

Factors for the Decline of the Women's Ministry in the Early Church (A.D. 2-5)

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I. Introduction

A word of caution must accompany any study of the status and ministry of women in the early Christian church. This is because, as the Encyclopedia Early Christianity explains, “the sources are scanty, and their authors are males who often wrote prescriptively.”³²⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza also notes that “studies on the development of church offices and church orders, though numerous, are inconclusive.”³²⁶

This, of course, complicates the task of investigation and puts the researcher on precarious ground. The surprisingly voluminous material on the subject requires careful sifting because the authors either have an axe to grind or a horn to blow. Only a handful has tackled the early role of Christian women with scholarly objectivity. Thus I approach the topic humbly and admit at the outset that this paper is nothing more than a survey of findings presented in the more reliable and comprehensive works. Because the roles and ministerial participation of women in the Apostolic and Post-Apostolic periods are axiomatic in Church History, these will be dealt with only in passing. This paper will instead focus on the reasons for the decline of the female presence in church leadership from the 2nd to the 5th centuries, and attempt to synthesize the factors suggested by historians to be responsible for this steady exclusion.

³²⁵Everett Ferguson, ed. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland, 1990), 940.

³²⁶Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 285.

II. Christ's Radical Notion of Gender Equality

The world into which Christianity burst forth was not a welcoming one for women. The patriarchal attitude which pervaded civilization from the Mediterranean to the Pacific supported the subjugation of womanhood without apology. Though Greece and Rome gradually granted women more freedom and status as they entered the Hellenistic age, they still exerted considerable social, moral and civic (legal) control over the womenfolk, whose proper realm was understood to be the household and the family.³²⁷

Jerusalem womanhood had more liberty than its Greek counterparts but was not as liberated as its first century Roman contemporaries.³²⁸ Nonetheless, even as the Romanas acquired higher social status and gained access to political and religious positions, the Empire's patriarchal thinking generally cast a baleful eye on attempts at self-determination and independence.³²⁹

This mindset (which subjected women to paternal and spousal authority) considered gender equality inconceivable and saw efforts at achieving the latter condition as taboo.³³⁰

Christ's message of gender and ethnic universality, articulated by Paul in Gal. 3:28, was under the circumstances radical to say the least. His inclusion of women among His disciples and His special ministry to them whom He recognized as part of the downtrodden and outcast of society broadcast a message of liberation to females under the thumb of patriarchy.³³¹ As part of the Jesus movement, women gained respect while

³²⁷Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 70-71.

³²⁸Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 71.

³²⁹C. Schmidt, *The Social Results of Early Christianity* (London: Pitman & Sons, 1907), 194-196.

³³⁰Jouette M. Bassler, "The Widows' Tale: A Fresh Look at 1 Tim. 5:3-16" *JBL* 103/1 (1984): 25-26.

³³¹Sharon Clark Pearson, "Women in Ministry: A Biblical Vision." *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31 (Spring 1996) 1: 148.

they participated in His ministry and, after His death, as they hosted house churches and occupied positions of teaching and authority and pastoral leadership in the nascent church.³³²

However, as the leadership of the apostolic church changed hands in the second century, a shift in this egalitarian trend occurred. A problem arose for the women of the church, and it involved the maintenance of their status as equal partners in ministry. The question confronting them was not how they could break into the ranks of men and serve their brothers and sisters in Christ (which was a responsibility they already enjoyed) but how they could continue doing what Christ had allowed and encouraged them to do in the first place.

III. The Shift

Much of the New Testament (particularly the Book of Acts and the Epistles of Paul to the Romans and to Timothy) bears evidence of remarkable women who held the church offices of minister, apostle, “widow,” and deacon in the apostolic period (cf. Acts 16, 19; Rom. 16:1, 7 and 1 Tim. 3:11).³³³ Records show how women were as active and prominent as men in the early church both in life and in death.³³⁴

However, upon the establishment of the institutional episcopate in the second century, a hierarchy emerged within the Church that not only separated clergy from laity but also “genderized” the ministry so that women were prevented from enjoying the latitude of the positions they had previously occupied.³³⁵

³³² Karen L. King, .Women in Ancient Christianity: The New Discoveries.. *Online*. www.pbs.org. Accessed August 11, 2001.

³³³ E. Margaret Howe, *Women & Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids:Zondervan, 1982), 37. Also see the letter of Pliny to Trajan (c. 112) where he mentions two .deaconesses. (*ministrae*) whom he tortured during interrogation.

³³⁴ The martyrs Perpetua, Felicitas, and Blandina gave stirring testimony to the robust courage of Christian women under persecution. Ferguson, *Encyclopedia*, 942.

³³⁵ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500* (Peabody, MA: Prince, 1975 [1953]), 116, 133; Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 286-287.

Although by this period women were ministering variously as deacon, canon, widow, virgin, virgin widow, presbyter, and (recent evidence suggests) episcopa (or bishop), and in these capacities were performing the teaching function and administering the sacrament of the Eucharist as well as other ministries, they were subtly being eased out of the ministry with considerable success.³³⁶

For instance, John Wordsworth notes that the first portion of the 3rd century Apostolic Church Order acknowledges the shared ministry of men and women, but in the latter half “a half-begun section on the ‘Oblation of the Body and Blood’ is cut short, and any attempt to introduce an order of Deaconesses is disallowed.”³³⁷

This trend of restraint was so effective over time that the 3rd century Syrian Didascalia Apostolorum and the 4th century Apostolic Constitutions declared that women could become “deaconesses” upon the understanding that they would minister exclusively to women, would hold no teaching office, and would exert no authority whatsoever over men.³³⁸ (Interestingly, though, the Constitutions included instructions for the ordination [“laying hands”] of deaconesses, a practice that had been removed [erased?] from the earlier Apostolic Church Order.)³³⁹

Joan Morris also documents the deliberate attempt to eradicate traces of women’s administration of the Eucharist and their occupation of the position of episcopa in the 5th century (and possibly earlier) by sandpapering paintings in the catacombs depicting such church leaders. She

³³⁶ Giorgio Otranto, .The Problem of the Ordination of Women in the Early Christian Priesthood.. *Online*. www.womenpriests.org. Accessed September 20, 2001; Dorothea McEwan, .The Ordination of Women . A Living Tradition.. *Online*. www.womenpriests.org. Accessed September 20, 2001; John Wordsworth, *The Ministry of Grace* (London: Longmans, 1901), 34-35.

³³⁷ Wordsworth, *The Ministry of Grace*, 35.

³³⁸ Georgia Harkness, *Women in Church and Society: A Historical and Theological Inquiry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 73-75.

³³⁹ Wordsworth, *The Ministry of Grace*, 35.

also writes about the case of the lady bishop Theodora, whose name was “masculinized” by the replacement of mosaic tiles to erase its feminine (and identifying) suffix “-ra.”³⁴⁰

In a short but intriguing study, Ben Witherington notes how there is a “definite tendency” in the Western Text (Codex Bezae) of Acts (and possibly elsewhere in the New Testament) to downplay the participation of women in Paul’s ministry.

...[I]t appears that there was a concerted effort by some part of the Church, perhaps as early as the late first century or beginning of the second, to tone down texts in Luke’s second volume that indicated that women played an important and prominent part in the early days of the Christian community.³⁴¹

If the suppositions are true, these policies effectively pushed women out of the male milieu and led them into nunneries and the monastic life where they could enjoy liberty from the prejudice and subjection of society. Ironically, this was a freedom originally offered by Christianity.³⁴²

This marginalization of women eventually resulted in their “withdrawal” from the mainstream of church leadership so that to this day the acceptance of women in leadership is more the exception than the rule.

IV. The Reasons for the Shift

“Patristic Misogyny” is a catch-all term used to describe the contemptuous and at times antagonistic attitude generally held by the Church Fathers for women in ministry. As has been demonstrated, they did not always feel this way. Fiorenza provides an enlightening analysis of what

³⁴⁰ Joan Morris, *The Lady Was A Bishop: The Hidden History of Women with Clerical Ordination and the Jurisdiction of Bishops* (New York: MacMillan, 1973), 4-5.

³⁴¹ Ben Witherington, “The Anti-Feminist Tendencies of the Western Text in Acts,” *JBL* 103/1 (1984): 82-83.

³⁴² Bassler, “The Widows’ Tale...,” 24.

prompted the shift from egalitarianism to subordinationism in the early church:

The shift which took place in the second century was not a shift from charismatic leadership to institutional consolidation, but from charismatic and communal authority to an authority vested in local officers who – in time – absorb not only the teaching authority of the prophet but also the decision-making power of the community. This shift is, at the same time, a shift from alternating leadership accessible to all the baptized to patriarchal leadership restricted to male heads of households; it is a shift from house church to church as the “household of God.”³⁴³

This patriarchy was in Rome and Palestine a condition of contemporary non-Christian society that may have seeped in through tradition and conventional wisdom into Christianity per se; but it is interesting that in Asia Minor, it may have been a Christian reaction to the *mutterrecht* (tracing of descent through the mother) and resulting high estimation of women by the pagan, uneducated sector of society.³⁴⁴

This is in itself a comment on the incipient pride gaining a foothold in the Church. Patriarchal attitudes derive from the low view of women in society that Christ Himself sought to change. Unfortunately, vestiges of it later emerged in Paul’s writings and were used to justify the resubordination of women in society and the church (compare the contradictory messages in Gal. 3 and Rom. 16 with 1 Cor. 11:2-16, 14:34-35, 1 Tim. 2:9-11, and Tit.

³⁴³ Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 286-287.

³⁴⁴ Now it was precisely in the educated parts of the country that Christianity first spread. Thus in the second century the situation was produced that the more advanced districts were Christian, while the uncivilised districts retained their paganism and their old *mutterrecht* even reckoning descent through their mother. Further, it is pointed out... that various developments of religious feeling, which arose in Asia Minor, were penetrated by the native tone and spirit of the country, and in particular, were characterised by prominent position and influence of women. In opposition to these provincial types, the Universal and Catholic type of Christianity became confirmed in its dislike of the prominence and public ministrations of women.. W. M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire Before A.D. 170*, 8th ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), 162.

2:5). Harkness finds the reason for Paul's "misogyny" in his exemplary Jewishness: "centuries of inherited belief in the inherent inferiority of women and therefore their necessary subordination to men remained" in Paul despite his clarion Christianity.³⁴⁵ Bassler sees Paul's disposition toward women ministers as the result of eschatological concerns and a desire for order in the church:

Paul himself, though retaining a sense of the functional equality of all members of the community (1 Cor. 11:11-12) nevertheless delivered some restrictive admonitions to women that arose in part from a practical desire for church order (1 Cor. 14:33b-36) and in part from a theological concern with the eschatological reservations of the Christian message of redemption.³⁴⁶

However, Paul's genuinely egalitarian message was later remolded by Church leaders as they bowed before social pressure:

The motivation for such a response may be found in a growing concern for public opinion, which was, as we have seen, profoundly conservative with regard to female equality. This the original *communitas* model that seems to lie behind Paul's letters, a model based on equal standing and equal acceptance of all members, was soon eroded by forces of time and public opinion into the patriarchal model of contemporary society in which roles were defined by the dominant-submissive pattern of the extended family.³⁴⁷

It was this menial, sometimes sordid view of women that led the Church Fathers to cast their Christian sisters in a mold similar to that which produced pagan women and treat them with commensurate contempt. For instance, Paul's concerns about women in his Epistle to the Corinthians were probably spurred by the *hetaerae*, courtesans who attempted to elevate their minds by downgrading their bodies.³⁴⁸ This negative conception of woman as wanton temptress is rife in the writings of Augustine and Jerome

³⁴⁵ Harkness, *Women in Church and Society*, 70.

³⁴⁶ Bassler, *The Widows. Tale....*, 30.

³⁴⁷ Bassler, *The Widows. Tale....*, 30-31.

³⁴⁸ Harkness, *Women in Church and Society*, 53.

and achieved theological significance when Athanasius used the image to characterize Arianism in the third century.³⁴⁹ Athanasius thus holds the dubious distinction of being the first to cloak heresy with womanhood.

The Montanists Maximilla and Priscilla gave the Church Fathers further reason to doubt the capacity of women for leadership, and more than enough “ammunition” with which to target those who would assert themselves. Origen set up a vigorous opposition to the possibility of women becoming teachers, citing as *prima facie* evidence the Montanist women “who led people astray.” “Certainly, women should also ‘teach what is good,’ but men should not sit and listen to a woman, as if there were no man capable of communicating the word of God.”³⁵⁰

The trend toward pietism and asceticism also proscribed the activity of women ministers, particularly the widows who were then performing the sundry ministries of the church. Viewed as threats to male purity, they were themselves called to lives of chastity; in the process, several widows who had actually been married were debarred from continuing in ministry.³⁵¹

The decline in the missionary activity of the church, which resulted in fewer adult baptisms at which the deaconesses could assist women candidates (and more infant baptisms, as Catholicism became institutionalized), led to a corresponding fall in female prominence and participation in the church. Also, the rise of religious orders which “assimilated and redirected” the deaconesses and other women ministers accounts for their gradual attrition.

It will be seen that the ebb of women’s ministry in the early church cannot be attributed to a single reason but to a conglomeration of events

³⁴⁹ Allan D. Ferguson, ed. *Augustine Through the Ages* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 887-888; Virginia Burrus, “The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Jerome.” *Harvard Theological Review* 84:3 (1991) 229.

³⁵⁰ H. Wayne House, “The Ministry of Women in the Apostolic and Postapostolic Periods.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* October-December 1988: 395-396.

³⁵¹ H. Wayne House, “Distinctive Roles for Women in the Second and Third Centuries.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* January-March 1989: 49.

that conspired to remove them from the scene. And yet Fiorenza seems to have hit upon the most influential factor: the return to patriarchy sealed the fate of women ministers in the early church and will continue to do so if attitudes on gender dominance persist in the contemporary Christian body, no matter how subtly.

V. Conclusion

While writing this paper I was often asked about the subject of my study. To my reply I invariably received the comment-cum-question, “So you’re a feminist?”

That response speaks volubly about attitudes in the Philippine church. I hesitate to call myself a feminist because I detest labels and insist that political gender appellations (in other words, name calling) should not be a Christian pastime. No, I am not a feminist if “feminist” means I campaign for women’s rights alone. I would be as militant for my brothers in Christ if they were treated as a number of them so often treat women now. I am for the partnership of men and women under the banner of Christ’s love. This, I believe, is what Jesus taught and practiced.

That my Christian brothers are so quick to attach the feminist tag to me is regrettable. I feel they do so not from a critical spirit but (and I beg pardon for this) from ignorance. It is the convenient response to a controversial issue and one they would rather not confront. Hence the label.

However, in the interest of protecting all the children of God from arbitrariness and discrimination, this ignorance must be overcome. No Christian should be debarred from serving God to the fullest. If we subordinate one gender to elevate another we are sorely limiting the efficacy of the Body and the Kingdom’s growth. It is God whom we must exalt. History demonstrates the silliness of the debate. The Church has everything to gain from the partnership of the sexes whom God ordained and Jesus prayed would be one in the first place.

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