high-status men. Elite women and higher-status freeborn and freedwomen from the artisan and small business classes were especially attracted to the new movement. Paul's affirmation of celibacy in light of his expectation of an imminent *parousia* would, in later generations, come to be valued for its own sake—especially by women. Undoubtedly, many women pursued a celibate path out of spiritual devotion; however, freedom from the demands of patriarchal marriage and the household-code ideal of wifely subordination seems to have been an added inducement. Christian virgins sought to forego marriage altogether, younger and older widows chose not to remarry, and some women chose to divorce their nonbelieving spouses, often because of the double standard that existed over sexual fidelity. Such decisions were a constant source of tension between early Christian communities and the broader Roman culture, and would have far-reaching conse-

132. Ibid., 129.

quences over many centuries. They would also transform patriarchal marriage.

In the early Jesus movement, women exercised significant ecclesial authority as patrons, itinerant prophets, evangelists, apostles, teachers, and missionaries. They founded and presided over house church worship in most urban centers and held titles such as *diakonoï* and probably *episcopoi* as these roles were understood in the first century. Yet, the public leadership of women was unsettling to the mainstream culture. Based as they were on gendered understandings of public and domestic space, hierarchical Greco-Roman household codes eventually became normative—not only in families but also in church structures. As hope for the parousia dimmed, more and more Christian communities sought some level of accommodation with and integration into the dominant culture. This resulted in an ever-increasing resistance to the leadership of women. From the early second century to the early fifth century, male church leaders repeatedly cited 1 Timothy's admonishment "Women are to be silent in the churches" as justification for curtailing women's exercise of ecclesial authority. Yet, women persisted in teaching, evangelizing, baptizing, and presiding at eucharistic meals despite official sanctions.

One could ask whether, in the final analysis, the initiative of Christian women made any difference. I submit there is ample evidence that it did. There are at least three significant differences between first- and fourth-century societies that can be attributed to the influence and authority exercised by Christian women. First, by the fourth century it had become both possible and socially acceptable for women to forego marriage. The freedom to choose a life of celibacy effectively dismantled one pillar of patriarchy—mandatory marriage. While forgoing the pleasures of intercourse and children may seem to our contemporary era a high price to pay, it is likely that women in late antiquity viewed this choice quite differently. No longer could they be forced into unwanted, loveless unions with older men who were free to couple with whomever they chose regardless of health risks. The continued ability of unmarried women to control their own finances (often generously shared with the church) made it possible to live an independent life free of the demands of patriar-

chal marriage. Joining a communal network of spiritually minded, often highly educated female virgins and widows may have also been attractive.

A second difference is that Christian widows and virgins rescued, socialized, baptized, and educated thousands of orphans who would otherwise have died of exposure or, in the case of baby girls, been doomed to lives of prostitution. In 374, Emperor Valentinian made the exposure of infants a capital crime.¹³³ Even though offenders were rarely prosecuted, this heinous practice was no longer socially sanctioned.¹³⁴ Christian values held by both women and men had significant societal impact. The implementation of those values when it came to children, however, was in the hands of women.

On February 14, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI made the rather remarkable statement that in the early Christian communities, "The female presence was anything but secondary."¹³⁵ This observation from, arguably, the most erudite of contemporary popes, is another way of saying that the ecclesial influence of early Christian women was either primary or equal to that of Christian men. The third and most significant difference made by women in the early church is the transformation of Roman society from a predominantly non-Christian to a predominantly Christian culture. While much necessary scholarly ink has been spilled tracking the decline of women's public leadership authority in early Christianity, what is easily overlooked is that Christianity's rapid expansion is largely due to the domestic networking and evangelizing efforts of women. Osiek and MacDonald cite several contemporary scholars in support of this realization:

In his magisterial study *Pagans and Christians*, Robin Lane Fox has written that "Christian women [were] prominent in the churches' membership and recognized to be so by Christians and pagans," and he recalls the claims of Adolf von Harnack about women playing "a leading role in the spread of this religion." More recently, the involvement of

133. Osiek and Balch, *Families*, 66.

134. See Samuel X. Radbill, "A History of Child Abuse and Infanticide," in *Violence in the Family*, ed. Suzanne K. Steinmetz and Murray A. Straus (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1974), 173–79.

135. "Pope: History of Christianity Would Be Very Different without Women," *Asia News*, February 14, 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/yb2v3e6s>.

women has been central to Rodney Stark's thesis about the involvement of women in the rise of Christianity.¹³⁶

Stark's 1996 book, *The Rise of Christianity*, uses methodologies gleaned from the social sciences to explore the rapid expansion of Christianity. Some of his findings resonate with what has been discussed in these first two chapters. Stark suggests that owing to Christian prohibitions against exposure, infanticide, and abortion, more Christian children than pagan were raised in the new religion. Concurring with feminist scholarship, he finds that "Christian women enjoyed substantially higher status within the Christian subcultures than pagan women did in the world at large . . . [and that] women also filled leadership positions."¹³⁷ Elizabeth Castelli and Michelle Renee Salzman dispute Stark's argument that there were more Christian women than Christian men, that Christian women enjoyed higher status within their subculture than their pagan sisters did within Roman society, and that exogamous marriages (i.e., to pagan men) led to higher rates of conversion.¹³⁸ Significantly, Brent D. Shaw's study of Christian funerary inscriptions in Rome with date of death included found essentially equal proportions of male (n=1918) and female inscriptions (n=1815).¹³⁹ Although Shaw's findings apply only to Rome, they undercut Stark's hypothesis that there were substantially more Christian women than Christian men throughout the Roman empire. Still, I believe Stark is probably correct that in at least some communities, Christian women enjoyed higher status within their own subcultures than non-Christian women did within theirs. While most Christian women were not of a higher *class* than their non-Christian counterparts, it is important to distinguish between *class* and *status*. Aristocratic women (whether pagan or Christian)

136. Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman's Place*, 223.

137. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 128.

138. See Elizabeth Castelli, "Gender, Theory and the Rise of Christianity: A Response to Rodney Stark," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6, no. 2 (1998): 227–57; and Michelle Renee Salzman, "Aristocratic Women: Conductors of Christianity in the Fourth Century," *Helios* 16, no. 2 (1989): 207–20. Both Castelli and Salzman argue convincingly against Stark's contention that there were more Christian women than Christian men and that exogamous marriages (i.e., to non-Christian men) led to higher rates of conversion.

139. Brent D. Shaw, "Seasons of Death: Aspects of Mortality in Imperial Rome," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 86 (1996): 107.

had both high class and high status but enjoyed less public independence than lower-class Christian women (whether freed or freeborn), who were able to move independently about in public, engage in commercial ventures, and accumulate wealth. Within their Christian social networks, these lower-class Christian women had money, high status, and freedom of movement. As we have seen, each of these contributed to the rapid expansion of early Christianity. Osiek and MacDonald correctly conclude: “Stark is clearly drawing on a particular sociological notion of conversion that focuses on the use of available social ‘networks’ in contributing to the expansion of the group. The network in question in this case is the extended household of antiquity.”¹⁴⁰ For over four centuries, women’s missionary authority and leadership to and within these extended households attracted both praise and blame. It would also change the face of the Roman Empire.

Peter Lampe’s exhaustive work *From Paul to Valentinus* identifies a preponderance of high-ranking women in the Roman church, including businesswomen and members of the nobility. In third- and fourth-century Rome, he finds “most Christian aristocrats were women” even though most Christians were of lower status. Even after Constantine legalized Christianity, Roman aristocratic families were “the last bastion of paganism.”¹⁴¹ Lampe points to two late fourth-century scions of the noble Ceionii family, Ceionius Rufus Albinus and Publius Ceionius Caecina Albinus. Both held high political offices—the former as prefect of Rome and the latter as governor of Numidia. The brothers each married Christian women but remained pagan themselves. The daughters and granddaughters of these unions were raised as devout Christians and they married other Christians. The sons, however, remained pagan until being baptized on their deathbeds. Lampe concludes:

140. Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*, 223–24.

141. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 149.

The men of the family preserved the pagan family tradition even after the official suppression of paganism, while the women gave the family the necessary Christian appearance. This example also shows that, still in the fourth century, the road to Christianization led through the female members of the family.¹⁴²

142. *Ibid.*, 150.

