

The Evolution of Women and Their Roles in Early Christianity

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From the time of Christ's birth, to the day of Pentecost and into the early centuries of the rise of Christianity and beyond, along with men, women have served, lead, partnered, sacrificed and died for the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the early days of the church, these women, married and single, wealthy and poor, slave and free, young and old, worked diligently in the spreading of the gospel and in establishing the home churches. Many were martyred. Some of these women are named, some remain anonymous. Each one was a part of God's plan to move his Church forward, against what appeared at times to be insurmountable odds.

There is much evidence within the scriptures and within historical writings to show that women who were followers of Christ initially held positions of leadership such as prophetess, minister, teacher, deaconess, missionary, overseer, apostle, *episcopa* or bishop. There is even a "legend" concerning a "Popess" – (female Pope) - in Constantinople around the early twelfth century.

There has been much controversy, disagreement and bitter dispute, even to the present day concerning exactly what the role of women should and should not be within the church, in particular within the leadership hierarchy of church organization and in the fivefold ministry. This paper will present information regarding the subject and hopefully stimulate further prayerful research and dialogue regarding the topic. We will give an overview of the lives of various women and their contribution to the growth and perpetuation of the Christian faith in the early Christian Church, particularly the early era of the Apostolic Fathers. Specifically, who some of these fascinating women were, how

their roles evolved and how they lives impacted their families, communities and the world for the cause of Christ's Church.

In researching this topic, we find that women in the apostolic and early post-apostolic era were treated with equality and had similar responsibilities as the men in the church, engaging in public prayer, prophecy, and teaching, and being apostles, servants (ministers) and overseers of house church congregations. The Gnostic texts show that women held senior roles as teachers, prophets and missionaries. They were ordained by the laying on of hands and conducted rituals such as baptisms, the Eucharist and exorcisms. Historians writing about this period note that many more females than males were converting to Christianity in its first centuries and recognized Christianity's appeal to women as an important factor in its success. It is also noted that in the first Christian centuries, women were able to utilize their position in the family household environment to spread the Good News and to increase the number of converts. So as long as the early church gathered in private homes, women who were influential in their communities economically and culturally often led the congregations. More often than not, women owned the homes in which the New Testament house churches met.

Women were central to the life, existence and the development of leadership within the community of Christians where ever they lived and worshipped. However, as Christianity emerged and the church became a public institution, the role of women changed as well. In the 2nd and 3rd century as the male dominated clerical hierarchy developed, women become more and more excluded from church leadership. But in the 4th and 5th centuries women began to surface in the monastic movement by sponsoring and funding the building of monasteries, convents, hospices, etc. In the Byzantine part of the Church, deaconesses flourished until well into the 8th and 9th centuries. Many women deacon saints are venerated in the calendar of the Orthodox Church.

The following are some of the early “Mothers of Christianity” and other women who were influential in early Christianity.

Mary the mother of Jesus continued to work alongside her son until his death and resurrection. She was present with all of the other disciples in the upper room on the day of Pentecost when the church was born and she continued in the faith and in the work of the Gospel until she was called home.

Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2): This woman was a deaconess of the church in Cenchrea, who was beloved of Paul and many other Christians for the help she gave to them. She filled an important position of leadership. It would be a difficult stretch of the imagination to say that this woman fulfilled her responsibilities and duties without ever speaking in the church. She is the only deacon in the Bible to be identified by name. The foundation for the work of a deaconess is found in Acts 6:1-6; Romans 16:1-2; I Timothy 3:11.

Priscilla (Acts 18:26): Priscilla and her husband Aquila are often mentioned with great respect by Paul. Together they were pastors of a church in Ephesus, and were responsible for teaching the full gospel to Apollos. We are told in the Bible that they both taught Apollos, and pastored the church together. We see here another example of a woman in a very prominent position of teaching and pastoring. (Other references to Priscilla and Aquila are Acts 18:2, 18; Romans 16:3, and I Corinthians 16:19).

Acts 21:8: Philip the evangelist had **four unmarried daughters** who were prophets.

Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3): Here we see reference to two women who were “true yokefellow” and who labored with Paul in the advancement of the gospel.

Junia (Romans 16:7): In this verse we see Paul sending greetings to Andronicus and Junia, his "fellow-prisoners" who are outstanding among the apostles. Junia is a woman's name. In some modern translations, an "s" has been added (Junias) because the translators so denied a woman being an apostle, that they assumed a copyist has accidentally dropped the "s." However the proper male ending would have been "ius," not "ias." No church commentator earlier than the Middle Ages questioned that Junia was both a woman and an apostle.

Dorcas or Tabitha (both names meaning "gazelle") was well-known and much loved for her acts of charity in the city of Joppa, especially for her making clothes for the poor. When Dorcas died suddenly, the members of her congregation sent to the neighboring city of Lydda for the Apostle Peter, who came and raised her from the dead (Acts 9:36-43).

Lydia was a woman of Thyatira, who worked at Philippi selling a famous purple dye and fabric. She was a wealthy businesswoman and she was also a "worshiper of God," most likely at a local synagogue. When the Apostle Paul encountered her in prayer among other women, his preaching of the Word brought Lydia to faith in Christ. She and her friends became the nucleus of the Christian community in Philippi (Acts 16). It was to her house that Paul and Silas returned following the conversion of the Philippians jailer.

Chloe (1 Cor. 1:10-11) is mentioned as the owner of a house where Christian meetings were held.

The following are some of the earliest secular accounts of Christians who suffered for their faith:

Tacitus writes (*Annales xiii* 32, AD 57) of the trial of Pomponia **Graecina**, a woman of high rank, who was accused of "foreign superstition" and handed over to her husband as

judge for trial. This woman was the first Christian persecuted for the faith that history records outside of the New Testament. She suffered for her testimony even before the canon of the New Testament was completed.

Pliny the Younger writes in his letter to Trajan (112 AD), "I thought it the more necessary, therefore, to find out what truth there was in this (accusation against Christians) by applying torture to **two maidservants who were called ministers**. But I found nothing but a depraved and extravagant superstition." These women, who may well have been quite young, were probably slaves since they were called maidservants. Yet they were recognized publicly as Christian ministers (Latin "*ministrae*", lit. "female ministers").

The Apostle Peter's wife was martyred before him during the reign of emperor Nero in Rome. Clement writes in his *Stromateus*, "They relate that the blessed Peter, seeing his own wife led away to execution, was delighted on account of her calling and return to her country, and that he cried to her in a consolatory and encouraging voice, addressing her by name: "'Oh thou, remember ,the Lord!"

Some women in the Roman empire who were persecuted were of high rank, giving up much for their Gospel witness. Eusebius recorded that at the same time, for professing Christ, **Flavia Domatilla**, the niece of Flavius Clemens, one of the consuls of Rome at that time, was transported with many others, as punishment, to the island of Pontia. This was during the persecution of Domitian when the apostle John was exiled to Patmos AD 93.

Symphorosa and her seven sons lived during the end of the reign of Emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD). Symphorosa lived in Tibur. She was the widow of the tribune, Getulius, who had previously been martyred by Emperor Hadrian, When Hadrian had

completed his palace at Tibur and began its dedication by offering sacrifices, he is said to have received the following response from his gods: "The widow Symphorosa and her sons torment us daily by invoking their God. If she and her sons offer sacrifice, we promise to give you all that you ask for." When all the emperor's attempts to induce Symphorosa and her sons to sacrifice to the gods were unsuccessful, he ordered her to be brought to the Temple of Hercules, where, after various tortures (beaten and hung by her hair) she was thrown into the river Anio, with a heavy rock fastened to her neck. Her brother Eugenius, who was a member of the council of Tibur, buried her in the outskirts of the city. The next day the emperor summoned her seven sons, and was equally unsuccessful in his attempts to make them sacrifice to the gods. He ordered them to be tied to seven stakes around the Temple of Hercules. Each of them suffered a different kind of martyrdom. Their bodies were thrown into a deep ditch.

Blandina was an example of how Christ showed that those who in the eyes of men appear cheap, ugly and contemptible, are treated by God with great honor because of their love for Him, which displays itself in power and now mere outward boasting. She repeatedly said, while being tortured, "I am a Christian, and nothing vile is done amongst us." She said this because they were accused of incest and cannibalism (a literal interpretation of Christians' consuming the Body and Blood of Christ – transubstantiation).

Blandina, and her companions, were subjected to additional tortures in the amphitheater at the time of the public games. She was tied to a stake and wild beasts were loosed on her. However miraculously, they did not touch her. After a few days of this, she was led into the arena to see the sufferings of her companions. Finally, as the last one of the group still alive, she was whipped and scourged, placed on a red-hot grate, enclosed in a net and thrown before a wild steer who tossed her into the air with his horns, goring and ripping her body. Then she was finally killed with a dagger in approximately 177 AD during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

I found this story, which is recorded in a diary, to be especially inspirational and empowering. **Perpetua**, a young 22 year old nursing mother of Carthaginian nobility, and Felicitas, a slave girl, were new Christians. Felicitas was pregnant at the time of her arrest and gave birth to a baby girl shortly before her death in the arena. Perpetua was baptized before being taken to prison. She was known for her gift of "the Lord's speech" and receiving messages from God. Perpetua and Felicitas suffered much physical and emotional pain in prison. They were sentenced to be executed. Perpetua was recognized in the prison as such a strong and resolute leader that the warden later became a believer. When it was their time, Perpetua and her four companions went to the arena with joy and calm. Perpetua in usual high spirits met the eyes of everyone along the way. We are told that she walked with "shining steps as the true wife of Christ, the darling of God." She actually sang on the way to the arena. Perpetua's last words were to her brother: "Stand fast in the faith and love one another", and then their throats were cut by the sword. She was executed on March 7, 203 AD during the reign of Septimus Severus.

In the Gnostic tradition, The *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary* described **Mary Magdalene** as a leader of Jesus' disciples. These writings state that she delivered a passionate sermon to the disciples after his resurrection, which is said to have raised their spirits and inspired them to evangelize the known world.

Philoumene was a Gnostic prophetess who headed a Christian theological school in Rome during the second century.

Thecla is said to have been an aristocratic young woman who heard the teaching of Paul, and upon hearing the message, gives up her fiancée in order to travel with Paul on his missionary journeys. Her family was very much opposed to this. Her mother goes so far as to try to have her daughter burned at the stake to prevent her from carrying out

this wish. However, after many lively adventures including baptizing herself in a pool of seals, Thecla did manage to become a missionary and live to a ripe old age preaching and teaching the gospel.

Olympias of Constantinople was a very good friend and, in fact, the confidante of John Chrysostom, who became the Bishop of Constantinople the last few years of the 4th century and the first years of the 5th century. She had enormous property. It has been calculated, using rather conservative estimates of how you translate ancient money into modern American dollars, that her contributions to the Church of Constantinople and surrounding areas was something like \$900 million. She was an example of someone who used her wealth and resources to help support the church by feeding hundreds, possibly thousands, of poor people, orphans, and widows and to help build hospitals that Christians were organizing. The church needed funding for its operations and women such as Olympias and others like **Malania the Elder and Malania the Younger**, were very instrumental, both in founding monasteries and directing them, as well as giving money for various charitable causes.

Helena was the mother of Constantine, the first Christian emperor of Rome (274-337 AD). There is not a lot that is known about her life, but we do know that she was a devoted Christian and that when her son Constantine converted to Christianity, Helena gave her strong support and encouragement. What is most amazing to me is that at almost eighty years of age, Helena traveled throughout Palestine and the eastern imperial provinces, encouraging the establishment and spread of the Christian faith. In Palestine she sought out the original locations associated with the life of Jesus, and she oversaw the construction of churches Constantine had ordered built at Bethlehem, Calvary, Olivet and Bethany. A pagan temple to Aphrodite had been built on the tomb site of Jesus' resurrection; it was torn down and replaced by the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Later legends arose that Helena also discovered the actual cross of Christ in

the tomb beneath the church. Helena's tour became a pattern for Christian pilgrims throughout the Middle Ages and into our own day as she sought to discover and honor the places where Jesus had lived. She has been called the first Christian woman archaeologist.

Monica, the mother of Augustine of Hippo was born in 332 AD in or near the North African town of Tagaste, some forty miles from the port city of Hippo. Her parents were native Africans and were devout Christians. Through her prayer, her husband and mother-in-law came to Christ. It was her son, Augustine that caused her the most pain. For 17 years she prayed for his salvation. Augustine attributed his conversion to his mother's prayers. At one point a priest said of Monica's prayers over Augustine, "It is not possible that the son of so many tears should perish." It is obvious that she loved her son very much. Augustine wrote that Monica endured as much pain in bringing him into the Christian faith as she had in bringing him into the world.

During the 4th and 5th century, the institutional Christian church gradually extinguished women's access to positions of authority:

- **The Council of Laodicea** (352 AD): Women were forbidden from the priesthood. They also were prohibited from presiding over churches. They decided that "*One ought not to establish in the church the women called overseers (presbutidas)....women must not approach the altar.*"
- **The Fourth Synod of Carthage** (398 AD) "*A woman, however learned and holy, may not presume to teach men in an assembly...A woman may not baptize.*"

- **The Council of Orange** (441 AD) "Deaconesses are absolutely not to be ordained; and if there are still any of them, let them bow their head under the benediction which is given to the congregations."
- **The Council of Chalcedon** (451 AD). Canon #15 of the Council states: *"No woman under 40 years of age is to be ordained a deacon, and then only after close scrutiny."* Apparently, the council wanted to start restricting the ordination of deaconesses, which must have been a common practice at the time. And, as the order of things went as that time, anyone ordained to the Holy Order of Deacon would be eligible for later ordination into the priesthood as well.
- **The Council of Epaon** (517 AD) "We completely suppress throughout our territory the consecration of those widows who are often called deaconesses".

Concerning women in the early church, W. M. Ramsey is quoted, "Moreover, there remains even in the mutilated and re-written tale (the Acts of Paul and Thecla) some traces of a view of women's rights and position, which is thoroughly characteristic of the [ancient] Asian social system, and thoroughly opposed to the ideas favored by the Church." Ramsey also shows how this opposition to the prominence of women in the original texts of the Bible resulted in the expunging of Damaris from Acts 17:33 in the *Codex Bezae*. He writes, ". . . various developments of religious feeling, which arose in Asia Minor, . . . were characterized 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 ministration of women. The dislike became abhorrence, and there is every probability that the dislike is as old as the first century, and was intensified to abhorrence before the middle of the second century. Under the influence of this feeling, the changes in Acts 17:12 and 34 arose in Catholic circles in Asia Minor."

Let us look at some of the attitudes that were held about women and their roles from the writings of the early Apostolic Fathers and other church leaders:

- **Tertullian** (160-223 AD) writes, "God's judgment on this sex lives on in our age; the guilt necessarily lives on as well. 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; you so lightly crushed the image of God, the man Adam; because of your punishment, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die. And you think to adorn yourself beyond your "tunics of skin" (Gen. 3:21)?" He further declared in his, *"precepts of ecclesiastical discipline concerning women"*, "It is not permitted for a woman to speak in the church nor is it permitted for her to teach, nor to baptize, nor to offer the Eucharist, nor to claim for herself a share in any masculine function, not to mention any priestly office".
- **Epiphanius** (the Bishop of Salamis in Cyprus), writing in 375 – 378 AD, almost two centuries after the birth of the Montanist (who ordained women) movement, in his book *Panarion (Medicine Chest against all heresies)*, could pass judgment on the Montanists as follows:

"Come now servants of God, let us assume a manly mind and banish the madness of these women. The whole deception is female; the disease comes from Eve, who was deceived long ago."
- **St. John Damascene** (676-787 AD) writes, "Woman is a daughter of falsehood, a sentinel of Hell, the enemy of peace; through her Adam lost paradise".

- "Woman is the instrument which the devil uses to gain possession of our souls"
(St. Cyprian) 3rd century AD
- "Woman is the fountain of the arm of the devil, her voice is the hissing of the serpent" **(St. Anthony)** 356-451 AD
- "Woman has the poison of an asp, the malice of a dragon" **(Pope St. Gregory The Great)** 540-604 AD

Along with these, we have harsh criticism later church fathers, including **St. Jerome** (340-420 AD) and **Chrysostom**, John Chrysostom (347-407 AD) wrote that, the subjection of the whole female race is a permanent punishment for sin. "For the woman taught the man once, and made him guilty of disobedience, and wrought our ruin.... The woman taught one, and ruined all". (Homily 9 on 1 Timothy).

St. Augustine (354-430) wrote to a friend, "What is the difference whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman."

Centuries later, **St. Thomas Aquinas** (1225-1274 AD) still considered women as being defective, "As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence."

Many of the early Church Fathers were opposed to women in any kind of leadership (especially ordained) . Sad to say, the manifest prejudice against women is quite obvious, at least to us today. These Church Fathers considered women mentally inferior, eternally guilty and under God's punishment. However, perhaps Bishop Atticus,

preaching in Constantinople in the presence of Pulcheria, sister of Theodosius, could go so far as to declare, that "through Mary all women are blessed; the female can no longer be held accursed, for the rank of this sex surpasses even the angels in glory. Now Eve is healed". . . and he went on to list the admirable women to be found in the Bible.

In retrospect, it is an interesting paradoxical type of mindset of that era that simultaneously denigrated women as "totally unworthy daughters of Eve" and yet reasoned to elevate Mary as the Mother of God and the instrument of man's salvation.

In conclusion, there was a monumental difference between the practice and teaching of the early church, by Christ and the Apostles, and the practice and teaching of the Apostolic Fathers regarding the value, role and contribution of women in the spreading of the Gospel. The lives of these women hold a rich history and legacy that needs to be passed on to younger generations and to the entire Body of Christ, so that we, as Christian women, can understand where we have come from, where we are now and where God is taking us.

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