

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

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## Women in the Early Church: From the Publisher

**The Questionnaire we sent out recently** drew an enormous response. Your counsel is most valuable. You gave us a number of good ideas for specific improvements to the magazine, which we will be implementing in the next few issues (for example, in this issue, at your request, we have expanded the bibliography to include brief comments on the books cited).

Your comments also showed that the overwhelming majority of our readers are broadly within the evangelical camp. You asked us to identify our orientation more specifically. Gladly.

**Christian History** magazine and its parent corporation, the Christian History Institute, were founded by people of evangelical Christian conviction. Our evangelical commitment continues to drive us forward as we research and report on our rich Christian heritage. Yet we aim to maintain a non-partisan, non-denominational stance, seeking to serve the whole Body of Christ. We feel that faithfulness to Christ means practicing an uncompromising integrity in our handling of history. Accordingly, we do not use only writers of our own background and persuasion. We will publish the work of writers who, in our judgment, best interpret the subject matter at hand.

Further, this quest for truth means that we must be willing to criticize ourselves and our own tradition. Remember that it was the Pharisees' lack of self-criticism that kept them from recognizing the presence of God in their midst.

Now, about the issue at hand, many readers in the past have urged us to devote a special issue to the role of women in church history. As we began to plan this project, we quickly realized how big it was. We consulted with a number of writers and scholars who have specialized in this field. It became apparent that we would need several issues on women in church history, covering various eras.

We have also taken to heart the comments of Pat Gundry, one of our contributing editors for this issue. She warned us against thinking that one issue, or even a series, could "cover" the subject. Her comments appear on page 4, serving as sort of an Op-Ed introduction to this issue. We appreciate her challenge, and accept it. And still we insist we had to do this series in spite of the pitfalls.

We send this first one forth with some degree of apprehension. We know that we are tiptoeing through an emotionally charged minefield; there is sure to be something to displease everyone. Feminists may be mad at us for not pushing women's ordination. More traditional readers may see too much of a feminist agenda.

You should find the articles stimulating and worth thinking about—even if you don't agree with them.

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## The Problem with Special Women's Issues

PATRICIA GUNDRY Patricia Gundry, a free-lance writer from Grand Rapids, Mich., is the author of *Neither Slave Nor Free: Helping Women Answer the Call to Church Leadership* (Harper & Row, 1987).

In a brave effort to do what all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't do, this magazine is attempting to re-assemble and present an accurate account of women's participation in the history of the church.

But are special issues the way to do that? Is there not perhaps some better way to give women the real place they've had in history, noticing the noteworthy ones, including the experiences of women as part of the whole fabric of historical reporting?

To the interested observer, particularly to women who are aware of the "normal" way history is done (by ignoring women), giving women their due is long overdue. It seems a great idea to right the wrongs that for so long have excluded females from the pages not only of history, but of most nonfiction for the general reader. Women wonder what the problem is. Can't we just do it right from now on?

But to the person who attempts to start "doing it right," it's not so easy. How do you locate information about women in history? Because so many of our source materials were written by men, preserved by men, interpreted and reported on by men, women have been sifted out at every level. Few remain in the narratives, and many are genuinely lost to the written record. We know, because we have clues, that women were influencing, participating in, and being uniquely and specifically affected by certain events and situations. But we do not have enough material, most of the time, to write a rich account, to do them justice, to draw conclusions we can support.

If we attempt to redress the inequity by over-emphasizing the participation and influence of a few women here and there, we perhaps overload the importance of those particular women and skew the account. So, in a very real sense, we need a new kind of specialist, a historical detective whose specialty is searching out women (and other forgotten ones) and assessing their participation, influence, and experience in the light of all the data available, both information specifically about them and other information that may relate to them.

There are dangers in any method we may choose in our attempt to balance the longstanding practice of lopsided reporting. If we produce special issues, we set women apart again, plucking them out of the rest of humanity to put them in the spotlight briefly. We wouldn't have special issues on men's participation in history; everyone knows men participated in history. Well, everyone knows women did, too—they just never have talked about it much. So now we're talking about it.

However, singling women out in this way contributes to the very problem women have been fighting against, the presentation of us as "other," creatures not quite the same as men. It feeds a mentality we have fought so long, that reaches all the way back to Aristotle and his thinking that women are inferior humans by nature—a belief so persistent that it still influences public and private practices that unnecessarily limit women.

We don't want to be "the other." We want to be what we are: fully human. But we would also like justice. And justice seems to be best served with solutions that are at least attempting to redress the omissions and exclusions of centuries.

We accept the special issues gratefully and appreciatively—yet warily, because what we really want is to be there in the regular issues. We would like women to be reported on equally with men, not a 50–50 quota, but true to the real world—the world in which we all live and in which our forebears lived too.

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## Quick Quotes on Women in the Early Church

"What women these Christians have!"

--*4th-century pagan philosopher Libanius*

"Many women have received power through the grace of God and have performed many deeds of manly valor."

--*Clement of Alexandria*

"Every woman who makes herself a man shall enter the kingdom of heaven."

--*the Gospel of Thomas, a 2nd-century Gnostic work*

"She was in the front line in condemning the heretics."

--*Jerome, on Marcella*

"A woman, however learned and holy, may not take upon herself to teach in an assembly of men."

--*the Synod of Carthage, 398 A.D.*

"You are the Devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first forsaker of the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not brave enough to approach!"

--*Tertullian, to women*

"When [the women] came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven... But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense."

--*Luke 24:9-11*

"These people do not know that while Barak trembled, Deborah saved Israel, that Esther delivered from supreme peril the children of God ... Is it not to women that our Lord appeared after His Resurrection? Yes, and the men could then blush for not having sought what the women had found."

--*Jerome, after criticism for dedicating his books to women*

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## The Neglected History of Women in the Early Church

**A number of prominent leaders, scholars, and benefactors of the early church were women and—despite neglect by many modern historians—the diligent researcher can still uncover a rich history.**

CATHERINE KROEGER Dr. Catherine Kroeger is chaplain and lecturer in the department of religion at Hamilton College in New Hartford, N.Y. Her doctorate is in classical studies and Greek, with a specialization in women in ancient religion, especially women and the ecclesiology of the Apostle Paul

**Women were the last disciples at the cross and the first at the empty tomb. they remained integral to the work of the church in its early centuries. Catherine Kroeger scours historical data to compile an impressive collection of stories about noteworthy women in the early church.**

One of the best-kept secrets in Christianity is the enormous role that women played in the early church.

Though they leave much unsaid, still, both Christian and secular writers of the time attest many times to the significant involvement of women in the early growth of Christianity.

Celsus, a 2nd-century detractor of the faith, once taunted that the church attracted only “the silly and the mean and the stupid, with women and children.” His contemporary, Bishop Cyprian of Carthage, acknowledged in his *Testimonia* that “Christian maidens were very numerous” and that it was difficult to find Christian husbands for all of them. These comments give us a picture of a church disproportionately populated by women.

Why? One reason might have been the practice of exposing unwanted female infants—abandoning them to certain death. Christians, of course, repudiated this practice, and thus had more living females.

Also, in the upper echelons of society, women often converted to Christianity while their male relatives remained pagans, lest they lose their senatorial status. This too contributed to the inordinate number of women in the church, particularly upper-class women. Callistus, bishop of Rome c. 220, attempted to resolve the marriage problem by giving women of the senatorial class an ecclesiastical sanction to marry slaves or freedmen—even though Roman law prohibited this.

These high-born Christian women seized upon the study of the Bible and of Hebrew and Greek. The circle of Roman women who studied with Jerome in the late 300s showed such scholarship that he thought nothing of referring some church elders to Marcella for the resolution of a hermeneutical problem. By the early 400s, Augustine could declare that “any old Christian woman” was better educated in spiritual matters than many a philosopher.

The women’s spiritual zeal exploded into social service. Fabiola founded the first Christian hospital in Europe. Many other church women encountered severe opposition from their families for spending their wealth so generously in helping the poor. Such selfless ministry became a trademark of Christian women.

In a letter to his wife, Tertullian gives us a glimpse into some of the ministries of church women in his time. He charges her, in case of his own death, to not marry a pagan.

“Who would be willing to let his wife go through one street after another to other men’s houses, and indeed to the poorer cottages, in order to visit the brethren? Who would like to see her being taken from

his side by some duty of attending a nocturnal gathering? At Easter time who will quietly tolerate her absence all the night? Who will unsuspectingly let her go to the Lord's Supper, that feast upon which they heap such calumnies? Who will let her creep into jail to kiss the martyr's chains? Or bring water for the saints' feet?"

## Women As Witnesses of Jesus

It is no surprise that women were active in the early church. From the very start—the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus—women were significantly involved. In fact, women were the major witnesses of his crucifixion and resurrection. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record that a significant group of women had followed Jesus in his Galilean ministry, and that they were present at his execution—when the male disciples were conspicuously absent.

All three describe the women's presence at Jesus' burial. Luke declares that the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee still followed along as Christ was carried to the tomb. Mark details the care with which Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus noted where He was laid, while Matthew tells how they kept watch over the sepulchre after the men had left. John tells of the group immediately beneath the cross, three women and one man. John alone preserves the garden interview between Mary Magdalene and the Risen Christ.

The proclamation of the astounding Easter event was entrusted to these women. The angel reminded them that they had already been instructed by Jesus about His death, burial and resurrection. The women remembered and hurried off to tell the men. Their witness remains an integral part of the gospel to this day. The early church considered Mary Magdalene an "apostle to the apostles," and Luke relied heavily on the testimony of women as he wrote both Luke and Acts.

The involvement of women continued in the first few decades of the church, attested by both biblical and extra-biblical sources. A number of women served as leaders of the house churches that sprang up in the cities of the Roman Empire—the list includes Priscilla, Chloe, Lydia, Apphia, Nympha, the mother of John Mark, and possibly the "elect lady" of John's second epistle.

In the 2nd century, Clement of Alexandria wrote that the apostles were accompanied on their missionary journeys by women who were not marriage partners, but colleagues, "that they might be their fellow-ministers in dealing with housewives. It was through them that the Lord's teaching penetrated also the women's quarters without any scandal being aroused. We also know the directions about women deacons which are given by the noble Paul in his letter to Timothy."

Was that perhaps the role of Junia? She was mentioned by Paul in Romans 16 as "of note among the apostles." Some have debated the meaning of this verse, but early tradition holds that Junia was a woman and was considered an apostle. John Chrysostom wrote: "Indeed, to be an apostle at all is a great thing; but to be even amongst those of note; just consider what a great encomium that is ... Oh, how great is the devotion of this woman, that she should even be counted worthy of the appellation of apostle."

Until the Middle Ages, the identity of Junia as a female apostle was unquestioned. Later translators attempted to change the gender by changing the name to the masculine Junias. But such a name is unknown in antiquity; and there is absolutely no literary, epigraphical or papyrological evidence for it.

Paul also mentions Phoebe in Romans 16, "a deacon of the church at Cenchreae." He calls her a **prostatis** or overseer. This term in its masculine form, **prostates**, was used later by the Apostolic Fathers to designate the one presiding over the Eucharist. And Paul uses the same verb, the passive of **ginomai** (to be or become), as he uses in Colossians 1:23: "I was made a minister." In the passive, the verb sometimes indicated ordination or appointment to an office. Thus one might legitimately translate

Paul's statement about Phoebe: "For she has been appointed, actually by my own action, an officer presiding over many." The church in Rome is asked to welcome her and assist her in the church's business.

The four daughters of Philip appear in Acts 21:9 as prophetesses. Eusebius viewed these daughters as "belonging to the first stage of apostolic succession."

Another prophetess attested to by extra-biblical tradition is Ammia, who prophesied in Philadelphia during New Testament times, and was received with reverence throughout Asia Minor. The first preserved mention of her dates to about 160 A.D.

## 2nd-Century Church Women

Just as the letters of Paul abound in references to his female associates in ministry, the Apostolic Fathers also mention women as stalwarts in the faith. Twice Ignatius sent greetings to Alce, whom he calls especially dear to him. He also greeted Tavia and her household; perhaps she was another house-church leader.

Polycarp mentioned the sister of Crescens, who deserved special commendation when she and her brother arrived in Philippi to deliver the letter. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, written about 148 A.D., gives instructions that two copies should be made of the work and one given to Grapte, "who shall exhort the widows and orphans." The other copy was to be given to Bishop Clement to share with the elders. It appears that Grapte and Clement represented the female and male leaders respectively.

But Christians were not the only ones prompted to write about the female followers of Jesus. About 112 A.D., the Roman governor Pliny the Younger detailed his efforts to cope with the nascent church in Bithynia. He had found it necessary to interrogate the leaders, two slave women called *ministrae*, or deacons. These women apparently followed in the tradition of Phoebe.

## Spurious Works

Certain female leaders are described as fully historic personages, while others are embedded in legend. Catherine of Alexandria, for instance, reportedly lived in the 2nd century, though the earliest reference to her is in an 8th-century work. The patron saint of scholars and philosophers, she allegedly debated 50 philosophers and won them all to Christ. As a result, she was condemned to death and ultimately perished on the wheel (hence the name of the "Catherine wheel," a rotating firework).

Her story may have been drawn from that of Hypatia, the noted pagan philosopher also of Alexandria, also of the 2nd century. Hypatia did in fact meet her death at the hands of an enraged Christian mob, and her historicity is beyond doubt. The Catherine story may well be drawn from that of Hypatia, but it demonstrates a willingness in the church to project a woman as a spiritual and intellectual leader.

Spurious works, even if their authorship is in doubt, can still have value in demonstrating certain attitudes. Two epistles erroneously attributed to Ignatius preserve an appeal from Mary of Cassobelae that three members of the clergy, Maris, Eulogius and Sobelus, be appointed to serve in her community so that it might not be devoid of those fit to preside over the Word of God. She begs Ignatius to not deny her request simply because the three are young and two of them newly ordained. Rather, she argues from the Scriptures that youth is no deterrent to a significant ministry for God. Pseudo-Ignatius replies: "Thy intelligence invites us, as by a word of command, to participate in those divine draughts which gush forth so abundantly in thy soul ... Thy numerous quotations of Scripture passages exceedingly delighted me, which, when I had read, I had no longer a single doubtful thought respecting the matter... Thou art perfect in every good work and word, and able also to exhort others in Christ."

He promises to comply with her wishes, citing the fame which had accrued to her earnest dedication to Christ at the time of her visit to Rome during the bishopric of Linus (beginning of the 2nd century). The letter is probably no earlier than the 4th century, but it demonstrates an attitude that was able to gain currency in the early church. A woman of outstanding spiritual gifts purportedly gives direction in the appointment of clergy, and is applauded for the inspiration she affords. The personages may be fictitious, but the appreciation of feminine spirituality is real.

### **The Legend of St. Thecla**

The legend of St. Thecla has endeared itself to modern women as well as to their earlier counterparts. It is the bestknown of the numerous apocryphal stories of early Christian heroines. According to the 3rd-century text of *The Acts of Paul*, Thecla, a noblewoman, was converted while listening to the preaching of the apostle. Forsaking her old life, she followed Paul and endured persecution, tribulation and great peril. The story resembles the ancient pagan romances in the repetition of hair's-breadth escapes, the fortitude and nobility displayed by both hero and heroine, and the happy ending. It is, however, a Christianized romance, as are several other of the apocryphal *Acts* and *The Recognitions of Peter*.

Thecla appears as a truly heroic character who endures all manner of suffering for the sake of Christ. After her itineration through Asia Minor with the Apostle Paul, she settles near Seleucia, where she teaches, preaches, heals and baptizes. Tertullian, incensed that Montanist women used her as a model, declared that a deacon had confessed that he fabricated the story "for love of Paul." William M. Ramsay maintained that *The Acts of Paul* contained an authentic 1st-century account, which had been outrageously embellished by the 3rd-century deacon. Dennis McDonald has pointed out that, though the story is almost surely fictitious, this does not obviate the existence of an actual female leader of that name.

Both Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea spoke of Thecla as a historical figure. Writing in the 300s, they described her teaching center and hospital near Seleucia. The pilgrim Egeria visited this facility in 399 A.D., and also described its monasteries, convents and assembly buildings, along with the teaching and healing ministries that went on there. The German team that excavated the center in 1908 found the apse still standing above the ground, with the main basilica's outlines covering a space equal to that of a football field. The excavators also found numerous cisterns, apparently for washing the sick, two other churches, and many fine mosaics. The center apparently was in active use for at least 1,000 years, indicating the presence in Asia Minor of an extremely strong female leader.

### **Women in Consecrated Orders**

Beside the outstanding achievements of individual women stood the ministry of consecrated women in specialized orders. These orders included ecclesial widows, virgins, presbyteresses and deaconesses. Sometimes such women were formally ordained and sat with the rest of the clergy in front of the congregation.

Mary McKenna suggests that the disadvantaged women who accompanied Jesus in his Galilean ministry (Luke 8:23) formed the beginning of the order of widows. The Greek term *cheira* might refer to any woman who found herself in difficult circumstances. Tertullian complained of a virgin who was admitted to the order of widows at the age of 19! These widows were supported by the gifts of the congregation, and in turn were expected to pray for their benefactors as well as for all other members of the church. Their duties and qualifications were developed from the instructions in 1 Timothy 5. In the Clementine *Recognitions and Homilies*, perhaps from the first half of the 3rd century, St. Peter, as he prepares to leave Tripoli, appoints elders and deacons and organizes an order of widows.

The widow came to be looked upon as "the altar of God," both because of her ministry of intercession and because of the gifts that she received. Under no circumstances should she reveal the name of a

donor, lest other widows demand an equal gift from the same source or, worse yet, curse the one who withheld such benefices. The *Didascalia* insisted that neither "the bishop nor a presbyter, nor a deacon, nor a widow should utter a curse," because widows "had been appointed to bless."

Widows were clearly part of the ordained clergy in the *Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, a 5th-century reworking of earlier material from Hippolytus's *Apostolic Tradition*. The selection process and ordination service of widows parallels those of deacons, bishops and presbyters. The document applies the title "presbyteresses" to these women, and six times refers to them as "the widows who sit in front." During communion, they stood by the altar, close to the bishops, presbyters and deacons, and within the veil that screened off the laity. These widows assumed pastoral responsibilities such as instructing female catechumens and the ignorant, gathering those who desired to live a pure life for prayer and encouragement, rebuking the wayward, and seeking to restore them.

## Women As Deacons

As Clement of Alexandria made mention of Paul's reference to deaconesses in 1 Timothy 3:11, so Origen commented on Phoebe, the deacon that Paul mentions in Romans 16:1-2:

"This text teaches with the authority of the Apostle that even women are instituted deacons in the Church. This is the function which was exercised in the church of Cenchreae by Phoebe, who was the object of high praise and recommendation by Paul... And thus this text teaches at the same time two things: that there are, as we have already said, women deacons in the Church, and that women, who by their good works deserve to be praised by the Apostle, ought to be accepted in the diaconate."

Women deacons appear to be under discussion in 1 Timothy 3:11, although the feminine form "deaconess" did not come into use until about 100 A.D. As late as the end of the 4th century, *diaconos* might designate a woman as well as a man. The order of deaconesses as distinct from that of widows appears clearly delineated in the first half of the 3rd century in the *Didascalia*, which declared that the deaconesses should be honored as figures of the Holy Spirit. They could visit believing women in pagan households where a male deacon would be unacceptable. To them belonged the duties of visiting the sick, bathing those recovering from illness, and ministering to the needy. Deaconesses also assisted in the baptism of women, anointing them with oil and giving them instruction in purity and holiness. They could give communion to women who were sick and unable to meet with the entire church. The *Apostolic Constitutions* even specified that both male and female deacons might be sent with messages outside the city limits. The ministry of the widow was largely that of prayer, fasting, and laying of hands on the sick, while the deaconess, usually a considerably younger woman, undertook the more physically arduous tasks.

Ancient documents show that deaconesses were ordained. The Council of Chalcedon set down requirements for the ordination of deaconesses, and the *Apostolic Constitutions* includes their ordination prayer.

## Women As Elders

The feminine form of "*presbyter*" or elder occurs frequently, though it is often translated simply as "old woman." At times the term certainly refers to women who were part of the clergy. The Cappadocian father, Basil, uses *presbytera* apparently in the sense of a woman who is head of a religious community. Also applied to women is the term *presbutis*, "older woman" or "eldress." The old woman who instructed Hermas is called *presbytis*. It occurs not only in Titus 2:3, but most markedly in Canon 11 of Laodicea, which forbade the appointment of *presbytides* (eldresses) or of female presidents (*prokathemenaî*).

The masculine form, *prokathemenos*, indicated the presbyter or bishop who presided over the

communion service. Dionysius of Alexandria, who died in 264 A.D., described a martyr as "the most holy eldress Mercuria" and another as "a most remarkable virgin eldress Apollonia." A variant reading of the apocryphal *Martyrdom of Matthew*, a 4th- or 5th-century document, tells how Matthew ordained a king as priest and his wife as *presbytis*, "eldress." Epiphanius and Theodoret vehemently repudiated any priestly function accruing to the "*presbytides*."

## Women As Priests?

There are even a few scattered references connecting women to the priesthood. Pseudo-Ignatius's *Letter to the Tarsians* commands that those who continue in virginity be honored as priestesses of Christ. The eldresses of Titus 2:3 must be "*hieroprepeis*," a term that inscriptional evidence suggests should be translated "like a priestess," or "like those employed in sacred service." The Cappadocian Gregory of Nazianzus wrote to Gregory of Nyssa about Theosebia, "the pride of the church, the ornament of Christ, the finest of our generation, the free speech of women, Theosebia, the most illustrious among the brethren, outstanding in beauty of soul. Theosebia, truly a priestly personage, the colleague of a priest, equally honored and worthy of the great sacraments."

The walls of the Roman catacombs bear pictures showing women in authoritative stances, with their hands raised in the posture of a bishop. The *Ecclesiastical Canons of the Apostles* specifically forbade women to stand in prayer (24:1–8). But here we see them standing in prayer, exercising a ministry of intercession and benediction, and dominating the scene. To this day, their steadfast faith and ministry still bless us.

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## Early Church Women and Heresy

**Of course not only women were attracted to the heretical sects that diverged from early church orthodoxy, but women were prominent in their leadership and teachings. Why might this have been?**

Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld

It is a curious fact that women were prominent in the life and literature of fringe groups [of the early church]. The Naasenes claimed to have received their teachings from James, the brother of Jesus, mediated by a woman named Marianne. Epiphanius said that the Nicolaitans had a work they ascribed to a woman they thought was Noah's wife, called Noria.

The Apocryphal literature names not only Thecla, in the Acts of Paul and Thecla, but also Marianne, alleged to have been the sister of Philip, and a number of other women who were said to be prophetesses. The New Testament itself had spoken scathingly of "that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess" (Revelation 2:20). But does this mean that only deviant sects had prophetesses, or, conversely, that prophetesses were always heretical?

The answer is clearly negative, since the canonical Book of Acts mentions that Philip the evangelist had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). Why then were prophetesses apparently more active in heretical groups than in the orthodox stream of the church?

One can only speculate, but the following facts may have a bearing on the question. In order for the deviant groups to gain adherents, it was necessary for them to demonstrate their superiority over the established church. This was done, in part, by claiming truth the orthodox Christians did not possess or emphasize.

Such "truth" had to come from a divine source, and the expected mode would be prophecy. By their nature, these groups were individualistic and lacked the established church's corporate structure (such as it was by that time). The way was open for individual prophetic activity, which in these groups included the participation of women. It could also be suggested that because women were increasingly restricted in the developing church structure, some of the more strong-minded or impulsive ones would gravitate to groups that allowed them more expression.

### Gnosticism

Whatever the case may have been with the other sects, in Gnosticism the female presence was prominent in its very theology. While the question could be asked as to why their theology became so feminized, for purposes of the present survey it is more important to observe that the existence of a feminine principle at the heart of their system could hardly fail to raise the female consciousness in their society. Much research has been done in this area, especially by Elaine Pagels [in her book *The Gnostic Gospels* (Random, 1979)]. In a chapter entitled "God the Father/God the Mother," Pagels assembles a curious assortment of texts. They are not monolithic, but evidence a diversity of attitudes toward sexual differentiation. One of these reveals an assumption that for women to enter the kingdom of heaven they must, as Pagels puts it, "assimilate themselves to men":

"Simon Peter said to [the disciples]: 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life.' Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her, in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.' "

... At the heart of all this is the theological discussion among the Gnostics themselves, according to Irenaeus, as to the feminine element in Bythus, who was generally thought to be the supreme being among the Gnostic hierarchy. Some considered "him" to be sexless, while others thought he was both masculine and feminine, "assigning to him the nature of a hermaphrodite" (*Against Heresies*, I,XI, 5).

The feminine principle in Gnostic thought was expressed frequently and under a variety of names, including "Mother," "Sound," "Thought of the Father," "Image of the Invisible Spirit," "Perfect Mind," "First and Last," "Thunder," "Whore," "Mother of All," "Virginal Berbelon," and the "Ineffable Mother who presides over heaven."

How does this complex of Gnostic ideology—of which only a part is reproduced here—fit into the whole picture of women in the early church? It has become increasingly common for students of the religious literature and history of the early Christian centuries (including the New Testament itself) to view this from a social perspective. Commenting on the Gnostic views and the diversity within the Christian church (e.g., Paul's teachings in comparison with the prominence of prophetesses in Montanism), Pagels remarks:

"Such contradictory attitudes toward women reflect a time of social transition, as well as a diversity of cultural influences. ... In Greece and Asia Minor, women participated with men in religious cults. ... In Egypt women had attained ... a relatively advanced state of emancipation. ... In Rome, forms of education had changed ... [women were active publicly in business and social activities]. ... "

"Yet despite all of this, and despite the previous public activity of Christian women, the majority of Christian churches in the 2nd century, like the majority of the middle class, opposed the move toward equality."

## **Montanism**

In contrast to some of the heretical sects that developed a competing system of theology over against orthodoxy, Montanism was flourishing as an attempt to bring in a new spiritual and visionary order emphasizing the Second Coming; this order was established to counter the formalism of the church.

Along with Montanus himself were two prophetesses, Maximilla and Priscilla. They were accused of leaving their husbands to follow Montanus. These prophetesses announced the imminent return of Christ and the advent of the New Jerusalem.

Maximilla declared, "After me, there will be no prophetess anymore, but the end will come."

Montanism itself was condemned by the church, but the extant pronouncements of the Montanist prophetesses, though they are somewhat mystical, do not contain outright denials of basic doctrine. These women spoke in the name of God, but did not claim to be divine themselves. On the contrary, they sought to call the church to Christ and to an expectation of His return.

Opinions have differed on whether their adherence to a deviant sect invalidated their belief that God had called them to prophesy. But throughout the centuries there have been women who were willing, even under criticism, to commit themselves to ministries they thought—rightly or wrongly—were the call of God. Some, suffering not merely criticism but also persecution, even committed themselves to martyrdom ...

## **Understanding the Conflict**

There are at least three ways to view the conflict between the orthodox and the sectarian practices regarding women. One is that the orthodox biblical position forbade the public ministry of women, with much of the prophetic and other leadership activity of women being thought of as simply out of order.

Another view is that the more orthodox churches were in reality opposing the activity of women in the heretical sects such as Gnosticism and Montanism largely because they opposed the sects themselves.

A third view is that in keeping with the social movements of the day, as Pagels says, perhaps Christianity moved upward in the social scale, from lower-class status, in which women had been needed in ministry ... , to the middle-class, where women were still restricted in that society. In this last view, we should also note that Christianity was not completely at home in the upper classes in which, certainly in Roman as well as in other societies, women had long since gained status and freedom. Perhaps all three of these views are in some degree valid.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

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## Early Church Heroines: Rulers, Prophets and Martyrs

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It is a curious fact that women were prominent in the life and literature of fringe groups [of the early church]. The Naasenes claimed to have received their teachings from James, the brother of Jesus, mediated by a woman named Marianne. Epiphanius said that the Nicolaitans had a work they ascribed to a woman they thought was Noah's wife, called Noria.

The Apocryphal literature names not only Thecla, in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, but also Marianne, alleged to have been the sister of Philip, and a number of other women who were said to be prophetesses. The New Testament itself had spoken scathingly of "that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess" (Revelation 2:20). But does this mean that only deviant sects had prophetesses, or, conversely, that prophetesses were always heretical?

The answer is clearly negative, since the canonical Book of Acts mentions that Philip the evangelist had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). Why then were prophetesses apparently more active in heretical groups than in the orthodox stream of the church?

One can only speculate, but the following facts may have a bearing on the question. In order for the deviant groups to gain adherents, it was necessary for them to demonstrate their superiority over the established church. This was done, in part, by claiming truth the orthodox Christians did not possess or emphasize.

Such "truth" had to come from a divine source, and the expected mode would be prophecy. By their nature, these groups were individualistic and lacked the established church's corporate structure (such as it was by that time). The way was open for individual prophetic activity, which in these groups included the participation of women. It could also be suggested that because women were increasingly restricted in the developing church structure, some of the more strong-minded or impulsive ones would gravitate to groups that allowed them more expression.

### Gnosticism

Whatever the case may have been with the other sects, in Gnosticism the female presence was prominent in its very theology. While the question could be asked as to why their theology became so feminized, for purposes of the present survey it is more important to observe that the existence of a feminine principle at the heart of their system could hardly fail to raise the female consciousness in their society. Much research has been done in this area, especially by Elaine Pagels [in her book *The Gnostic Gospels* (Random, 1979)]. In a chapter entitled "God the Father/God the Mother," Pagels assembles a curious assortment of texts. They are not monolithic, but evidence a diversity of attitudes toward sexual differentiation. One of these reveals an assumption that for women to enter the kingdom of heaven they must, as Pagels puts it, "assimilate themselves to men":

"Simon Peter said to [the disciples]: 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life.' Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her, in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.' "

.... At the heart of all this is the theological discussion among the Gnostics themselves, according to Irenaeus, as to the feminine element in Bythus, who was generally thought to be the supreme being among the Gnostic hierarchy. Some considered "him" to be sexless, while others thought he was both masculine and feminine, "assigning to him the nature of a hermaphrodite" (*Against Heresies*, I,XI, 5).

The feminine principle in Gnostic thought was expressed frequently and under a variety of names, including "Mother," "Sound," "Thought of the Father," "Image of the Invisible Spirit," "Perfect Mind," "First and Last," "Thunder," "Whore," "Mother of All," "Virginal Berbelon," and the "Ineffable Mother who presides over heaven."

How does this complex of Gnostic ideology—of which only a part is reproduced here—fit into the whole picture of women in the early church? It has become increasingly common for students of the religious literature and history of the early Christian centuries (including the New Testament itself) to view this from a social perspective. Commenting on the Gnostic views and the diversity within the Christian church (e.g., Paul's teachings in comparison with the prominence of prophetesses in Montanism), Pagels remarks:

"Such contradictory attitudes toward women reflect a time of social transition, as well as a diversity of cultural influences .... In Greece and Asia Minor, women participated with men in religious cults .... In Egypt women had attained ... a relatively advanced state of emancipation .... In Rome, forms of education had changed... [women were active publicly in business and social activities] ...."

"Yet despite all of this, and despite the previous public activity of Christian women, the majority of Christian churches in the 2nd century, like the majority of the middle class, opposed the move toward equality."

## **Montanism**

In contrast to some of the heretical sects that developed a competing system of theology over against orthodoxy, Montanism was flourishing as an attempt to bring in a new spiritual and visionary order emphasizing the Second Coming; this order was established to counter the formalism of the church.

Along with Montanus himself were two prophetesses, Maximilla and Priscilla. They were accused of leaving their husbands to follow Montanus. These prophetesses announced the imminent return of Christ and the advent of the New Jerusalem.

Maximilla declared, "After me, there will be no prophetess anymore, but the end will come."

Montanism itself was condemned by the church, but the extant pronouncements of the Montanist prophetesses, though they are somewhat mystical, do not contain outright denials of basic doctrine. These women spoke in the name of God, but did not claim to be divine themselves. On the contrary, they sought to call the church to Christ and to an expectation of His return.

Opinions have differed on whether their adherence to a deviant sect invalidated their belief that God had called them to prophesy. But throughout the centuries there have been women who were willing, even under criticism, to commit themselves to ministries they thought—rightly or wrongly—were the call of God. Some, suffering not merely criticism but also persecution, even committed themselves to martyrdom ....

## **Understanding the Conflict**

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

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## Women of the Early Church: A Gallery

A few of the many

MARY L. HAMMACK Dr. Mary L. Hammack is a teacher with more than 29 years of experience at the elementary, high school and university levels. She currently works as a freelance writer and curriculum coordinator, and is the author of *A Dictionary of Women in Church History* (Moody Press, 1984). AND THE EDITORS

### Anthusa

Anthusa lived from c. 330 to 374 A.D. in Antioch. Widowed at the age of 20, she is remembered for her influence in the life of her son, John Chrysostom, one of the greatest preachers and leaders of the 4th-century church. Her contemporaries tell us Anthusa was cultured, attractive, and from a wealthy family. Yet she chose to not remarry after her husband's death, deciding instead to devote herself to rearing her two children, John and his sister.

John later wrote that his mother not only taught her children to know and love the teachings of the Bible, but also that her very life was a model of biblical teaching. A student of law, rhetoric and the Scriptures, John was ordained by Bishop Meletius and later became bishop of Constantinople. A zealous missionary himself, he inspired numerous others to serve as missionaries. And he always emphasized that a crucial factor to effective evangelism is for Christians to be living examples of Christ-centeredness. Surely he learned something of this from his mother Anthusa.

Chrysostom is known as the writer of numerous biblical commentaries, and as one of the most articulate and influential spokesmen for Christianity in his era. So much so, in fact, that the Empress Eudoxia tried in Chrysostom's later years to silence the preacher by banishing him. Chrysostom deeply revered his mother, admiring her prayers and her faith, and cared for her until her death. We don't know much else about Anthusa, but we know she had great positive influence, at the least by way of her influential son.

### Candace

Candace was a queen of Ethiopia, the one mentioned in Acts 8:27 in the story of Philip witnessing to an Ethiopian eunuch who was this queen's treasurer. Tradition tells us that Queen Candace was converted to Christ through the eunuch's testimony, and that her conversion caused her to use her office to promote Christianity in Ethiopia and the surrounding countries. She and her husband reigned c. 25–41 A. D.

### Cecilia

Cecilia was a martyr of the 2nd century, who is remembered not only for the circumstances of her martyrdom but also for her contributions to the church's music. She is sometimes referred to as a patron saint of music. Tradition says she was the inspiration for the musical maiden described in "The Second Nun's Tale" in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and the painter Raphael painted her sitting at an organ. Her remains lie beneath the Church of St. Cecilia, at Trastevere in Rome.

According to the records, Cecilia decided at a fairly early age that she wanted to live a life of celibate devotion and service to God. But her parents disapproved of this idea, and thus proceeded to arrange her a marriage with a high-born young Roman. However, only a few hours before the time appointed for the wedding, both the groom and his brother became Christians. This was good news to Cecilia—but also

bad news, because in those times of heavy imperial opposition to Christianity it meant the two brothers were almost immediately beheaded. Cecilia's life was also threatened by the imperial forces, but she was not actually martyred for her faith until later, in Sicily.

## **Helena**

Helena, a 4th-century Christian, is remembered for her influence in the life of her son Constantine, the first Christian ruler of the Roman Empire. She was married to Emperor Constantius Chlorus I, though he later divorced her for political reasons. Still, their son Constantine claimed a share of the imperial throne when his father died.

It was on the eve of the decisive battle in Constantine's quest for the emperorship that he claimed to have seen the vision that inspired him to become a Christian. After his conversion, Constantine sponsored the church's first general council at Nicea, designated Sunday as a sacred day, appointed many Christians to high offices in the empire, and avowedly tried to use a Christian approach in the affairs of state. He publicly revered his mother, ordering that all honor due the mother of the emperor be paid to her. He named the city of Helenopolis for her, and ordered the casting of gold medals bearing her image and inscription.

Helena is credited with sponsoring the building of the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem, as well as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem. She was one of the first Christian pilgrims to tour the Holy Land, and apparently had a keen interest in finding and restoring revered historical sites, or at least building new church buildings on them. Tradition has it that she was successful in finding the actual sites of Jesus' birth and resurrection and that she even found the actual cross upon which He died—though this last item is especially questioned by scholars.

## **Macrina**

Macrina, another 4th-century Christian woman, is known mostly today for the great influence she had on and with her brothers who became church leaders in Asia Minor: Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea; Gregory, bishop of Nyssa; and Peter, bishop of Sebaste. Born to Christian parents in Cappadocia in 327, she and her brothers grew up in Pontus. Their father was an attorney and professor, and their mother, Emmelia, was recognized as "a godly woman." Their grandparents were also influential Christians. Basil and Emmelia had 10 children, and Macrina was probably the eldest.

Macrina apparently was unusually well-educated for her time; in fact, she may have taught her brothers in their younger years. We know that she, after their mother died, took responsibility for the care and upbringing of young Peter, and that all three of her well-known brothers apparently had great respect for her.

Basil, recognizing her able intellect, arranged for her to receive a theological education—a great rarity for women in those days. Rare as her case was, it was she who reminded Basil, when he returned from some high-level studies in Athens, that he ought to stay humble.

About 355, while still in her 20s, Macrina established a religious community for women in Pontus. The monastic movement was still in its early stages, so this was pioneer work. It's probable her cloister inspired Basil to start a companion monastery for men nearby, and served as a model for numerous other monasteries and convents.

On the theological front, Arianism was the conflict of the day, and Basil and Gregory both wrote and taught in defense of the Nicene Creed, affirming that Jesus did indeed share the very substance of the Father. What background support Macrina may have given them in this conflict is uncertain. It is certain she was known for her teaching abilities, for organizing the religious community, and for founding a

hospital devoted to caring for the needy. The hospital was quite large and gave help to many, often funded by the money Macrina inherited from her parents. In fact, she was so generous with this money that she's said to have died almost penniless, in 379.

When a frustrated Gregory came to her deathbed (after being banished by an Arian emperor to a backwoods bishopric in Nyssa), she told him that the church needed him, and that he should accept his responsibility for the church as a blessing from God. Apparently taking her words to heart, he served the church for 20 more years, and won the day for the orthodox faith at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Gregory stayed with her to the last, and then was surprised to find she possessed no garment suitable for burial; she had given all her formal clothing away to the poor. But her gifts to her brothers and the church was greater: her spiritual influence in their lives, her charity to the poor, and a community of women wholly dedicated to the Lord.

### **Marcella**

Marcella, who was born to a noble Roman family in 325, was highly revered by Jerome, the 4th-century translator of the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible. This noblewoman offered her palace as a sanctuary for Christians who were being persecuted, and was active in leading Bible classes and prayer meetings among the other noblewomen.

Though widowed at an early age and having no children, she chose to not remarry and instead devoted herself to serving Christ and the church. When Pope Damasus commissioned scholar Jerome to make a newly revised translation of the Gospels, taking the latest available Hebrew and Greek texts and translating them into Latin, Jerome moved into Marcella's retreat house palace for the duration of his task. For three years, he depended upon Marcella and her other house guests to critique his ongoing work, which eventually became a classic, the Latin Vulgate Bible.

Marcella founded the first convent for women in the Western church, and gave liberally of her wealth to help other Christians, clearly showing to her fellow noblewomen that greater rewards and fulfillment come from storing up treasures in heaven than from hoarding treasures on earth.

### **Marcellina**

Marcellina was a 4th-century Christian woman who was known for her effective prayer ministry, her teaching abilities, and her influence in the life of her brother, Bishop Ambrose of Milan. He dedicated his book *De Virginibus (Of Virginity)* to her, in remembrance of her devout prayers and influence on his life. After their father died, Marcellina assisted their mother in providing for Ambrose's education, and in her later years she resided with Ambrose. A consecrated virgin, she was the recipient of three of Ambrose's most important letters on theology. He often praised her for her devotion, though he once cautioned her to not be over-diligent in her fasting practices.

### **Olympias**

Olympias, a daughter of the wealthy Count Seleusus, was born near Constantinople in 368. Apparently her parents died when she was still quite young, but they left her a substantial fortune. This drew the attention of many matchmakers, including the Emperor Theodosius, who wanted to be sure that such a large amount of wealth—and the influence that went with it—came to rest in the proper hands.

So while still in her teens, Olympias married an official in the imperial court named Nebridius. But he died less than two years later. The stream of eager suitors resumed, but she chose to not remarry—having decided, as a Christian, that she would devote herself to the Lord and her inheritance to helping the poor.

This decision aggravated Theodosius, who used his royal privilege to seize her fortune and place it in trust until she turned 30. Olympias wrote to thank the emperor for relieving her of the burden of all that money, and insisted that, as executor of the inheritance, he divide it between the church in Constantinople and the poor. Outfoxed by the plucky teenager, Theodosius restored the wealth to her prerogative ... and she immediately began to give the money away again, to the sick, widows, prisoners, beggars, and slaves (she even bought hundreds of slaves and set them free).

She became a deaconess of the church at Constantinople, and a good friend of John Chrysostom, the local bishop, who once advised her to give less to the poor because she was making them lazy.

Her loyalty to Chrysostom eventually cost her much. He, a gifted preacher, spoke out against the wanton behavior of the Empress Eudoxia. Incensed at his impertinence, the empress pulled strings in the church hierarchy and, in 403, got John banished-for-life on trumped-up charges. Olympias and many other Christians in Constantinople protested this treatment of their beloved bishop, and hence were physically harassed. Then, when Olympias refused to recognize the new bishop who was appointed, she was banished as well. She was also tried for disrupting the church, and was heavily fined. Later, all her assets were seized and her charitable projects shut down.

Throughout all these troubles, Olympias and Chrysostom managed to maintain a correspondence. In his letters John encouraged her, praising her patience and dignity. He died in 407; within a year she also died, a pauper. But she was remembered as a devoted Christian who used her great wealth unselfishly for the Lord, as a regular student of the Bible, and as a faithful deaconess of the church.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

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## **Paula: A Portrait of 4th Century Piety**

**This close friend of the scholar Jerome, known for her scholarship and her extreme piety and generosity, was one of the most noteworthy people—women or men—in all the 4th-century church.**

NANCY A. HARDESTY Nancy A. Hardesty, a church historian who lives in Atlanta, Ga., is the author of *Great Women of Faith* (Abingdon) and *Women Called to Witness* (Abingdon). Her most recent book is *Inclusive Language in the Church* (John Knox).

**One of several Roman noblewomen who supported the work of the scholar Jerome, Paula became his fast friend and colleague. As part of her Christian commitment, she changed her lifestyle from Roman richness to strict asceticism. Noted historian Nancy Hardesty details Paula's devotion.**

"She was squalid with dirt; she mourned and she fasted ... her eyes were dim with weeping ... the Psalms were her only songs; the gospel her whole speech; continence her one indulgence; fasting the staple of her life." Thus Jerome (347–420, in Letter 45) describes the piety of his close friend and most generous benefactor: Paula (347–404).

Jerome first met Paula in Rome in about 382. She was one of a group of high-born women who devoted themselves to strict asceticism and benevolent service. The leader of the group was Marcella (325–410), an ardent student of the Bible to whom Jerome referred questions from bishops and presbyters after he left the city. With her friend Principia, she opened the first convent for women. The group included Ascella, Albina, Marcellina, Felicitas and Fabiola.

### **From Wine to Water**

Formerly these women had devoted their lives to family and fashion. Since it was the custom for older men to marry much younger women, most of them had been widowed at an early age. Before becoming Christians, they had dressed in silks, Chinese fleeces and gold brocades. They rouged their faces, darkened their eyes with kohl, plaited blonde hair pieces into their own dark hair, wore gold shoes, and were carried everywhere on litters borne by eunuchs.

But when they became Christians they forsook all that, and adopted simple brown cassocks. They no longer ate meat or sweets, but took only bread and a little oil. Many drank no wine, only water.

Their lives came to revolve around charity—blankets for the poor, money and food for the bed-ridden, burial for the paupers. With the help of Paula's widowed son-in-law, Pammachius, Fabiola founded Rome's first hospital.

Paula was the daughter of Blesilla, a descendant of the Scipios and Gracchi families, and of Rogatus, whose Greek family was said to descend from the Greek king Agamemnon. At 17 she married a senator, Toxotius, whose most-famous relatives were Aeneas and Julius Caesar. Together they had four daughters—Blesilla, Paulina, Eustochium and Rufina—and one son, Toxotius, who was just an infant when his father died in 380. Shortly thereafter, through the witness of Marcella, Paula became a Christian.

When the bishops of the Western church gathered in Rome in 382 to determine their response to the Eastern church's 381 Council of Constantinople, Paula hosted Epiphanius, the bishop of Salamis in Cyprus. Later during the council she met Jerome, who had also attended the Constantinople conference.

She and the other noblewomen studied the Scriptures with Jerome, and adopted the austerities being popularized by Paul the Hermit (whose biography Jerome had written), by Anthony, by the two Melanias, Elder and Younger, and by the others who were fleeing into the deserts of North Africa to devote themselves to God. Paula's daughter Blesilla, having been recently widowed after just seven months of marriage, began rigorous fasting and other austerities. Within three months she was dead. Some said that the public reaction to her death, directed against Jerome, hastened his departure from the city in 385.

### **Following Jerome**

He urged Paula to follow him, and soon thereafter she and her daughter Eustochium sailed for the East, leaving on the shore her daughter Rufina sobbing and little Toxotius stretching out his hands in entreaty. Jerome notes that while "no mother... ever loved her children so dearly," Paula "overcame her love for her children by her love for God."

After visiting Bishop Epiphanius on Cyprus, Paula and Eustochium sailed to Antioch to see Bishop Paulinus. From there they toured the Holy Land, some of the first Christian women to do so. And though it was midwinter, Paula rode simply on an ass.

Among other places, the two women saw "the humble abode of Philip and the chamber of his daughters, the four virgins 'which did prophesy' "; the mausoleum of Helen, queen of Adiabene, "who in time of famine had sent corn to the Jewish people"; "the blood-stained column to which our Lord is said to have been bound when he suffered his scourging"; Rachel's tomb; and the home of Sarah where they "beheld the cradle of Isaac." Paula even kissed the stone the angel had rolled away from Christ's tomb, and "licked with her mouth the very spot on which the Lord's body had lain."

Mother and daughter continued into Egypt, visiting all the hermits of the desert, then returned to Bethlehem. There, for three years, they lived in a mud hut while they built a monastery for Jerome to oversee, as well as three convents for women, which Paula eventually supervised. They also built a chapel, and a guest house for pilgrims, the sick, orphans, the elderly, the destitute and any others who were needy.

Paula was one of many Greek and Roman women of this period who gave of their wealth to build the institutional church. Paula was said to own most of the city of Nicopolis near Actium. But once converted, she vowed she would become poor for Christ's sake. When she had given away her own wealth, she took loans in order to continue her good works. Finally, reported Jerome, "she obtained her wish at last, and died leaving her daughter overwhelmed with a mass of debt."

### **Ascetic, Philanthropist, Scholar**

From the time of her husband's death until that of her own, Jerome tells us, she never ate a meal with a man, no matter how holy or venerated he was. She never entered a bath, except when dangerously ill. Even when she suffered from fevers she slept only on the hard ground, covered with a mat of goat's hair; and most nights she prayed rather than slept anyway.

Jerome's great work was translating into Latin the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament) and the Greek writings of the Christian canon. His translation is known as the Vulgate. Paula not only paid his living expenses, she also gathered and purchased the expensive manuscripts and supplies needed for his work. Within her convents, she and the other women copied manuscripts by hand in order to facilitate their use and to preserve them. For the next 1,000 years, nuns and monks were to continue that work, preserving for us not only Scripture and commentaries on it, but also other theological works, and cultural works of the ancient world.

But Paula was more than the scholar's financial support; she shared with him the work of translation. Having learned Greek from her father, Paula was eager to learn Hebrew from Jerome. He found her an apt pupil, saying she "succeeded so well that she could chant the Psalms in Hebrew and could speak the language without a trace of the pronunciation peculiar to Latin." She gave him inspiration, intellectual stimulation and critical response. To her and her daughter Eustochium, Jerome dedicated his versions of Job, Isaiah, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, Esther, Galatians, Philemon, Titus and the 12 minor prophets.

Some criticized him for dedicating his books to women, but Jerome responded, "These people do not know that while Barak trembled, Deborah saved Israel; that Esther delivered from supreme peril the children of God ... Is it not to women that our Lord appeared after His resurrection? Yes, and the men could then blush for not having sought what women had found." Ironically, however, a new Roman Catholic edition of the Today's English Version of the Bible, which is being advertised as "St. Jerome's Bible," does not mention Paula once in its lengthy introduction.

### **An Unusual Couple**

Jerome was a very difficult man, and he himself admits that Paula was the only woman who had power to subdue him—she was probably the only person with enough patience to work with him as well. Their friendship illustrates an interesting ambivalence about women in the 4th-century church. Like many of the earlier church fathers, Jerome equated "woman" with "body," and thus with sexuality and evil. He wrote with total disgust of the life of the average woman. In a letter written about 403 concerning the upbringing of Paula's granddaughter, Jerome said she should not be taken to the baths, because there she might see the totally revolting sight of a pregnant woman. Indeed, she should not be *given* baths, because any woman should find the sight of her own body disgusting. He considered marriage, sexual relations, giving birth, mothering children, and attending to one's hair, clothes or face as repulsive. From reading Jerome's comments, one might think he despised women.

Yet his descriptions of Paula, Eustochium, Marcella and the other women of their circle are filled with genuine affection, friendship and respect. Once a woman had adopted a celibate lifestyle, became a "virgin" and devoted herself to Christ, Jerome supported her choices and gave her every encouragement. In his several letters to and about women, he often lauds their spirituality as far superior to his own. In his tribute to Paula after her death (Letter 108), he constantly describes her spiritual practices as more rigorous than his own, and cites many occasions when her faith and spiritual wisdom exceeded his.

Paula died at Bethlehem at age 56. Six bishops carried her to a grave near the place where Jesus was born. The whole population of Palestine came out for the funeral—even the desert monks and virgins. For three days they chanted the Psalms in Greek, in Latin and in Syriac, for the sake of this woman who was, as Jerome said, "one of the marvels of the Holy Land."

## The Early Controversies Over Female Leadership

KAREN TORJESEN Dr. Karen J. Torjesen is an assistant professor of early Christianity and women's studies at Claremont Graduate School in Claremont, Calif. She has written a book on Origen's writings, plus numerous other articles for magazines and journals.

**Church documents from the first few centuries give us glimpses of what women could and could not do. But what were the controversies that made these rules necessary? Antiquities scholar Karen Torjesen traces the development of the church orders, and considers their social subtext.**

Those Ecclesiastical traditions which have not yet recognized the legitimacy of women's leadership see themselves as keeping faith with an ancient tradition that explicitly rejected the leadership of women in the church. Their appeal to tradition is largely an appeal to a series of documents called the church orders, which span five centuries.

These church orders, claiming apostolic authority, sought to define the liturgical and ecclesiastical practices of the church. However, each of the church orders was composed at a particular point in ecclesiastical history. They convey, in the language they use and the issues they discuss, the particular concerns of the church at that moment. Although their claim to apostolic authority intends to obscure their roots in particular crises of ecclesiastical history, a careful reading can identify the controversies out of which each new church order was formed.

### Recent Studies

The debate over women's ordination has sparked a number of recent studies of early church orders. Scholarly activity has focused primarily on the types of ministries exercised by women and on the specific nature of their ordination. Scholars have tended to read the church orders exclusively as regulatory documents, excerpting only their authoritative definitions of ritual and practice.

But the church orders are more than legal codes. They are treatises composed to settle controversies over liturgy, discipline and ordination. For the historian, it is the polemical *contours* of these controversies that provide the most reliable knowledge about the practices of the 3rd-, 4th- and 5th-century churches. The so-called "apostolic teachings" buttress only one side of a dispute. It is the controversies behind them that provide concrete evidence for the practices of the churches of the first five centuries.

### Getting at the Controversies

Most scholars have limited themselves to the question, Do the church orders prescribe ordained ministries for women? They conclude that, although women had an important role in the Christian community, they exercised no leadership role. On this reading the only offices held by women were those of deaconess and widow. According to these scholars, the office of deaconess did not develop until the 3rd century, and then only in the East. The office of widow, according to these scholars, was never a true office but only a way of life sanctioned by the church for those dependent on her benevolence.

However, a different reading of the church orders, one that attempts to reconstruct the conflicting positions rather than recite the imposed settlement, provides a different picture of the practices of the churches in the first four centuries. From this vantage point we see women exercising a variety of

ministries—teaching, disciplin, disciplining, moving from house to house, entering into public debates, and speaking in the assemblies.

So why were women excluded from church offices? Because Jesus excluded them, says the *Didascalia*, putting these words in the mouths of the apostles:

“For our master Jesus Christ sent us, the twelve, to teach all nations, but He did not command the women to teach, nor to speak in the church and address the people .... For there abode with us Mary Magdalene and the sisters of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, and Salome and others along with them, and since he did not command them to teach alongside us, neither is it right for other women to teach” (*Didascalia* XV, translated by A. Voobus).

It must be pointed out that these “apostolic sayings” were created in the 3rd century by authors whose intent was to provide 1st-century justification for a disputed 3rd-century practice. These “apostolic sayings” offer a clear statement of the theological justification used for the exclusion of women, but they do not provide insight into the actual *motives* for the exclusion of women from church offices. Nor do they give a description of the circumstances under which this exclusion seemed necessary. Only a careful study of the controversies that produced—and modified—these documents can provide answers.

From the controversies, we learn that women’s ministries raised questions of propriety. Terms such as “immodest,” “unchaste” and “shameless” spice the discussion and phrases such as “on the streets,” “in public places” and “in the assembly” are sounded in scandalized tones. This begins to give us a feel for the underlying reasons for the eventual exclusion of women from these ministries.

Further, a diachronical study of the controversies echoing in the church orders will allow us to trace the mutations of the issue of women’s leadership from century to century. By beginning our study with the *Didache* and progressing chronologically through the *Apostolic Tradition*, the *Didascalia*, the *Statutes of the Apostles*, the *Constitutions of the Apostles*, the *Octateuch of Clement* and the *Testament of Our Lord*, we can follow play-by-play the changing fortunes of women’s leadership.

### The *Didache*

The first document of our series is the enigmatic *Didache*. While its provisions are quite clear, its period and provenance have never been settled to everyone’s satisfaction. More of a consensus has emerged over the place—Syria or Egypt, than over the period—anywhere from the late 1st century to the early 3rd.

According to this church order, the authoritative offices are those of apostle, prophet, and teacher. The function common to all three offices is Spirit-inspired instruction. It is clear that the basis for the authority of those who claim these offices is the possession of the Spirit. Thus it is an authority that is recognized by the church, but not conferred by it. Correspondingly, no rite of ordination is given through which Spirit-inspired persons are installed in their offices. The concerns of the church at this historical moment were those common to groups recognizing charismatic leadership—namely, the problem of credentials. Thus a major section of the *Didache* is devoted to procedures for distinguishing the true prophets from the false.

It is interesting to note that, although one of the major concerns of the *Didache* is the problem of leadership, the issue of leadership by women is absent. There are no restrictions placed on the ministries of women, nor are there any specifically women’s offices. Later church orders do restrict women to certain roles, but among the writers of the 1st and 2nd centuries grappling with the problems of leaders (Clement and Ignatius, as well as the *Didache*), we do not find any suggestion that women’s ministries were controversial.

### The *Apostolic Tradition*

The ***Apostolic Tradition*** of the early 3rd century presents a new form of church organization, claiming 1st-century apostolic authority. The church has changed since the time of the ***Didache***. We see this in the expansion of the doctrine of the Spirit as it relates to leadership roles.

The authoritative offices are no longer the teaching offices, but the Eucharistic offices. The Spirit is still the basis for the authority, but now the Spirit is conferred by a specific rite of ordination in a narrowly defined way, and for the exercise of specific functions.

In this church order we find the first restrictions placed on women. Widows are not to be ordained. The ***Apostolic Tradition*** justifies this on the grounds that widows do not exercise a eucharistic ministry. But the larger context for this restriction is that the particular spiritual gift of authority has been linked to the Eucharistic offices. Not only are widows excluded from the ordinations, but so also are readers, subdeacons, and male and female virgins.

### **The *Didascalía***

The ***Didascalía***, a church order composed around the middle of the 3rd century, is the first church order to reflect a major controversy surrounding women's leadership. The exhortations on the Christian life in the first section of the church order contain restrictions placed on women in their roles as wives. The regulations on ordination and ministry in the second section place similar restrictions on women in their ecclesiastical roles as widows and virgins.

Careful exegesis of the passages restricting women's functions makes it possible to reconstruct the controversy that led to the formulation of the regulations restricting women's ministries. The restrictions on widows are as follows: they should be gentle, quiet, peaceful, free of malice and anger, not talkative or gossips or scolds and not fond of controversy. Although these demands placed on widows seem relatively straightforward and seem to be nothing other than echoes of 1 Timothy 5, it is essential to understand what the church order itself means by these restrictions and what it intends to accomplish. The sections immediately following can be taken as an exegesis of these few lines:

"And when she sees anything that is hateful, or hears it, let her be as though she saw and heard it not. Indeed, a widow should care for nothing else except this, to pray for those who give, and for the whole church. And when she is asked regarding an affair by anyone, let her not too quickly give an answer, except only about righteousness and faith in God" (XV).

The text further says that, when a widow is asked any questions regarding the Christian faith, she should not answer, but send the questioner to the leader of the congregation. She is explicitly instructed not to address questions regarding the rejection of idolatry, Christian monotheism, and the nature and scope of the kingdom of Christ. Widows are to refrain from engaging in theological discussion so that they won't bring disgrace upon the Logos:

"Indeed, when the Gentiles, those who are being instructed, hear the Word of God spoken not firmly, as it ought to be, unto edification of life everlasting—and especially because it is spoken to them by a women—about how our Lord clothed Himself in the body, and about the passion of Christ, they will deride and mock, instead of praising the word of doctrine. And she shall be guilty of a hard judgment for sin" (XV).

That widows were involved in preaching and teaching seems clear from the context. It is precisely such activities that created the conflict.

Another fascinating restriction placed on widows in this portion of the ***Didascalía*** is that they are forbidden to speak with other members of the Christian community.

Widows who visited in the homes of other believers were suspected of stirring up controversy and forming factions by their teaching and involvement. Their financial autonomy with respect to the bishop precipitated the accusations both of insolence and greed. They were called immodest simply because they were "roaming about" in public.

The profile of the good widow is sketched in another section. She remains in her house praying day and night. Her eyes are pure and her ears are holy, implying that she is not defiled by reports of scandals. Her feet walk in the way of peace, meaning she is not involved in controversies. In her mouth are no lies, indicating she is not teaching. Widows in the *Didascalia* are restricted to praying at home because their teaching activities among fellow believers lead to factions and controversies.

The picture of the activities of widows emerging from this church order is impressive indeed—not only preaching and teaching the pagans Christian truth, but also visiting the homes of believers for the purpose of instruction in Christian doctrine. These activities clearly generated conflict in the church. But it is important to be quite precise in determining the nature of this conflict.

Why were widows not just forbidden to teach, but restricted to their homes? Let us compare the regulations governing wives with those governing widows. In the first section of the *Didascalia*, the Christian wife is contrasted with the wicked woman, who moves freely about the streets of the city seeking men to seduce (III). The Christian wife, on the other hand, does not wear makeup, nor fine fabrics, nor designer sandals; rather she obeys her husband and does not appear in public.

Restrictions placed on Christian women are no different from those placed on women of the upper classes by Hellenistic society. A Pythagorean treatise on chastity affirms that "a woman's greatest virtue is chastity. Because of this quality she is able to honor and cherish her own particular husband." Chastity, in this treatise, is a composite virtue and to possess this virtue a woman must fulfill five qualifications for chastity.

The first is preserving the sanctity of the marriage bed. The second is to preserve the cleanliness of her body. The third, fourth and fifth qualifications concern "the manner in which she refuses to leave the house." A major part of the virtue of chastity is how and when a woman appears in public.

This pagan standard for upper-class women, applied in the first section of the *Didascalia* to women in their social roles, is then applied in the second section—which contains rules for church offices—to women in their ecclesiastical roles.

### **The Statutes of the Apostles**

The *Statutes of the Apostles*, a church order of the early 4th century, indicates that the problem of women's leadership has shifted from the ministry of the widows to the ministry of female deacons. Only three widows were to be ordained—two to function as intercessors and one to minister to women when they were sick and confined to their homes. The ministry of male and female deacons was primarily the ministry of good works, but they also assisted in the eucharistic ministry. This is the focal point of controversy.

An apostolic dialogue created by this church order addresses the problem: "John spoke; have you forgotten, brothers, that our Master, when He has asked for the bread and wine, blessed them and said, 'This is My body and My blood,' 'He did not permit the women to be around us?' Martha said; 'It is because of Mary, because He saw her laugh.' Mary said: 'That was not the reason I laughed. He said to us before when He taught that the one who is weak will be saved by the one who is strong.'"

Clearly the precedent claimed for this minor role for women in the eucharistic service had been the natural assumption that the women had waited on Jesus and His disciples and served them at the Last Supper.

But the apostolic sayings make clear that the Last Supper was an exception in this regard and the women were not present even as servers. The social explanation for this is reflected in Martha's saying that Mary laughed—it is because women lack the necessary seriousness that they were excluded. Mary's remonstrance goes back to the theological point that according to the teaching of Christ the weak (women) should be healed by the strong (men administering the eucharist). In these apostolic sayings we see the primarily social reasons given for excluding women from a minor role in the eucharistic service.

This exclusion of women from participation in the Eucharistic ministry has the flavor of an innovation. The elaborate defense of the practice is followed by the rather poignant question of James, "How can we find for the women any ministry?" To which the church lamely replies, "Well, they can exercise the ministry of good works." It is interesting to note that the problem of women's ministries, in light of the restrictions placed on their activities, has become so acute that this church order addresses it directly: What ministries are appropriate for women? The tone of the church order implies that no satisfactory answer had been found.

### ***Octateuch and Testament***

The last two church orders we will consider are the ***Octateuch of Clement*** and the ***Testament of Our Lord***, both dated in the early 5th century. In these church orders, we see a resolution of the problem of finding a ministry for women. For here we find widows assigned many of the activities that were denied them by the earlier orders. The widows are to exercise a disciplinary function; they are to exhort the women who are disobedient. The women characterized as disobedient were evidently leaders of factions, and teachers in this capacity; for it is said of them that what they put forward is just a lot of talk and nonsense. Furthermore, they are to bring sinful women to repentance and teach them modesty.

The widows are also entrusted with a teaching office. They are to instruct the ignorant (which most likely refers to pagan women), and they are also to teach the female catechumens. They are to visit the homes of other believers, provide for the sick, and support the needy. There is, however, one restriction placed on women in these ministries an—issue is not made of it, but it is assumed—that all of these ministries are to be exclusively exercised toward other women.

These two church orders are remarkable for the tenor of the passages dealing with women's ministries. The concern of these church orders is not to limit or restrict women's ministries, but rather to provide women with specific ministries. We sense no controversy here. The church was comfortable with the notion of women exercising the entire range of ministries, as long as they didn't minister to men.

### **Conclusion**

What can we learn about the leadership of women from these documents? Since there are no controversies over the leadership of women in the church orders of the 2nd and early 3rd centuries (the ***Didache*** and the ***Apostolic Tradition***), we learn nothing about women's ministries in this period. One might conclude from this evidence that women did not exercise any leadership function until the 3rd century. However, recent scholarship (E. Fiorenza, B. Broton, D. Irvin, F. Klawiter) renders such a thesis highly improbable.

From the middle of the 3rd century on, the controversies over women's ministries in the church orders teach us much about women's leadership. Women were evangelizing, baptizing, teaching, interpreting Scripture, doing visitation, functioning as leaders of groups within the church and speaking out in the assembly. The ***Statutes of the Apostles*** show that women also shared in the eucharistic ministry.

The church orders from the middle of the 3rd century and following also make clear that these ministries on the part of women generated conflict—conflict that resulted from a sense that such activity was inappropriate for women when measured by the standards of Greco-Roman society. The ***Didache***

expresses the concern that women who minister seem immodest or unchaste. The ***Statutes of the Apostles*** find women lacking in seriousness and dignity when sharing in the eucharistic ministry. The ***Octateuch of Clement*** and the ***Testament of Our Lord*** have no problem with women's ministries, so long as they are directed exclusively to other women. It is interesting to note that each of the church orders attempts to resolve this conflict by restricting women to the private sphere. The widows of the ***Didascalia*** (like the wives) are to stay at home and pray. The ***Statutes of the Apostles*** offer women the ministry of good works, which is practiced in private. The ***Octateuch of Clement*** and the ***Testament of Our Lord*** restore all the lost ministries to women, but they are to be exercised only in the women's quarters. That is a ministry to women and in principle not a public ministry. In each case the attempt to resolve the conflict generated by women's ministries is an attempt to restrict them to the private sphere.

If, as the evidence seems to indicate, the reasons for the exclusion of women from church offices were primarily societal—that is, that their activities in the church brought them into conflict with the norms of Hellenistic society—then we find ourselves in the odd predicament of having to explain not why women were excluded from church offices, but why they were free to exercise ministries up until the 3rd century. Since Hellenistic norms for the behavior of women remained relatively stable throughout these five centuries, what we need is an explanation for why women's ministries did not come into conflict with these norms in the first two centuries. What we are looking for is some fundamental change in the character of the church occurring around the middle of the 3rd century.

The early Christian community understood itself to be creating a new social order where family bonds were extended to include the whole "household of faith." The titles "sister" and "brother" express the familial nature of this new community. Their forms of worship grew out of the family liturgies of the Jewish world. Leadership roles were modeled on the household roles of disciplining, disciplin, teaching and providing. These were all functions of the mistress of an extended household.

At this stage Christian worship took place in the private sphere—the sphere of the household. The activities and ministries of women generally took place within the accepted roles and legitimate identity of women in the private sphere of the household. This had two consequences. Because women played a powerful role in the household of the Greco-Roman, it would have been natural for them to assume functions within the house church that they already exercised in their households. Second, because Christian worship took place in the private sphere, women were not subject to the norms that limited the activities of women in the public sphere.

But in the 3rd century, Christianity began to constitute itself as a public sphere. We see this in a number of ways. Christian worship moved out of homes into buildings that were devoted exclusively to the needs of the worshipping community. The common meal was dropped. Rituals became more elaborate. In the early part of the 3rd century, offices of the church were institutionalized through a rite of ordination and, by the end of the 3rd century, through a distinctive garment. The sphere of Christian worship was becoming a public sphere.

Women's leadership in the 1st and 2nd centuries would have been exercised in the private sphere, which is the sphere of the household. In this sphere there were no limitations placed on women. Women would have continued exercising these ministries in the 3rd and 4th centuries as well. But around the middle of the 3rd century, Christian worship began to be perceived as taking place in the public sphere. Women no doubt continued exercising the ministries they had in the 1st and 2nd centuries, but suddenly their ministries were controversial primarily because Hellenistic women were not allowed to exercise authority in the public sphere. What follows is a century of conflict over women's roles until the ministry of women is restored again in the private sphere. But the church by that time had gone public.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

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## Women and the Church Orders: Christian History Timeline

### Events

#### 1–90 A.D.

Pentecost (c. 30 A.D.)  
Spread of faith despite persecution by Nero and Domitian  
Phoebe

#### 90–200 A.D.

Consolidation of church; spotty, localized persecution  
Clement  
Justin Martyr

#### 200–300 A.D.

Sharp persecution, especially in North Africa under Septimius Severus  
Origen, Tertullian make Christianity intellectually respectable.  
Church becomes more respectable, builds buildings  
Blandina martyred  
Perpetua martyred  
Decius stuns church with persecution; Valerian continues it  
Church tries to rebuild  
Origen martyred

#### 300–400 A.D.

Diocletian launches Great Persecution (303–310)  
Edict of Toleration (311)  
Constantine converts, begins co-regency (313)  
Constantine makes Christianity the religion of the empire (324)  
Helena visits Holy Land  
John Chrysostom  
Paula  
Monica dies  
Jerome in Rome

#### 400–500 A.D.

Alaric the Goth sacks Rome (409–410)  
Pulcheria rules empire  
Augustine is bishop of Hippo

### Key Writings

***Didache*** (100-200 A.D.)

Recognized those with the Spirit, gave guidelines for their ministry.

***Problem:*** Credentials of traveling prophets

***Restrictions on women:*** None specified.

***Apostolic Tradition*** (c. 215)

Conferred spiritual authority by ordaining bishops, elders, deacons.

***Problem:*** Setting apart church leaders and distinguishing their various roles.

***Restrictions on women:*** Widows designated as church workers but not ordained.

***Didascalia Apostolorum*** (mid-200s)

Regulated Christian life and ministry.

***Problem:*** Public image of Christianity?

***Restrictions on women:*** Severe, at home and in church. Consistent with Greco-Roman image of the good noblewoman.

***Statutes of the Apostles*** (early 300s)

Defines the work of deacons, among other things.

***Problem:*** Women deacons taking on too much authority?

***Restrictions on women:*** Some women were ordained as deacons, but could not participate in eucharistic ministry, only good works.

***Octateuch of Clement: Testament of Our Lord*** (early 400s)

Further defined church ministry.

***Problem:*** What are women allowed to do?

***Restrictions on women:*** Some are reversed. Women are encouraged to do works of teaching, visitation, etc. But they may only minister to other women.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

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## The Chaining of the Church

What happened to the church between the vibrantly pluralistic 1st century and the legalistic, male-dominated 3rd century?

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The earliest Christian writers show us a potent church at work, uniting believers of different races, sexes and economic levels, a church rich in prophecies, healings, exorcisms and powerful preaching by numerous leaders.

But the Spirit began fading through the 200s, until by the time of Athanasius in the 300s the miraculous acts of God were on the wane, the leadership of women had been curtailed, orthodoxy was threatened, and church unity had virtually disappeared. What happened?

### The Didache

The *Didache* was one of several Syrian church discipline manuals that came to define church order in the Near East. This 2nd-century document dealt with the proper conduct expected of and expected toward itinerant ministers who apparently had begun to abuse Christian hospitality.

It is remarkable in many ways, among which is its introduction of a negative Golden Rule: "All which you may wish will not happen to you, you also do not do to another" (1:2). This recasting of Jesus' words from the positive to the negative serves as a synecdoche for the whole book; the *Didache* introduced into early church literature the infamous lists of "don'ts" that would come to characterize much of the Christianity that would follow. As a result, Christian freedom was sharply curtailed.

In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul leaves the eating of food offered to idols up to the individual Christian's conscience, cautioning each Christian to consider those weaker in the faith when deciding how to exercise Christian freedom. But in the *Didache*, individual conscience has been superseded by ecclesiastical rule: "... keep strictly away from what is offered to idols, for that implies worshipping dead gods" (6:3). What was once a caution is now a rule.

Jesus said to baptize. But the *Didache* specified *how* to baptize. The *Didache* also required fasting of Christians, on Wednesdays and Fridays. Jesus told His disciples that they should not vainly repeat ritual prayers the way the pagans did, but the *Didache* ordered Christians to repeat the Lord's Prayer verbatim, three times a day. About 96 A.D., Clement of Rome gently corrected a schismatic group of young upstarts in the letter we call "1 Clement," but only a few decades later (if that) the *Didache* was fiercely advocating the practice of shunning those with divergent views.

Indeed, the spirit of the *Didache* must have been stifling for the average churchgoer.

One exception to this trend is that prophets were not restricted when speaking or acting under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Going overboard in one of its lone concessions, the *Didache* identifies prophets as the church's high priests (13:3). The implications of this statement are enormous.

In the New Testament and especially in Hebrews, no one in the church is called a high priest except

Christ Himself. But this casual appellation by the *Didache* effectively ends the priesthood of all believers, for now another high priest is instituted on earth—the prophet. Appropriately, church people are instructed to give these prophets their “first fruits” of money and clothes. The *Didache* further restricts these offices to males (15:1), despite the fact that, early in the 2nd century, the governor of Bithynia, Pliny the Younger, had found it necessary to torture two female ministers (*ministrae*) in order to gain more information from them about the activities of Christians (Letters of Pliny X.96).

## Spiritual Gifts

Restricting women, as we shall see, directly rebounded on men in the restrictions made by later church orders against unordained male leadership. The inevitable result was that most believers were discouraged from exercising their spiritual gifts.

From Paul’s letters in the 1st-century, through Justin Martyr’s in the mid-2nd, we find evidence of the widespread use of spiritual gifts. But the chains that were binding women and laymen were also tightening on the exercise of spiritual gifts in general.

The church had its reasons. About 170 A.D., three self-proclaimed prophets—Montanus, Maximilla and Priscilla—began replacing the Scriptures with their ecstatic utterances. Ecstatic prophecy quickly began to be identified with the lunatic fringe of this heresy. Meanwhile, secular intellectuals like Celsus had begun attacking prophecy in general, so that by the time of Origen and Irenaeus in the 200s, Christians had to defend the exercise of spiritual gifts like exorcism, prophecy and healing (Eusebius 5:7:3–5).

Ronald Kydd, in his interesting study *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church*, speculates that from 200 to 260 A.D., the Christian community grew, attracting wealthy congregants and attaining social respectability. As the level of members’ education rose, and as church organization became more formalized, the gifts of the Spirit just quietly slipped away. No one really missed them. In fact, in the view of many orthodox Christians, the heretics had co-opted the gifts.

Those safeguarding the purity of the church could easily argue that the seeds of restricting both women and gifts could be already detected in the New Testament, when Paul restricted women’s participation in churches so that they would not be dishonored by outsiders. The apostle warned in 1 Corinthians 14:23: “If, therefore, the whole church assembles and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers [such as Celsus] enter, will they not say that you are mad [as Celsus did]?”

The problem was that the church did not just keep public opinion in mind—it catered to it. This high regard of public opinion, especially as the church became more socially acceptable, along with the worries over church purity, caused the church of the 200s not merely to regulate the use of spiritual gifts and pluralistic leadership, but effectively to eliminate them. Thus the leadership of women and laymen was generally curtailed, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit were largely quenched.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

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## What About Paul?

**The Apostle's writings are foundational to the standard interpretation of what women's role in the church should be. But examined carefully, his points about women raise several puzzling questions**

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**Scholars have long wrangled over the meaning of New Testament statements about the relative roles of women and men, and always central to the debate are the Apostle Paul's outspoken declarations. Was he a pragmatic libertarian, or an imposing legalist, or something in between?**

The issue of women in church history bristles with controversy. Two groups fight it out. One holds that women have always, until recent years, had subordinate roles in the church. This was proper, these scholars say, because Paul clearly stipulated that women should be silent and submissive. Obviously, they say, the early church followed his instructions.

But the other group presents an impressive collection of women in leadership roles in the church's early centuries. It's surprising, they say, that any women could have such prominence in a maledominated society. They cite Jesus' tradition-breaking acceptance of women and assume that Priscilla, Phoebe, Lydia, et al., followed in that spirit.

Christianity's unique "servant-language" doesn't help much. Following Christ's example, the church avoided terms and titles that would suggest domination. Its leaders were simply "elders" and "deacons" (servants). That makes it confusing for modern-day detectives. When Paul calls Phoebe a "deacon," is he referring to a church office she holds? Most other uses of this word in the New Testament indicate church office. But some conservatives say this cannot be, in Phoebe's case, because Paul elsewhere limits the diaconate to men. We have similar confusion with the two *ministrae* arrested by Pliny in the 2nd century. Were these just helpers, as some historians assert, or were they "ministers"? The language could mean either.

The two positions thus have radically different views of history, both supported, to some degree, by the evidence. Traditionalists see the church adopting a certain order, based on apostolic teaching. Feminist scholars generally see the free exercise of ministry gifts by men and women in the first century or two.

The debate often sets up as Jesus vs. Paul. The traditionalists often underestimate how radically Jesus broke with the tradition of his day in his treatment of women. The feminists often discount or disparage Paul. And many, many in between wonder why it has to be "either/or." Doesn't Paul preach the gospel of Jesus? Is there no continuity?

## The Importance of Paul

Paul stands at the start of church history. An understanding of his writings and how they were read is foundational to a good understanding of early-church practice regarding women in leadership and ministry.

Several major questions loom: Was Paul restricting women for pragmatic or theological reasons? He uses theology, but does he use it as proof or merely as illustration? If he is being pragmatic, do his practical

reasons continue today, or did they fade in subsequent generations? Was Paul declaring a new order for the church or was he mitigating the effect of a sexist society? Was he placing restraints on believers coming from a libertine culture or was he adapting Christian freedom so that it would not be misunderstood, by those within the church or without?

Wait! say the traditionalists. Why all these questions? Can't we just take Paul at face value?

The problem is that face value doesn't work. Paul's commands are strong and specific, but their very specificity may limit them. There are seeming contradictions, strange allusions, rabbinic reasoning. The pertinent texts, taken together, cry out for a second look.

## **The Unity Principle**

The keynote text in such a re-examination is Galatians 3:28. If this bit of theology is foundational, it forces a re-reading of the other texts on women.

Paul writes, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Paul is talking about salvation, faith in Jesus, being "baptized into" Christ. Galatians is a theological treatise, one of Paul's earliest. He is not specifically referring to the relations between men and women at home, in the church, or in society. His basic point is that we are all one in God's eyes. It would be possible to accept this as a spiritual reality and leave it at that. Many commentators do.

But theology has implications. We must ask how this unity of male and female bore itself out in the church and in Christian living. The references to Jews and Greeks and slaves may help.

The Book of Acts shows us the expansion of Christianity from the Jewish world to the larger Greek world. There were some rocky times. Do Gentiles need to become Jews in order to follow Christ? No, it was decided—after some debate. The Galatian churches were apparently in the middle of this controversy, as zealous Jewish believers tried to force the demands of the Law on them.

In many cities throughout the Greek world, the church started in the synagogue and spilled over into the lecture halls or private homes of the Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles together made up the church, and there was some friction.

Elsewhere, Paul talks of Christ as "our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two" (Ephesians 2:14–15). Yet, Paul was careful not to offend the Jews needlessly. He did not flout the laws of the Temple when he visited Jerusalem with the Gentile Titus. Yet, he was quick to chastise Peter for breaking fellowship with Gentiles in the church at Antioch.

The church also included both slaves and free people. Slaves were numerous in the Roman world, and Christianity was popular among them. Within the church, slaves and their masters had equal rank. In fact, there are instances of slaves becoming church leaders; Callistus even became bishop of Rome (d. 222). Yet Paul does not seek to topple the institution of slavery overnight. He sends the runaway slave Onesimus back home. He commands slaves to be good slaves, to obey their masters

The pattern seems to be this: Paul recognizes the social institutions and says Christians should respect them; but in the church there are new rules, rules of unity. This gives us some interesting groundwork for the male-female relationship. Following the examples of Jew-Greek and slave-free, we would expect that women and men would receive equal treatment in the church, though the relationship at home and in society might need to cater to cultural norms. Thus, the call for wifely submission may have the sense of "As long as you are in a world where women are considered subordinate to their husbands, be a good wife, in reverence to Christ." (Just as he would say, verses later, "As long as you are a slave, be a good

slave.”) As Nancy Hardesty and Letha Scanzoni said in their classic *All We’re Meant to Be*, the surprise was not that Paul asked wives to submit but that he asked husbands to love and give themselves up for their wives. As with slavery, Paul may have been beginning with the actual world situation in which believers lived and infusing it with Christian spirit.

If this “neither male nor female” was part of Paul’s early teaching, we can better understand the proliferation of women who worked alongside Paul in the cause of the gospel. These were women set free from Jewish and Gentile norms, free to serve God in the church. Lydia, Phoebe and Priscilla are obviously women of intelligence and talent. But newfound freedom can get out of hand, and problems arose in Corinth and Ephesus and perhaps elsewhere. Women seem to have been abusing their freedom, rushing unqualified into leadership, creating disorder in the assembly. Thus Paul would need to correct the situation by ordering silence and forbidding women to teach. Thus Galatians 3:28 would have brought about, in a way, a situation which made Paul’s restrictions in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy necessary.

### **The Silence Principle**

Discussing orderly worship with the Corinthians, Paul states, “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches .... If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church” (1 Corinthians 14:33–35).

As some commentators have pointed out, women and men probably sat, synagogue-style, in separate sections of the church. When women had questions about the preaching (as they often would, since they were generally untrained in the Scriptures), they would call to their husbands. In the interest of orderly worship, Paul forbids this.

So goes the theory; but Paul uses awfully strong language for that bit of correction. “They are not allowed to speak,” he says, “... it is disgraceful.” The ideas of submission and silence appear elsewhere in Paul’s writing, so it appears that Paul developed a policy on this matter. And, lest we think this was a unique policy for a particular problem in Corinth, Paul says the command applies “in all the congregations of the saints” (though some have suggested that this phrase applies to the previous verse).

It is possible, still, that Paul is looking over his shoulder here, conscious of popular opinion. That is, it was the disapproval and/or misunderstanding of the surrounding Jews and Gentiles that made it “disgraceful” for women to speak in the church, not any theological matter. Paul’s “weaker brother” passages may serve as examples. Who cares whether or not you eat the meat offered to idols? Just be sure your choice does not deter you or anyone else from the most important thing—a relationship with God. Paul’s major concern was the furtherance of the gospel, and if Jews or Gentiles would be turned off by the clamoring—or even the teaching—of women in the church, better to forgo that privilege. Paul’s following comments, “Are you the only people [God’s Word] has reached?” suggests that the apostle may be thinking of the surrounding public.

### **The Authority Principle**

One of the biggest problems we have with 1 Corinthians 14:33 is reconciling it with 1 Corinthians 11. There, introducing this whole section on orderly worship, Paul writes, “Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.... every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved” (1 Cor. 11:3–5).

Note that Paul does not say, “Every woman who prays or prophesies should stop doing that,” as you might expect in light of chapter 14. No, here he acknowledges that women do pray and prophesy in

church and merely asks that they cover their heads.

How do you reconcile this with Paul's prohibition in chapter 14? Some possibilities: 1) Chapter 14 refers to the specific matter of women calling out in a disorderly way, not to their official participation in the service. 2) There are two different types of services in view here, possibly one open to outsiders, in which women were not allowed to speak, and one for the church alone, in which they were. 3) Praying and prophesying, as more freely Spirit-inspired activities, are exceptions to the rule. Women may not lead, read, teach, preach, etc. But if the Spirit moves one to prophesy, who can argue?

But what is this head-covering all about? Paul is drawing an interesting picture here, and punning on the word "head." Because the "head" of man is Christ, a man should not cover his (physical) head when he worships. Man, as the "image and glory of God," glorifies God better with his head uncovered. But women's "head" is man, and thus she should cover her head. Was this so she would be glorifying God and not man? Or is Paul warning the church to avoid the fashions of the pagan priests and temple prostitutes?

Scholars have developed various theories. James Hurley and others have suggested that the text has nothing to do with veils; a woman's "covering" is her hair, done up modestly over her head. Richard and Catherine Kroeger see Paul in dispute with a head-shaving ritual; since in Christ "there is neither male nor female," women were trying to look and act like men. Thus Paul says that a shaved head is "a disgrace" and he affirms their womanly appearance.

Once again, Paul uses the language of public opinion in this text. "Dishonor" has to do with reputation; "disgrace" is violation of common decency. "Is it proper. . . ?" Paul asks.

He raises a curious question: "Doe not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?" What's the answer? Well, no. There is nothing in nature that keeps man from growing long hair. Paul must be referring to something else, perhaps the nature of society. And, since society glorifies women with long hair, they should cover it (or put it up), so that God gets all the glory.

Two cryptic comments appear in verse 10. "Because of the angels" has stymied many. Also, the Greek text lacks the word for "symbol of." It reads, "... woman ought to have authority on [or over] her head." These phrases have spawned many intriguing theories, too numerous to detail here.

## The Headship Principle

Paul talks about the principle of headship again in Ephesians 5: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior."

What does Paul mean by "head" here? Obviously he is speaking metaphorically. The word *kephale* literally means one's physical head, but it has a range of metaphorical meanings. In English, our major metaphorical meaning for head is "leader." The Hebrew *rosh* is used similarly. But that idea is not found in Greek. Alvera and Berkeley Mickelsen have done good work scouting out the likely meaning of *kephale* here and throughout the New Testament. They suggest several meanings, depending on the context. The most prominent is "source of life." In Greek one would speak of the "head" of a stream, its headwaters or source. Christ is the source of creation, Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 11, just as man (through Adam's rib) is the source of woman. In some cases, the unity of head and body are stressed, as in Paul's analogy in 1 Corinthians 12: "The head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'" The head completes the body, it is the capstone. This is the meaning the Mickelsens favor for Ephesians 5. Paul later cites Genesis 2:24: "... the two shall become one flesh." In a context of mutual submission (v. 21), Paul is emphasizing the unity of husband and wife and the unity of Christ with his church, they say.

## Eve's Curse

Probably the strongest passage of Scripture restricting women's involvement in church ministry is 1 Timothy 2:12–15. This too is enigmatic in parts, though its main emphasis is rather straightforward.

Paul is writing to Timothy in Ephesus. His main concerns in this letter are purity of doctrine and purity of conduct, both in the church at large and in the lives of Timothy and other church leaders. False teachers are about. They are perverting the truth, seducing believers into heresy and immorality.

After urging men to avoid quarreling in the church and urging women to dress modestly, Paul says, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent."

Conservative scholars say that's that. How much clearer do you want it? Others claim the command is tied to the particular situation in Ephesus at the time.

Catherine Kroeger has investigated the background of the word for "have authority" used here. ***Authentein*** occurs only this once in Scripture and seldom in ancient Greek. Some classical Greek writers used it, and then it generally appeared in shady, sordid contexts. It seems to have meant "to gain power through violence and/or sex."

If that's what it means, why does Paul use it? Remember that Ephesus, like Corinth, is a cradle of temple prostitution. Consider that, a few decades later, in the nearby town of Thyatira, a "prophetess" named Jezebel earned a special rebuke: "By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality..." (Revelation 2:20). Could this sort of thing have been going on in Ephesus when Paul wrote? Kroeger points out the existence in that area of forms of Gnosticism, which held strange ideas about sexuality and tried to mix pagan mystery religions with Christianity.

But Paul goes on to explain his command, not on the basis of cultural pragmatism, but on the scriptural account of creation and the fall. While mystery religions could come and go, it would always be true that Adam was created first and that Eve was deceived. Conservative interpreters often maintain that this indicates the principle holds true for all time—women should not teach in church. But let's look at Paul's reasoning. Does Adam's being first make men better than women? Few would say that. Does it make men smarter, better able to teach, closer to God? If it did, then men should start studying from animals, since animals were created first. Does Eve's being deceived make her more to blame for the fall? No, elsewhere Paul blames Adam exclusively. Does it mean women are by nature more gullible than men? Could be, but that's hard to prove. Is Paul's command here an extension of the curse, that men should rule over women? This is one of the better possibilities, but what does the coming of Christ do to change that?

An idea: Perhaps Paul is using Scripture not to prove his case, but to illustrate it. Picture it. God makes man first, puts him in the Garden, tells him not to eat from the forbidden tree. Then he makes Eve. An old Hebrew tradition says that Eve never got the command straight from God; Adam told her. Maybe that's why she got it wrong when the serpent confronted her. Eve, the receiver of God's Word second-hand, was thus deceived. Another tradition says she seduced Adam into joining her in sin.

Now fast-forward to Timothy's time. Women are learning the Scriptures, many for the first time. In Jewish culture, and in Greek society, women generally depend on their husbands for education. What they know, they know second-hand. It's a time when dangerous heresies run rampant. In 2 Timothy, Paul refers to false teachers who creep into homes and "lead captive silly women," as the KJV quaintly puts it. The "silly" women are not unintelligent, just unlearned. Like the second-created Eve, they get their knowledge second-hand, if at all. Like Eve, they are easily deceived. Like Eve, they can lead their husbands into sin, possibly through sexual wiles.

Christ brought new freedom to Gentiles, slaves, and women. Understandably, women were eager to use their newfound freedom in the church. But the worst thing that could happen, Paul sees it, is for some converted temple prostitute to take the pulpit and bat her eyelashes and flash her jewelry and spout off some half-baked theology she heard from the Gnostic guru down the street. We're talking Paradise Lost all over again should learn in silence, Paul says.

The implication of this view is that Paul's command is very temporary. Once Christian women were as well-versed in the law as men, it would be a different story. In fact, the best application of this passage today might be the football hero or rock star who becomes a Christian and immediately begins "teaching" the faith, through Christian talk-shows, books, and magazine interviews.

Verse 15 remains a problem, for everyone who reads it carefully. The word for "kept safe" usually means "saved," but that would rewrite Paul's theology. We are all saved by God's grace alone, not through childbirth. But are Christian women "kept safe" through childbirth? Many die in labor. "Childbirth" can mean "the birth of a child" and, in the context of the Genesis story, may be a messianic reference to the child of Eve who would crush the serpent's head, that is, Christ. Perhaps "saved" here means "restored," or "delivered from the effects of the curse." Might Paul be saying that women have borne the curse of Eve for millennia, being ruled over by their husbands and often kept in ignorance, but the promised Child, Christ, has brought deliverance from that and other curses? Though now Christian women still suffer the effects of Eve's curse, and must be forbidden to teach while they are still learning, they will be restored to full participation in church ministry, if they continue to prove themselves worthy of the task, by means of faith, love, holiness, and propriety.

## Conclusion

These are mere possibilities presented here, alternate readings of pertinent texts. What did Paul really mean? Did he intend for his commands to stay in effect throughout church history? The church fathers generally assumed that he did, and many moderns agree. But then why does Paul commend his many female collaborators in the gospel? How does that jibe with Jesus' teaching and practice? And how can we reconcile it with the liberating theology of Galatians 3:28?

Historians, and biblical exegetes, deal with hypotheses, balancing data to get a reasonable picture of what actually went on in the past. Different scholars can reach radically different conclusions, because they balance the data differently.

On the question of women's involvement in the church, do you start with order or freedom? If you start with 1 Timothy 2:12–14, you will see the creation order prescribing something basic about men and women: Men are to lead. Granting this a great deal of weight, you are forced to find alternate explanations for what seems to be conflicting data. Galatians 3:28 becomes a spiritual truth without any particular application in the hierarchy of church life. Phoebe was a servant, Priscilla an exception. The "deaconesses" mentioned in early church history held subordinate positions—as Paul intended—and the paucity of references to women in leadership indicates that there were few, as was proper.

But if you start with Galatians 3:28 and the unity of men and women in Christ, you read the data very differently. Paul's theology offered new freedom to women, and many used it to minister effectively. Some, however, misused it, forcing Paul to recommend certain restrictions of female leadership. These were for specific places at specific times, as indicated by the continuing leadership roles of women like Lydia, Junia, etc. Women continued to serve in positions of leadership in the first century or two, but their ministry over time became more and more restricted.

We have been too quick to assume that we understood Paul. Feminists often write him off as a chauvinist. Traditionalists often affirm what they see as his simple logic and desire for order. But, on closer examination, his logic is not that simple (at least to our 20th-century minds), and some of his

proposals seem downright disorderly (or perhaps they are proposing a new order). He seems more pragmatist than chauvinist—a fact that should jar idealists in both camps.

We need to keep researching, keep debating, keep sorting out Paul's teachings on women in the church. We may find more surprises.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

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## Jesus and Women

**In His treatment of women, as in many other areas, Jesus of Nazareth was a radical contrast to the standards of His times**

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The world Jesus entered largely discriminated against women. He rejected the false criteria upon which the double standard was built. He measured men and women by the same standards, the inner qualities of character and not by such accidents of birth as ethnic or sexual differences. He affirmed women by His manner, example, and teaching.

### The Manner of Jesus

Jesus included women where Jewish piety largely excluded them. Women were excluded from participation in synagogue worship, restricted to a spectator role, and forbidden to enter the Temple beyond the Court of the Women. A woman was not to touch the Scriptures, lest she defile them. A man was not to talk much with a woman, even his wife. Talk with a woman in public was yet more restrictive.

Jesus brushed aside all such discrimination. He astonished His disciples by talking openly with "a woman" at Jacob's well (John 4:27). His dearest friends included Mary, Martha and Mary Magdalene. There were many women who ministered to (or with) Him, following Him from Galilee to Golgotha (Mark 15:41).

Having already affirmed Martha by accepting her invitation to dinner, He affirmed Mary's choice of sitting at His feet to hear Him teach (Luke 10:39). He did not question her right or competence to hear His word, He commended her for choosing "the good part," declaring that "it will not be taken away from her" (v. 42). Many have sought to take from women like Mary precisely what Jesus affirmed as rightfully theirs.

The story of the anointing of Jesus by "a sinful woman" is amazing (Luke 7:36–50). She showered her love and gratitude upon Jesus, and He affirmed her and her act. Without a hint of impropriety, Jesus let this woman thus touch Him and express her feelings toward Him. The pious Pharisees were scandalized that Jesus let her do this, and would have forbidden it even if the woman had been "good" and not "a sinner."

Equally amazing is the story of the woman with an issue of blood who touched Jesus (Mark 5:25–34). According to the code in Leviticus, a woman with an issue of blood was "unclean," defiling everyone and everything she touched (15:19–33). Had Jesus followed this code, He would have denounced the woman for touching Him and demanded her punishment. Instead, Jesus had her stand up and openly identify herself; and then He publicly affirmed her: "Daughter, your faith has saved you; go in peace, and be healed from your scourge" (v. 34). Jesus thus rejected the cruel stigma imposed upon women. He rejected the fallacy that "an issue of blood" is defiling.

### The Teaching of Jesus

Jesus also rejected the double standard for marriage, divorce and adultery. He put marriage and divorce in new perspective in answering the question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (Mark 10:2). It would never have occurred to His questioners to ask, "Is it lawful for a wife to divorce her husband?"

Under Jewish law, a wife could not divorce her husband.

Jesus traced divorce to the hardness of human hearts, not to the intention of God. But Jesus did more! He recognized husband and wife as equally free and responsible in marriage and divorce. Significantly, Jesus built upon the story in the first chapter of Genesis (Genesis 1:27, supplemented by 2:24), not the "rib story" as such: "Male and female He made them; for this cause a man shall leave father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Marriage thus is a partnership, with no double standard in marriage or divorce.

Jesus corrected current understanding of adultery at two points: 1) adultery begins as lust in one's heart, not just when overt; and 2) adultery can be committed against a woman (Matthew 5:27–30). Jewish law saw adultery as a sin against a husband, not against a wife. For a husband to visit a prostitute or an unmarried woman was not seen as adultery. Rape of a single girl was a crime, but not adultery. It was considered adultery only if the rights of a husband were violated.

Jesus declared two things in saying, "The one looking upon a woman with a view to lust has already committed adultery against her in his heart." Although the main point may be that lust itself is adultery, the charge "against her" is innovative. Jesus rejected the fallacy that adultery is a sin against a husband only; adultery can be committed ***against a woman***.

### **The Risen Christ and Women**

According to the Gospels, women were last at the cross and first at the empty tomb, and the first to see the risen Christ. Peter and the other male disciples first heard of the resurrection of Jesus from women. The risen Christ, at the most important juncture for the Christian movement, trusted and commissioned women to proclaim to men the basic tenet of the Christian faith—He is not dead but alive!

The church for the most part has sought to deny to women an equal role in the ministry of proclamation. Jesus had no such reservation before His death or after His resurrection.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

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## From the Archives: The Martyrdom of Perpetua

About 200 A.D., under the reign of Roman emperor Septimius Severus, persecution broke out against the Christians. It was particularly severe in North Africa. In Carthage, a Christian woman of noble birth, Perpetua, was arrested. She was about 22 years old and was nursing an infant son. In what may be the earliest extant Christian document from a woman's pen, she wrote her own story. The account of her death was, of course, added later.

While we were still under arrest, my father out of love for me was trying to persuade me and shake my resolution. "Father," I said, "do you see this vase here, for example, or water pot or whatever."

"Yes, I do," said he.

And I told him: "Could it be called by any other name than what it is?"

And he said: "No."

"Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian."

At this my father was so angered by the word "Christian" that he moved towards me as though he would pluck my eyes out. But he left it at that and departed, vanquished along with his diabolical arguments ....

Then Tertius and Pomponius, those blessed deacons who tried to take care of us, bribed the soldiers to allow us to go to a better part of the prison to refresh ourselves for a few hours. Everyone then left that dungeon and shifted for himself. I nursed my baby, who was faint from hunger. In my anxiety I spoke to my mother about the child, I tried to comfort my brother, and I gave the child into their charge. I was in pain because I saw them suffering out of pity for me. These were the trials I had to endure for many days. Then I got permission for my baby to stay with me in prison. At once I recovered my health, relieved as I was of my worry and anxiety over the child. My prison had suddenly become a palace, so that I wanted to be there rather than anywhere else.

Then my brother said to me: "Dear sister, you are greatly privileged; surely you might ask for a vision to discover whether you are to be condemned or freed."

Faithfully I promised that I would, for I knew that I could speak with the Lord, whose great blessings I had come to experience .... Then I made my request and this was the vision I had.

I saw a ladder of tremendous height made of bronze, reaching all the way to the heavens, but it was so narrow that only one person could climb up it at a time. To the sides of the ladder were attached all sorts of metal weapons: there were swords, spears, hooks, daggers, and spikes; so that if anyone tried to climb up carelessly or without paying attention, he would be mangled and his flesh would adhere to the weapons.

At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon of enormous size, and it would attack those who tried to climb up and try to terrify them from doing so. And Saturus was the first to go up, he who was later to give himself up of his own accord. He had been the builder of our strength, although he was not present when we were arrested. And he arrived at the top of the staircase and he looked back and said to me: "Perpetua, I am waiting for you. But take care; do not let the dragon bite you."

"He will not harm me," I said, "in the name of Christ Jesus."

Slowly, as though he were afraid of me, the dragon stuck his head out from underneath the ladder. Then, using it as my first step, I trod on his head and went up.

Then I saw an immense garden, and in it a gray-haired man sat in shepherd's garb; he was tall, and milking sheep. And standing around him were many thousands of people clad in white garments. He raised his head, looked at me, and said: "I am glad you have come, my child."

He called me over to him and gave me, as it were, a mouthful of the milk he was drawing; and I took it in my cupped hands and consumed it. And all those who stood around said, "Amen!" At the sound of this word I came to, with the taste of something sweet still in my mouth. I at once told my brother and we realized that we would have to suffer, and that from now on we would no longer have any hope in this life.

A few days later there was a rumor that we were going to be given a hearing. My father also arrived from the city, worn with worry, and he came to see me with the idea of persuading me.

"Daughter," he said, "have pity on my grey head—have pity on me your father, if I deserve to be called your father, if I have favored you above all your brothers, if I have raised you to reach this prime of your life. Do not abandon me to be the reproach of men. Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us! None of us will ever be able to speak freely again if anything happens to you."

This was the way my father spoke out of love for me, kissing my hands and throwing himself down before me .... I tried to comfort him, saying, "It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills; for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power."

And he left me in great sorrow.

One day while we were eating breakfast we were suddenly hurried off for a hearing [before Hilarianus the governor] .... All the others when questioned admitted their guilt. Then, when it came my turn, my father appeared with my son, dragged me from the step, and said: "Perform the sacrifice—have pity on your baby!"

Hilarianus the Governor... said to me, "Have pity on your father's grey head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors."

"I will not," I retorted.

"Are you a Christian?" said Hilarianus.

And I said: "Yes I am."

When my father persisted in trying to dissuade me, Hilarianus ordered him to be thrown to the ground and beaten with a rod. I felt sorry for father, just as if I myself had been beaten. Then Hilarianus passed sentence on all of us: we were condemned to the beasts, and we returned to prison in high spirits ....

***(Later, an observer picks up the story)***

The day of their victory dawned, and they marched from the prison to the amphitheater joyfully, as though they were going to heaven, with calm faces, trembling, if at all, with joy rather than fear. Perpetua went along with shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ, putting down everyone's stare by her own intense gaze ....

They were then led up to the gates and the men were forced to put on the robes of priests of Saturn, the women the dress of the priestesses of Ceres. But the noble Perpetua strenuously resisted this to the end.

"We came to this of our own free will, that our freedom should not be violated. We agreed to pledge our lives provided that we would do no such thing. You agreed with us to do this."

Even injustice recognized justice. The military tribune agreed. They were to be brought into the arena just as they were. Perpetua then began to sing a psalm; she was already treading on the head of the Egyptian [dragon?]. Revocatus, Saturninus, and Saturus began to warn the onlooking mob. Then when they came within sight of Hilarianus, they suggested by their motions and gestures: "You have condemned us, but God will condemn you" was what they were saying.

At this the crowds became enraged and demanded that they be scourged before a line of gladiators. And they rejoiced at this that they had obtained a share of the Lord's sufferings ....

For the young women, however, the Devil had prepared a mad heifer. This was an unusual animal, but it was chosen that their sex might be matched with that of the beast. So they were stripped naked, placed in nets and thus brought out into the arena. Even the crowd was horrified when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other was a woman fresh from childbirth with the milk still dripping from her breasts. And so they were brought back again and dressed in unbelted tunics.

First the heifer tossed Perpetua and she fell on her back. Then sitting up she pulled down the tunic that was ripped along the side so that it covered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty than of her pain. Next she asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair; for it was not right that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be in mourning in her hour of triumph.

Then she got up. And seeing that Felicitas [a Christian slave-girl also facing the beasts] had been crushed to the ground, she went over to her, gave her her hand and lifted her up. Then the two stood side by side. But the cruelty of the mob was now appeased, and so they were called back through the Gate of Life ....

Perpetua then called for her brother and spoke to him together with the catechumens and said: "You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another, and do not be weakened by what we have gone through."

... Immediately as the contest was coming to a close, a leopard was let loose, and [as Saturus predicted,] after one bite Saturus was ... drenched with blood .... Shortly afterward, he was thrown unconscious with the rest in the usual spot to have his throat cut. But the mob asked that their bodies be brought out into the open. And so the martyrs got up and went to the spot of their own accord, and kissing one another they sealed their martyrdom with the ritual kiss of peace. The others took the sword in silence and without moving, especially Saturus, who being the first to climb the stairway was the first to die. For once again he was waiting for Perpetua.

Perpetua, however, had yet to taste more pain. She screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing.

Ah, most valiant and blessed martyrs! Truly you are called and chosen for the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord!

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

## **From the Archives: Monica, Faithful Mother**

**Augustine considered his mother, Monica, a driving force in his own salvation. In his Confessions, he documents her relentless prayers and persuasions. In Book IX, he speaks of her married life with Patricius in Thagaste, a small town in North Africa, thanking God for her powerful Christian witness. Patricius was a pagan throughout his life, but converted to Christianity shortly before his death.**

Brought up thus with modesty and discipline, she was made subject by you to her parents, rather than by her parents to you. When with the passing years she reached marriageable age, and was given to a husband, she served him as a master. She worked hard to win him to you, preaching to him by her character, by which you made her beautiful, submissively lovable and admirable to her husband.

She so endured his marital infidelities that she never had a quarrel with her husband on this account, for she still looked for your mercy upon him, that, believing in you, he might become chaste. Generally speaking, he was exceedingly kind but also bad-tempered, but she knew not to oppose an angry man by deed or word. If it happened that he had been too thoughtlessly aroused, she would explain what she had done at the right time, when he had cooled down and was calm. In a word, though many married women, who had better tempered husbands, bore on their faces the marks of shameful blows and gossiped among their friends about the way their men lived, she rebuked their tongues, half seriously, half in jest. She would advise them that, from the time they heard the marriage contract read to them, they should consider them documents which made them servants, and that thus, remembering their condition, they should not set themselves up proudly against their masters. And when they expressed amazement, knowing what an evil-tempered husband she put up with, that nothing had been heard or by any means had been made apparent, that Patricius had beaten his wife, or that they had ever fallen into the strife of domestic disagreement, and confidentially asked why, she taught the rule I have mentioned. Those who took notice of it, after a trial, thanked her. The others, kept down, suffered ....

Finally even her own husband, now in the last days of his earthly life, she won to you, and in him as a believer she had no more to complain of those things she endured in him before he believed. She was the servant of your servants, and anyone of them who knew her found much to praise in her while honoring and loving you, seeing that you were at the center of her holy way of life to which its fruits bore witness. For she had been "the wife of one man," had paid the debt she owed to her parents, had managed her household religiously, had a reputation for good works, she had brought up her children, as often "travailing for them" as she saw them swerve from the path. Finally, Lord, for all of us [he refers to the "household" of Augustine's friends and colleagues that Monica managed at Cassiciacum] she exercised as much care as if she were the mother of us all, and served us as if we were all her parents.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

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## From the Archives: The Wife's Domain

A wife has just one purpose: to guard the possessions we have accumulated, to keep a close watch on the income, to take charge of the household. Indeed, this is why God gave her to you, that in these, plus all other matters, she might be a helper to you.

Our life is customarily organized into two spheres: public affairs and private matters, both of which were determined by God. To woman is assigned the presidency of the household; to man, all the business of state, the marketplace, the administration of justice, government, the military, and all other such enterprises. A woman is not able to hurl a spear or shoot an arrow, but she can grasp the distaff, weave at the loom; she correctly disposes of all such tasks that pertain to the household. She cannot express her opinion in a legislative assembly, but she can express it at home, and often she is more shrewd about household matters than her husband. She cannot handle state business well, but she can raise children correctly, and children are our principal wealth. At a glance she can detect the bad behavior of the servants and can manage them carefully. She provides complete security for her husband and frees him from all such household concerns, concerns about money, woolworking, the preparation of food and decent clothing. She takes care of all other matters of this sort, that are neither fitting for her husband's concern nor would they be satisfactorily accomplished should he ever lay his hand to them—even if he struggled valiantly!

Indeed, this is a work of God's love and wisdom, that he who is skilled at the greater things is downright inept and useless in the performance of the less important ones, so that the woman's service is necessary. For if the man were adapted to undertake both sorts of activities, the female sex could easily be despised. Conversely, if the more important, most beneficial concerns were turned over to the woman, she would go quite mad. Therefore God did not apportion both duties to one sex, lest the other be displaced and be considered superfluous. Nor did God assign both to be equal in every way, lest from equality a kind of struggle and rivalry should again arise, for women in their contentiousness would deem themselves deserving of the front-row seats rather than the man! But taking precautions at one and the same time for peace and for decency, God maintained the order of each sex by dividing the business of human life into two parts and assigned the more necessary and beneficial aspects to the man and the less important, inferior matters to the woman. God's plan was extremely desirable for us, on the one hand because of our pressing needs and, on the other, so that a woman would not rebel against her husband due to the inferiority of her service. Understanding all these things, let us strive for just one goal, virtue of soul and nobility of behavior, so that we may enjoy peace, live in concord, and maintain ourselves in love unto the end.

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## From the Archives: The Acts of Thecla

[The governor] commanded that Paul be bound and carried off to prison until he had the opportunity to hear him more attentively.

But at night Thecla removed her bracelets and gave them to the gatekeeper, and when the door was opened for her, she went into the prison. And giving the jailer a silver mirror, she went in to Paul. She sat by his feet and heard the great deeds of God. Paul did not fear at all, but lived freely in the perfect openness of God. And her faith was increased by kissing his bonds.

As Thecla was sought by her own people and by Thamyris, as she was searched for in the streets like a lost person, one of the fellow-servants of the gatekeeper revealed that she had gone out at night. And they inquired of the gatekeeper and he told them that she had gone to the stranger in prison. They went just as he had told them and found her, bound to him in a manner of affection. And having departed from there, they drew together the crowd and showed it to the governor.

And he commanded Paul to be brought to the platform. Thecla, however, rolled around on the place where Paul had taught when he sat in prison. And the governor commanded that she also be brought to the platform. She went, exultant with joy. And the crowd, when Paul was brought in again, shouted inordinately, "He is a wizard, away with him!" But the governor gladly heard Paul on the subject of the holy deeds of Christ. And taking counsel, he called Thecla and said, "Why will you not marry Thamyris, according to the law of the Iconians?" But she just stood, gazing intently at Paul. When she did not reply, Theocleia, her mother, cried out, saying, "Burn the lawless woman, burn her who is not a bride in the middle of the theater, so that all women who have been instructed by this man may be afraid!"

The governor was greatly affected and having scourged Paul, he sent him outside the city, but Thecla he sentenced to be burned. Immediately the governor arose and went to the theater, and the entire mob went out for the distressing spectacle. But Thecla, like a lamb in the wilderness who looks about for the shepherd, sought Paul. And when she looked at the crowd, she saw the Lord sitting there, as if he were Paul, and she said, "As if I were not able to bear it, Paul came to watch me." And gazing at him, she kept intent on him. But he went away into the heavens.

And the boys and the virgins brought wood and hay in order to burn Thecla. And as she was brought in naked, the governor wept and was astounded at the Power in her. They spread the wood and the public executioners ordered her to climb on the pyre. She made the sign of the cross, went up on the wood, and they lighted it. A great flame blazed but the fire did not touch her. For God, showing compassion, produced a noise under the ground and a cloud threw a shadow from above, full of rain and hail, and the whole vessel was poured out so that many were endangered and died, and the fire being extinguished, Thecla was saved.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

## From the Archives: Egeria at Thecla's Shrine

Constantine's mother, Helena, traveled to Palestine, touring biblical sites and, with her imperial wealth, establishing churches and shrines. Thereafter, it was quite fashionable for Christians to visit the Holy Land. Late in the 4th century, a nun named Egeria made the trek from western Europe and kept a diary of her travels. Not far from Tarsus, she visited the shrine of Thecla, then considered a historical figure.

Since the martyrdom of St. Thecla is three days from Tarsus, that is, in Isauria, it pleased me much to go on there, especially since it was so close by.... When I arrived there, I went to the bishop, a truly holy man and a former monk. I also saw there a very beautiful church in the same city.

Since St. Thecla's shrine is placed above the city on a flat hill, perhaps 1500 feet from the city, I chose to go out there to make the lodging that had to be made. At the holy church there is nothing else except innumerable monastic cells for men and women.

For I found there one of my dearest friends, a person in whose way of life everybody in the east bears witness, the holy deaconess named Marthana, whom I had met in Jerusalem where she had come up to pray. She governs there monastic cells of "apostolites" or virgins. Would I be able to describe her joy or mine when she saw me?

But I should return to my subject. There are a great many monastic cells there on that hill and in the middle is an immense wall that encloses the church in which is the martyrdom, for the martyrdom is very beautiful. Therefore the wall was put there to guard the church against the Isaurians who are evil and often steal, lest they try to do something against the monastery placed there.

When I had arrived there in the name of God, a prayer was given at the martyrdom and the entire **Acts of St. Thecla** were read. I gave boundless thanks to Christ our God who counted me worthy, though I was unworthy and undeserving, to fulfill my desires in all things.

I stayed there for two days, seeing the holy monastics or "apostolites," men as well as women, who were there, and after praying and receiving communion, I returned to Tarsus to continue on my route ....

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

## From the Archives: The Value of Virginity

We are not ignorant of: "Marriage is honorable and the bed undefiled" (Heb. 13:4). We read God's first judgment: "Increase and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28), but just as we accept marriage, we prefer virginity, which is born of marriage. Now will silver not be silver, if gold is more precious than it? .... Although the one-hundred-fold, sixty-fold, and thirty-fold fruits are brought forth from one earth and from one sowing, nonetheless they differ much in number. The thirty-fold refers to marriage ..., the sixty-fold to widows..., the one-hundred-fold ... expresses the crown of virginity.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

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## From the Archives: Agnes: the Virgin Martyr

From the bitter persecution of Diocletian (303–305), a heroine emerged. Agnes embodied the two ultimate devotions of Christianity: virginity and martyrdom. Since church fathers often spoke in glowing, almost worshipful, terms of both virgins and martyrs, it was natural that they would hail this young girl, martyred in about 304 A.D. The early-5th-century poet Prudentius takes up the story:

So brave a girl, a martyr famed

Was Agnes, who in Romulus' home

Lies buried in a tomb. She sees

In death Rome's towering roofs

And so she keeps her people safe.

She also shields the pilgrims there

Who pray with pure and faithful hearts.

A double crown of martyrdom

Sets this noted girl apart:

Virginity free from any fault,

Then honor from a death she chose.

Hardly old enough to wed,

She was a little girl, they say,

By chance a child of tender years,

But aglow for Christ, with manly heart,

She defied the shameless laws.

For pagan idols she would not

Desert her holy, sacred faith.

First lured by many skillful tricks—

Now the lures of fawning judge,

Now the raging butcher's threats—

She stood her ground tenaciously,

Of savage strength she freely gave

Her body to the harsh abuse;

She did not flee impending death ....

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 17: Women in the Early Church

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## Women and the Early Church: Recommended Resources - Historical Writings and Perspectives, Scripture Studies, Bibliographies

### Historical Writings and Perspectives

Bell, Susan G., ed. *Women: From the Greeks to the French Revolution*. Stanford University Press, 1981.

While coming from a broad sociological perspective, this does contain substantial references to Judeo-Christian perspectives and practices toward women, from the Old Testament period right through the Reformation.

Clark, Elizabeth A. *Women in the Early Church: Message of the Fathers of the Church*. Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983.

This excellent collection from the church fathers' writings regarding women presents some fascinating—and disturbing—points of view. We cite it extensively in "From the Archives" (pp.32–35).

Fiorenza, Elizabeth Schussler. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1983.

A remarkable historical reconstruction, though it doesn't concentrate exclusively on the early church.

Gryson, Roger. *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1980.

A detailed history drawn from early church documents, it tilts against women's full participation in church leadership.

Heine, Susanne. *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?* London: SCM Press Ltd., 1987.

An irenic analysis of the unique insights that feminist scholars have brought to biblical and early-church historical exegesis.

LaPorte, Jean. *The Role of Women in Early Christianity*. New York: Edwin Mellon, 1982.

A good collection of primary documents that mention women.

Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. New York: Schocken Books, 1975.

Recounts and analyzes numerous ancient writings referring to women in various roles, and of

various economic classes.

Ruether, Rosemary, and McLaughlin, Eleanor, eds. ***Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Tradition***. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979.

The first two chapters, by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Ruether, cover the early church. Fiorenza looks at broad sweeps of theology and heresy. Ruether looks at the people, providing helpful overviews of Macrina, Paula, Marcella, and the Melanias Elder and Younger.

Seltman, Charles. ***Women in Antiquity***. Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, 1981.

Spans the records of the ancient Western world to see how women were treated from Athens to Egypt to Crete.

Tucker, Ruth A., and Liefeld, Walter. ***Daughters of the Church***. Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Academie Books, 1987.

An extensive overview of women throughout church history. Pp. 9–10 of this magazine contain an excerpt from an early chapter.

Wilson-Kastner, Patricia, et al. ***Women Writers of the Early Church***. New York: University Press of America, 1981.

Much new information is presented in this rare collection of primary writings by early Christian women.

## **Scripture Studies**

Clark, Stephen B. ***Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences***. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant, 1980.

A conservative Catholic approach to the biblical data.

Hayter, Mary. ***The New Eve in Christ***. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987.

This new book takes a non-partisan approach, trying to cut through the shallow rhetoric and misuse of Scripture on both sides of the debate.

Howe, Margaret E. ***Women and Church Leadership***. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982.

A solid argument for changing women's position in today's churches.

Hurley, James B. ***Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective***. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981.

A traditional approach, though with some modifications, from an evangelical Presbyterian scholar.

Martin, Faith. ***Call Me Blessed: The Emerging Christian Woman***. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.

To be released in March, this book offers "not a challenge to Scripture but a challenge to the

traditional interpretations of Scripture regarding women.”

Mickelson, Alvera, ed. ***Women, Authority, and the Bible***. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986.

Papers from the Evangelical Colloquium on Women and the Bible, 1984. More than 20 writers contribute, from all sides of the issues. Some new interpretations, some old. A ground-breaking collection.

Scanzoni, Letha Dawson, and Hardesty, Nancy. ***All We're Meant to Be***. Nashville: Abingdon, 1986.

The 1973 classic that set in motion a substantial biblical feminism has been revised. The book was controversial then and may still be, but even staunch traditionalists should admire the authors' efforts to understand Scripture rather than discard it.

Spencer, Aida Besancon. ***Beyond the Curse***. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985.

An exegetical study of women in the New Testament.

Stagg, Evelyn, and Stagg, Frank. ***Women in the World of Jesus***. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978.

More on the theme they explore in this issue (pp.29–30).

## **Biographies**

Deen, Edith. ***Great Women of the Christian Faith***. Westwood, N.J.: Barbour & Co., 1986.

A reprint of the 1959 standard.

Hardesty, Nancy A. ***Great Women of Faith: The Strength and Influence of Christian Women***. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980.

Easy-to-read biographical sketches. Hardesty is strongest in the 1700–1900 period, but does include Paula, Marcella and Pulcheria.

Wright, Elliot. ***Holy Company: Christian Heroes and Heroines***. New York: Macmillan, 1980.

A readable collection of biographies of men and women through the centuries, it includes short sections on Macrina and her brothers, Olympias, and Perpetua and Felicitas.

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