

# Master Thesis

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‘Church and gender  
in the first three centuries’

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## ‘Church and gender in the first three centuries’

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### **Research question**

The New Testament appears to offer women greater participation in Christianity and in the church than that which was normally available to them in the first century. To what extent is the development of the role of women, particularly in church activities such as praying, prophesying, teaching and leading, traceable in the first three centuries?

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# Foreword

The theme of Church and gender has been a concern of mine for many years. Since moving to The Netherlands in 2007 I have had the opportunity to invest more time and energy in studying the canonical texts and related literature. Most of the books and papers included in the bibliography now form part of my personal collection. The preparation of this Master Thesis has provided me with the occasion (and a deadline!) to put my current reasoning and findings on paper and situate them in the context of early church history.

Here I wish to express my gratitude to my wife, Anneke, for her patience during all these years of study and my bouts of 'absent mindedness' – especially during these last three years.

I also feel very indebted to my fellow elders at 'De Bron', Gerrit-Jan van Kleef, Gerard Venhuizen, Hans Savert and Hans-Jürgen Reumerman, for the patient, friendly, honest, intense and sometimes emotive discussions over the last two years while together seeking to understand and apply the biblical guidelines on gender to our local church situation. Many church members have also contributed. The process of study and research, weighing and comparing, discussing and explaining can go on and on – and it will! And yet the need to find and apply biblical principles to local situations demands that at some point conclusions must be drawn. Chapter 4 of this thesis represents our best attempts at drawing these conclusions.

Finally my thanks to Dr Marten van Willigen for a couple of stimulating telephone conversations which have helped me to appreciate the rich heritage Christianity has in its Church Fathers, and to professors Gerard Rouwhorst and Marcel Poorthuis who first introduced me to the interesting and complex world of non-canonical early Christian writings.

# 1. Research Question and Abstract

## 1.1 *Research question*

The New Testament appears to offer women greater participation in Christianity and in the church than that which was normally available to them in the first century. To what extent is the development of the role of women, particularly in church activities such as praying, prophesying, teaching and leading, traceable in the first three centuries?

## 1.2 *Abstract*

The canonical texts suggest that the 1<sup>st</sup> century churches had a rather flat and informal church leadership structure, where both men and women, without reference to the priest-layman divide, participated fully in community life and were able to 'pray and prophesy' in their church meetings. Teaching in such meetings was restricted to gifted men, and church leadership roles or offices appear also to have been restricted to suitably qualified men.

The textual evidence I explored suggests that early Christianity promoted and practiced a *reformed patriarchal arrangement* (rather than an egalitarian one) at home and in the church, an arrangement that gave enhanced value to women, slaves and outcasts, offering them new freedoms. However, given the male dominated society, the generally rather negative view of women expressed by most Church Fathers together with several developments within the church itself - such as the move from spontaneity towards liturgy, from leadership through moral authority towards formal authoritative offices, from small house meetings towards larger public meetings in basilicas, from the charismatic towards the dogmatic - it is to be expected that any new freedoms given to Christian women in the 1<sup>st</sup> century were increasingly under pressure through the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries.

## 2. Status Quaestionis and Methodology

### 2.1 *Status quaestionis*

Given the gender-related social developments of this last century, new archeological findings and the current accessibility of historical documents and research, many Christian denominations and communities have been reassessing the role and participation of women in their church structure and praxis. Painting the broad picture back in 2008, Kraemer says that the “scholarship of the last 30 years or so unquestionably has its roots in the debates about the ordination of women to ministerial and priestly offices in contemporary Christian communities, themselves fuelled by the resurgence of the women’s movement in the last third of the twentieth century”.<sup>1</sup> This passionate development is evident in both academic and popular religious circles. Based on their church tradition and the state of their current research and convictions, most churches today may be described by one of the following 5 categories:

- (1) Total silence: Here women’s audible contribution is limited to congregational singing and joining in the ‘amen’ at the end of prayers.
- (2) Informal participation: These may allow women to be active or vocal in church meetings in some low key non-official way.
- (3) Participation under male leadership: Here women may participate in some aspects of church meetings, such as ‘praying and prophesying’, and perhaps more freely in non-church settings, such as seminars and workshops - but always under the direction or authority of male church leadership.
- (4) Participation also in teaching: Here women with the appropriate skills also participate fully in the teaching ministry during church meetings, but are not part of church leadership.
- (5) Egalitarian churches: In these communities, gender presents no restrictions in church life. Both men and women are equally involved in *all* church activities, including leadership and ordination.

Central to this reassessment process is the search for (a) a better understanding of the role women played within the first generation of churches – primarily as taught and illustrated in the New Testament, and (b) an improved hermeneutical method which will help bridge the temporal and cultural gap between ‘then’ and ‘today’ – in order to prescribe a structure and a praxis for their own church life. In this paper I seek to contribute towards (a).

During these last few decades, scholars have devoted much energy in tracing the movement in attitudes towards gender. In the words of Kraemer, “this narrative of egalitarian beginnings and subsequent decline prompted considerable scholarship... Understanding just how the original egalitarian intentions of Jesus himself and the original egalitarian nature of the earliest followers of Jesus degenerated, became an

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<sup>1</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *Women and Gender*, in Harvey and Hunter, 2008, 475.

urgent historical task that had significant impact on the work of scholars whose expertise lay in the second and subsequent centuries”.<sup>2</sup> Was Christianity diverse from its conception? Were gender restrictions and conformity always present? If they were present, egalitarian scholars would then beg the question as to what extent the woman’s less than completely equal participation is “a function of ancient historical, economic, social, and cultural conditions, rather than, again, some essential, immutable aspect of Christianity”.<sup>3</sup>

## **2.1            *Methodology***

This paper will start by looking at the role of women in the 1<sup>st</sup> century together with the relevant canonical didactic and historical texts. It will be evident that the teaching of Jesus and the way he treated women differed significantly from the normal gender-protocol of his day, especially Jewish protocol.

By exploring the New Testament texts relevant to gender and church I propose a possible scenario of church life in the 1<sup>st</sup> century – how Christian churches probably were - or should have been - if they were faithful to both the liberating message for women preached and lived by Jesus and the apostolic gender instructions for church life. In order to reduce somewhat the wide scope of research to fit a paper of this size, I give special attention to the role of women in four church activities, namely praying, prophesying, teaching and leading.

After a brief overview of available non-canonical literature from the first three centuries, our attention will be focused on a small sample: two Apocryphal Acts (John and Thecla), two Church documents (Didache and Didascalia) and some of the writings of one Church Father (Tertullinan). I shall seek to highlight the stories and instructions that shed light on the role of women, with particular focus on any information that could help to trace the role of women in church activities such as praying, prophesying, teaching and leading.

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<sup>2</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *Women and Gender*, in Harvey and Hunter, 2008, 476.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 477.

# 3. The role of women in the 1<sup>st</sup> century

## 3.1 *Gender in the New Testament*

The possibilities open to a woman during the first century varied *greatly* depending on her social standing (whether she were slave, plebeian or patrician class) and her cultural setting (if she belonged to a Roman, Hellenist or Jewish household). “Unlike many other cultures in the Mediterranean, *Romans* saw the education of women not as an extravagance, but as a way to enhance a woman... they were not allowed to vote or hold public office, though they were deeply involved and highly influential in affairs of state and matters of law”.<sup>4</sup> In *Hellenistic* settings, a woman’s status as a legal wife, a concubine or a companion made a great difference in her social standing. The latter, for example, had no civic rights and few civic restrictions.<sup>5</sup> In fact, women in *Jewish* settings were the most restricted, “the family was the exclusive sphere of influence for Jewish women in the first century A.D”.<sup>6</sup>

The role of Jewish women in the 1<sup>st</sup> century appears to have been much more restrictive than that sketched by King Lemuel a millennium earlier: “Who can find a woman of worth? ... And she riseth while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and the day's work to her maidens. She considereth a field, and acquireth it; of the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. She girdeth her loins with strength, and maketh strong her arms. She perceiveth that her earning is good... She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and upon her tongue is the law of kindness”.<sup>7</sup>

Witherington comments that “though women were limited to their own court in the Jerusalem Temple, it is not certain when the practice of having special galleries for women in the synagogues began, though apparently they existed in Trajan’s time (early second century A.D.)... Babylonian Talmud Megillah 23a tells us that women were qualified to be among the seven who read Torah in the synagogue...”.<sup>8</sup> To date, no evidence has been found to show that this was allowed in 1<sup>st</sup> century synagogues. The cultural setting of the New Testament is clearly strongly patriarchal, but not homogeneously so. Women were known to play important roles also in religious settings.

## 3.2 *Women in the life and teachings of Jesus*

Jesus is silent on the roles of men and women in the church. On many other aspects of woman’s life, Jesus’ teachings and many of his actions went against the Jewish culture of his day. He taught that “the new demands of the Kingdom would affect women in their roles as mothers, daughters, wives, widows, harlots and believers”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Witherington III, Ben. *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 31:1-31.

<sup>8</sup> Witherington III, Ben. *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

In his healing and teaching he gave special attention to widows.<sup>10</sup> He strengthened the woman's stature and security within the family.<sup>11</sup> He encouraged women to sit at His feet and learn.<sup>12</sup> In contrast with common practice among the rabbis of his time, he allowed and welcomed women to follow him and be part of his team of disciples.<sup>13</sup> Jesus' teaching on 'eunuchs for the Kingdom' opened new possibilities for non-married women - who at that time lacked status and significance. Furthermore, Witherington points out, "that Jesus offset two equally valid callings, either to life-long marriage or to be celibate for the Kingdom, is in itself evidence that Jesus did not have a negative view about human sexuality or sexual relations in marriage".<sup>14</sup>

Some see a sharp distinction between the egalitarian teachings of Jesus and the patriarchal Christian church which followed. As Kraemer points out, "particularly because no teachings attributed to Jesus himself are definitely misogynist or restrictive of women ... it was relatively easy for early Christian feminist scholars to argue for a historical narrative of an initial, pristine, egalitarian 'Christianity' followed by a period of contestation and ultimate subordination of women that begins almost immediately with the writings of Paul, is articulated and developed in the writings of proto-orthodox and then the truly orthodox male authorities, and culminates in the eventual exclusion of women from the orthodox priesthood".<sup>15</sup>

### **3.3 Luke – Gospel and Acts**

Of the four evangelists, Luke stands out for his sensitivity to gender. Like the other Gospel writers, he must select and arrange his material, and the attention he gives to women in the life, ministry and teachings of Jesus is striking. In the opening chapters of Luke's gospel, Elizabeth, Mary and Anna take centre stage. In its closing chapters women are standing by the cross, and it is women who believe and bear witness to His resurrection. Often in parables and healing narratives, we notice Luke's use of gender parallelism: a shepherd loses a sheep, a woman loses a coin; a man is healed, a woman's son is resurrected.<sup>16</sup> It is only Luke who mentions that women were among the followers of Jesus and that they helped him financially.<sup>17</sup> During His visit to the house of Martha and Mary, Martha was busy as hostess, occupied with her woman's role, doing what society would have expected of her. Mary, on the other hand, joined the disciples and sat learning at Jesus' feet. When Martha complained about Mary's socially awkward behaviour, Jesus commends and defends her choice: "Mary has chosen the good part, the which shall not be taken from her".<sup>18</sup> "Martha's service is not denigrated but it does not come first. One must reorient one's lifestyle according to what Jesus says is the 'good portion'. This is the radical nature of the

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<sup>10</sup> Mark 12:38-40; 12:41-44.

<sup>11</sup> His handling and teaching on adultery (John 8:2-11) and divorce (Matthew 5:31-32, 19:3-9) strengthened the position of the woman.

<sup>12</sup> John 4:27; Luke 10:39.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 8:1-3.

<sup>14</sup> Witherington III, Ben. *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, 48.

<sup>15</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *Women and Gender*, in Harvey and Hunter, 2008, 475-6.

<sup>16</sup> Davies, Stevan L. *The Revolt of the Widows*. 134-135,145.

<sup>17</sup> Luke 8:1-3.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 10:42.

Gospel and why it dramatically affected women's status especially in first-century Palestine".<sup>19</sup>

Although women do not feature in the Book of Acts to the same degree as in the Gospel, Luke still desires Theophilus and future readers to know that women were valuable, responsible and active in the early church. Ananias and Sapphira are *both* considered responsible and culpable for their sin. Priscilla and Aquila *together* instructed Apollos. Luke points out that "both men and women" were being added to the church,<sup>20</sup> and that Saul considered Christian men and women both equally worthy of persecution.<sup>21</sup> Luke explicitly points out that prominent women became Christians.<sup>22</sup> The two times Luke mentions a church meeting in a particular person's house, it is the homes of women: Mary the mother of Mark, and Lydia.<sup>23</sup> Women, like Tabitha, are involved in practical help-tasks which are usually associated with deacons. In passing, Luke mentions that Philip had four daughters who prophesied, female counterparts to Agabus.<sup>24</sup>

Witherington poses an interesting question, to which he suggests an answer: "Why then did Luke go to such lengths to stress and indeed support the role of women in the earliest Christian churches? It is a reasonable hypothesis that when Luke wrote in the last quarter of the first century there was still considerable resistance to such ideas among his audience, and so the case had to be made in some detail ... Luke and Paul stand together in maintaining a tension between the reformation of the old order and the affirmation of the new 'in Christ'".<sup>25</sup>

### **3.4 Paul and Peter on the family**

Paul and Peter made some clear patriarchal statements about household arrangements and the role man and woman within marriage. Their comments are in harmony with the Gospel writers. They do not seek to endorse or sustain the rigid patriarchal arrangement found in the Old Testament but neither do they seek to introduce an egalitarian arrangement. They encourage a modified, more enlightened, *reformed* patriarchal arrangement.

Peter, a married apostle, visited the churches together with his wife – as did other apostles.<sup>26</sup> His advice to married couples is: "Likewise, wives, *be subject* to your own husbands... Ye husbands likewise, dwell with *them* according to knowledge, as with a weaker, *even* the female, vessel, giving *them* honour, as also fellow-heirs of *the* grace of life, that your prayers be not hindered".<sup>27</sup> This could be interpreted as promoting a reformed patristic family arrangement.

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<sup>19</sup> Witherington III, Ben. *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, 102.

<sup>20</sup> Acts 5:14.

<sup>21</sup> Acts 22:4.

<sup>22</sup> Acts 17:4, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Acts 12:12, 16:40.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 21:9, 11:28, 21:10-11.

<sup>25</sup> Witherington III, Ben. *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, 224.

<sup>26</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:5.

<sup>27</sup> 1 Peter 3:1-7.

Paul's admonition for married couples is clearly asymmetrical and non-interchangeable: "Wives, *submit yourselves* to your own husbands, as to the Lord, for a husband is head of the wife, as also the Christ *is* head of the assembly. He *is* Saviour of the body. But even as the assembly is subjected to the Christ, so also wives to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your own wives, even as the Christ also loved the assembly, and has delivered himself up for it".<sup>28</sup>

Both Paul and Peter promote a *reformed* patriarchal arrangement rather than an egalitarian one. The New Testament consistently promotes a loving, sacrificial, complementarian relationship between men and women within marriage, and it appears that this asymmetrical complementarian arrangement between genders also finds some form of expression within the church.

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<sup>28</sup> Ephesians 5:22-25

## 4. Women and the Church in the New Testament texts

### 4.1 *Choosing a starting point*

Given the diversity of biblical interpretations concerning the role gender should play in church affairs, it is clear that there is some tension inherent in the biblical text. Based on the principle that Scripture should be used to interpret Scripture,<sup>29</sup> the interpretation of each of the canonical texts on this matter should be informed by the message of the other's texts. If one text is singled out and taken as the firm (clear, obvious, absolute) starting point, this will force the other texts to bend unnaturally in a particular direction. If one text is used as the lens through which all the other texts must be viewed, it will most likely bias or distort the aggregate biblical message. The challenge is to let the interpretation of each text be informed and inform the interpretation of each of the other texts. A careful conclusion will then have to wait until the end.

#### 4.1.1 **Why not start with Galatians 3:27-28?**

The apostle Paul writes: "... for ye are all God's sons by faith in Christ Jesus. For ye, as many as have been baptised unto Christ, have put on Christ. There is no Jew nor Greek; there is no bondman nor freeman; *there is no male and female*; you are all one in Christ Jesus".<sup>30</sup>

This important text clearly shows that Christianity eliminates certain social barriers. But in what context is this text given? Paul eliminates social differences in soteriology – affirming that *all* humans may receive salvation. The possibility of being 'baptised into Christ' is open to all humans, irrespective of race, social standing or gender. *All* may have 'faith in Christ', *all* may be 'sons of God', *all* are 'one in Christ Jesus'. This text does not suggest that such social differences disappear but simply that they are irrelevant to *salvation*. This text does not address the role of gender in the family or in the church.<sup>31</sup> Since this text provides no guidelines for church structure or church praxis, it is not *directly* relevant here.

#### 4.1.2 **Is 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 not clear enough?**

"Let [your] women be *silent* in the assemblies, for it is not permitted to them to *speak*; but to be in subjection, as the law says. But if they wish to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is a shame for a woman to *speak* in assembly".<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Zuck, Roy. *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 71-3.

<sup>30</sup> Galatians 3:26-28.

<sup>31</sup> Hove, Richard. *Equality in Christ?: Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute*. This is a very thorough exegetical study of this passage.

<sup>32</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

Is the meaning of this statement not clear enough? Based on etymology and grammar alone, it is plain that the text requires women to be silent and not to speak in church meetings. What's more, to avoid any disagreement, the apostle adds, "If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him recognise the things that I write to you, that it is the Lord's commandment".<sup>33</sup> For some, this closes the matter: women should not speak in church meetings in obedience to a commandment which carries the authority of Christ.

Clearly all the apostolic instructions pertaining to church praxis that are outlined in chapters 11-14 should be taken seriously, as commands of the Lord himself. But the question is *what precisely* should be taken so seriously. The fact is that sometimes the intended meaning of a biblical text differs from what is based on etymology and grammar alone. Consider the following two more obvious examples:

- (1) One of the Ten Commandments given through Moses reads "Thou shalt not kill".<sup>34</sup> We know that 'kill' means 'to take or end life'. The grammar of this sentence is also simple and clear. But later we read that the Israelites were required to sacrifice (kill) animals. In addition, we read that the Israelites were sometimes required to kill a 'sinner' from within their own camp, and to kill enemies in battle. The intended meaning of this text is clearly not based on etymology and grammar alone; "Thou shalt not kill" does not have animals in mind. More significantly, the commandment "thou shalt not kill" does not prohibit human killing generally, but seeks to forbid a *certain type* of human killing. Taking this into account, some modern translations translate this text, "You shall not murder" (NRSV).
- (2) Jesus taught his disciples that "if two of you shall agree on the earth concerning any matter, whatsoever it may be that they shall ask, it shall come to them from my Father who is in *the* heavens".<sup>35</sup> Both the meaning of the words and the grammatical construction of this text are clear and straightforward, yet prayer has never been governed by this simple 'mechanical' formula. The Bible contains other texts with teachings on prayer, and many narratives of men and women illustrating the practice of prayer. The intended meaning of these words of Jesus is clearly not based on etymology and grammar alone.

Similarly, although the reading of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is clear, it is not the only text that deals with gender and church meetings. There is therefore a distinct possibility that the intended meaning of this text is not based on etymology and grammar alone.

#### **4.1.3 Why not start with 1 Corinthians 14:34-35?**

Some scholars conclude that these verses are not authentic material. Given that not all manuscripts place verses 34-35 in the same place in chapter 14, it has been suggested that someone other than Paul inserted them into the text later. Fee, for

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<sup>33</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:37.

<sup>34</sup> Exodus 20:13.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 18:19.

example, attributes these verses to some later glossator: “Real problems for Pauline authorship lie with the phrase ‘even as the Law says’. First, when Paul elsewhere appeals to ‘the Law’, he always cites the text (e.g. 9:8; 14:21), usually to support a point he himself is making. Nowhere else does he appeal to the Law in this absolute way as binding on Christian behaviour”.<sup>36</sup>

Most theologians and scholars by far, in the past and today, accept these verses as genuine apostolic material, and seek to understand their role in ecclesiology.<sup>37</sup>

What place should be given to this imperative text? It is clearly a relevant text since it deals with women and the church. If ‘silent - don’t speak’ is taken as an absolute prohibition, this will exert an immense force on the interpretation of all the other gender texts in the New Testament. However, most would agree that this prohibition is not as absolute as that imposed on Zachariah.<sup>38</sup> The ‘silent - don’t speak’ command would allow at least a certain type of female participation, for example in collective activities such as singing, or stating their agreement with a prayer by voicing an ‘amen’. Could it also allow for some other type of verbal expression? To determine what type of female participation Paul seeks to restrict in the assemblies, this text must be informed by the context of the apostolic letter (chapters 11-14) and also the other relevant didactic and narrative canonical texts. For this reason this text is probably not an appropriate starting point for this study.

#### **4.1.4 The Old Testament?**

Our interest is the role gender plays in the church. The Christian church is clearly a New Testament concept, a ‘mystery’ revealed in the apostolic era.<sup>39</sup> The patriarchal structure within Jewish society, the exclusive role of men as kings and priests in Israel, and the very few cases of women as judges and prophets shed, therefore, no *direct* light on the role of gender in the Christian church.

In His teaching, Jesus uses the creation account when giving guidelines on marriage and divorce. The apostle Paul uses the creation story to support his teaching on the asymmetric role of men and women within marriage and in the Church. For this reason Genesis 1-3 may well be an appropriate starting point for this study.

## **4.2 Gender in Genesis 1-3 – the ‘creation order’**

Some Bible scholars read Genesis 1-3 as a literal description of the dawn of humanity. Others consider it myth-story, that is, a good story told for didactical purposes. For the sake of this study, the type of approach is immaterial. Whether it is considered literal history or a myth-story the same question holds: What is the intended gender message? What is the author of Genesis 1-3 trying to say about the relationship between men and women?

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<sup>36</sup> Fee, Gordon D. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 707.

<sup>37</sup> Garland, David E. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Corinthians*, 664-73.

<sup>38</sup> Luke 1:20.

<sup>39</sup> Ephesians 3.

There are at least six creation ‘details’ that are used in the New Testament in support of some form of role-differentiation of men and women within the Church.<sup>40</sup> These are: Both are made in God’s image (1:27); Adam is created before Eve (2:18); Eve was created from Adam (2:23), Eve was created to be Adam’s helper (2:20), Eve was ‘deceived’ and not Adam (3:6) and the curses and their effect on the man-woman relationship.

An element of gender asymmetry is clearly evident in the Genesis 1-3 story before the fall. This asymmetry can be understood as an ‘original design feature.’ After the fall, sin and the curse introduced selfishness and competition into the man-woman relationship. The fall introduced the possibility to exploit and to misuse the asymmetry. Since then, it has become more difficult to live this designed feature in a healthy way. The way Genesis 1-3 is used in the New Testament to explain and support the role of gender in the family and in the church suggests that this original gender asymmetry is intentional, and has an application that may extend well beyond its immediate context.

### **4.3 *Christian women and the church***

The participation of men and women ‘in church’ can be considered in three areas: (a) In the structure of the church. Some would call this the official functions or church office. (b) During their assembly meetings, that is, their participation when the community comes together as church. (c) In community life in general, that is, in areas of Christian community life outside church structure and church meetings.

To narrow the scope of this study, I shall focus only on the Christian women’s degree of participation in four church activities. Therefore, only areas (a) and (b) are of interest to us here. When exploring *church structure*, we shall be searching for traces of the role of gender in church leadership, and when exploring *church meetings* we shall be searching for traces of the role of gender associated with praying, prophesying and teaching.

### **4.4 *Women in ‘church structure’***

The simple Greek words used in the New Testament to describe *functions* in the church have evolved and acquired a formal, *structural* and hierarchical flavour. Some Bible translations have encouraged pyramidal way of thinking. “Thankfully, some modern translations have sought to rectify this problem... For example, *ekklesia* has been translated ‘assembly;’ *episcopos* has been translated ‘overseer;’ *diakonos* has been translated ‘servant;’ *praxis* has been translated ‘function;’ and *proistemi* has been translated ‘guard’”.<sup>41</sup>

Some see in Ephesians 4:11-12 five functions: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers. The apostles are ‘sent ones’ – usually on the move, who give priority to setting up new congregations. As such, they do not form part of ‘local church structure’. Evangelists, prophets, shepherds and teachers are all gifted

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<sup>40</sup> Nunn, Philip. *Gender Issues in Genesis 1-3 Relevant to the Church*.

<sup>41</sup> Viola, Frank. *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity*, 305.

persons who serve for the benefit of the local church or the churches in a region, but as such, they are not part of 'local church structure'. Only elders and deacons appear to form part of 'local church structure'.

When Paul and Timothy write to an established church in Philippi they identify three groups within it: "Paul and Timotheus, bondmen of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with *the overseers (episcops)* and ministers (*diakonos*)".<sup>42</sup> They identify the *overseers* – who are elsewhere referred to as elders, the *ministers* – who are the deacons or those who carry 'serving' responsibilities, and '*all the saints*'. It is in the Pastoral Epistles that the personal characteristics of these elders and deacons may be found.

Kraemer remarks, "some of the richest early Christian texts for questions of women and gender are precisely those which some scholars would date to the first century (e.g. Luke-Acts and the Pastorals) but which others think more likely to be second-century productions".<sup>43</sup> The latter tend to study the role of gender in the early church excluding the Pastorals and quoting only from what they call the 'undisputed letters of Paul'.<sup>44</sup> Reasons given to doubt their Pauline authorship are based on historical detail, writing style, doctrinal emphasis and so on. Among these reasons, some point to the contrast between Paul's first letter to the Corinthians,<sup>45</sup> in which he strongly endorses celibacy, and this first letter to Timothy in which "young widows are instructed to marry, bear children, and manage their households – that is, to assume the life of the traditional matron (1 Timothy 5:14)".<sup>46</sup> Other scholars endorse the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles arguing that all the objections presented can also be explained in some other natural way.<sup>47</sup>

#### 4.4.1 Titus 1:5-9 – About Elders/Overseers

In this short letter, Paul gives Titus some pastoral guidelines. Concerning church leadership he writes, '...I left thee in Crete, that thou mightest go on to set right what remained *unordered*, and establish elders [*presbiterus*] in each city, as I had ordered thee".<sup>48</sup> Paul is very aware of gender roles. In the second chapter of this epistle he specifically lists some gender related tasks. But when he deals with leadership, with elders, he requires them to be the "husband of one wife".<sup>49</sup> This requirement could be seen to be in line with a male headship role based on the creation account and in line with the role of men in marriage.

As to the difference between bishop and elder, it is worth taking note that "bishop (Gk. *episkopos*) and elder (Gk. *presbyteros*) were in NT times alternative names for

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<sup>42</sup> Philipians 1:1.

<sup>43</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *Women and Gender*, in Harvey and Hunter, 2008, 466.

<sup>44</sup> MacDonald Margaret, Y. *Reading Real Women Through the Undisputed Letters of Paul*, in Kraemer and D'Ángelo, 1999.

<sup>45</sup> 1 Corinthians 7.

<sup>46</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard and D'Ángelo Mary Rose. *Women & Christian Origins*, 237.

<sup>47</sup> Guthrie, D, Motyer, A.A. *The New Bible Commentary Revised*, 1166-7.

<sup>48</sup> Titus 1:5.

<sup>49</sup> Titus 1:6.

he same officer (see Tit. 1:5,7; Acts 20:17,28), the first term indicating function or duty, and the second dignity or status”.<sup>50</sup>

#### 4.4.2 1 Timothy 3:1-13 – About Elders/Overseers and Deacons

As in the letter to Titus, Paul here gives Timothy guidelines, “in order that thou mayest know how one ought to conduct oneself in God's house, which is *the* assembly of *the* living God, *the* pillar and base of the truth”.<sup>51</sup> About church leadership he writes, “if any one aspires to exercise oversight [*episkopos*], he desires a good work. The overseer [*episkopos*] then must be irreproachable, husband of one wife...”.<sup>52</sup> As in the letter to Titus, most likely male overseers are in view. This may be seen as confirmed when Paul in the preceding chapter explicitly limits women's sphere of authority in the church.<sup>53</sup>

As to deacons the apostle writes that, “ministers [*diakonos*], [ought to be] in like manner, grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not seeking gain by base means, holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these be first proved, then let them minister, being without charge *against them*. *The* women in like manner grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things. Let *the* ministers [*diakonos*] be husbands of one wife, conducting *their* children and their own houses well...”.<sup>54</sup> For some, the requirement that a deacon, if married, must be “husband of one wife” would suggest that male deacons are envisaged.

But in Romans 16:1 a woman named Phoebe is referred to as a *diakonos*. Could this suggest the existence of female deacons in the church? Perhaps. The word *diakonos* however simply means servant (male or female), minister (one who serves), administrator, helper. Christ is also referred to as a *diakonos* (translated ‘servant’).<sup>55</sup> The reference to women in 1 Timothy 3:11 could well refer to the wife of a deacon who also assists him. “But even if they are women deacons, they hold an office of mercy ministries, not one of governance and teaching. Thus women deacons would not violate Paul's restriction against women teaching and leading men”.<sup>56</sup>

### 4.5 Women in ‘church meetings’

Social conventions relating to gender applied differently to the ‘private sphere’ than they did to the ‘public sphere’. The public sphere was mainly the domain of men. In the private sphere, primarily the home, women enjoyed much greater freedoms. “Although the law clearly subordinated a woman to her husband as her legal guardian, she nevertheless maintained a significant measure of autonomy within the domestic sphere as household manager”.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Stibbs, A. M. *The Pastoral Epistles*, in Guthrie and Motyer, 1970, 1171.

<sup>51</sup> 1 Timothy 3:15.

<sup>52</sup> 1 Timothy 3:1-2.

<sup>53</sup> 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

<sup>54</sup> 1 Timothy 3:8-12.

<sup>55</sup> Romans 15:8.

<sup>56</sup> Strauch, Alexander. *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, 300.

<sup>57</sup> Torjesen, Karen Jo. *When Women were Priests*, 75.

For the first two centuries, the home was the locus of church meetings. Since, in practice, many wealthy women exerted authority in their home, some suggest that they would also naturally continue to exert such authority in any church meeting that would take place in their home. They propose that “by and large, the engendered roles and functions of household leadership were transferred with quiet and unconscious ease to the sphere of the house church”.<sup>58</sup> But later, as the church changed from the private to the public sphere, the functions available to women began to decrease: “As Christianity entered the public sphere, male leaders began to demand the same subjugation of women in the churches as prevailed in Greco-Roman society at large”.<sup>59</sup> This argument assumes that churches which met in homes consisted mainly of the household of that home. This is unlikely. Furthermore, Paul explains in his first letter to the Corinthians that ‘when the church comes together’ certain protocol, including gender protocol, was applicable. For instance, even though the church met in a home, the apostle urged the believers, “my brethren, when ye come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone be hungry, let him eat *at home*...”<sup>60</sup> – and not during the church meeting. Similarly, women were requested not to ask certain types of questions ‘at church’ but rather to ask them ‘at home’.<sup>61</sup> The church meeting, therefore, had a special character even if such meeting took place in a home. Some type of activity was acceptable outside a church meeting but not acceptable within it. The New Testament contains four key texts that deal with church meetings. We shall now look at each of these in turn.

#### **4.5.1 Acts 2 – The first church meeting**

Many theologians consider that the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost marks the beginning of the Christian church.<sup>62</sup> In the Gospels and in Acts 1 we read of believers meeting together, but in Acts 2, for the first time, Christians are gathered and the Holy Spirit leads among them. Acts 2 describes a special gathering, a unique gathering; it describes the first ‘church meeting’. The relevant question to our study is: were women present? If so, in what way, if any, did they participate in this first church meeting?

From Acts 1:14-15 we know that when the small group of Christians in Jerusalem gathered together to pray, women were also present. Acts 2 begins affirming that “*they were all together in one place*”. The terms ‘they’ and ‘all’ would most naturally include the women. Then the Holy Spirit arrived, something like tongues of fire sat on “*each one of them*” and “*they were all filled with [the] Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them to speak forth*” (v.4). Speaking in tongues could be considered a form of prophecy. So here in the first church meeting, Luke desires his readers to notice that the Spirit enthused and enabled both men and women to participate audibly. Between verses 4 and 5 there is a clear transition from a house (v.2) – where perhaps maximum of some 100-150 people could meet, to a wider space where at least 3000 people could assemble – probably the temple plain.

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<sup>58</sup> Torjesen, Karen Jo. *When Women were Priests*, 82.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>60</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:33-34

<sup>61</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:35

<sup>62</sup> Guthrie, D, Motyer, A.A. *The New Bible Commentary Revised*, 973-6.

In this public space perhaps only the men, or perhaps only the 11 apostles addressed the crowd (v.7). The apostle Peter then stands up and quotes the prophet Joel to explain what was happening on that day. He claims that the events they had just witnessed were fulfilling part of Joel's prophecy, namely that the Holy Spirit was being "poured out on *all* flesh; and your *sons* and *daughters* shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your elders shall dream with dreams; yea, even upon your my *bondmen* and upon my *bondwomen* in those days will I pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy" (v.17-18). Peter quotes Joel's important prophecy to explain both the agency of what had happened (that it was caused by the Spirit and not by alcohol), and to justify why both men and women were audible.

The conclusion follows that in this first church meeting both men and women spoke audibly. Luke does not present this participation of women in this church meeting as a 'humanly driven' action, neither as a disorder nor as sinful in any way. Rather Peter in his discourse and later Luke in his reporting wished to make clear to their listeners and readers that what took place in that house was a 'divinely driven' action. This important conclusion must be allowed to inform our understanding of the other three key New Testament texts.<sup>63</sup>

#### **4.5.2 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 – When men and women 'pray and prophecy'**

In this section it is taken for granted that both men and women 'prayed and prophesied'. Paul's concern is *how* this should be done: Men should pray and prophesy with their heads uncovered and women with their heads covered (v.4-5). Given the reference to 'comeliness' (v.13) and 'honour' (v.14), some understand such apparel as the correct thing to do at that time in that prevailing culture. Others, observing the reference to 'angels' (v.10) and the common practice in other churches (v.16), understand the attire as a religious *symbol*.

It is possible to pray in silence but not to prophesy in silence. It is therefore very unlikely that this section is dealing with some internal personal spiritual activity. Could it be addressing 'prayer and prophesying' in a 'private space' such as in one-to-one encounters or in the privacy of homes? The fact that 'comely and honourable' attire is required suggests that the sphere of action is wider than private encounters and the private home setting. On this text, Winston remarks, "prophecy is, by definition, a public and not a private ministry. Prophecy as presented in 1 Corinthians, is uttered for the edifying of the church when it is gathered".<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, this section, 11:2-16, can also naturally be taken as belonging to the division of the epistle (chapters 11-14) that deals with order in church meetings. Commenting on the closing verse of this section (11:16), which reads "we have no such custom, nor the assemblies of God", F.F. Bruce says that it belongs to what precedes and shows that the matter discussed is situated within church.<sup>65</sup>

And yet the first reference to "come together in assembly" (11:18) only comes *after* this section on appropriate attire for 'praying and prophesying' (11:2-16). Mercadante

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<sup>63</sup> Nunn, Philip. *Did Mary also Speak? A Study of the First Church Meeting*.

<sup>64</sup> Winston, George & Dora. *Recovering Biblical Ministry by Women*, 374.

<sup>65</sup> Bruce, F. F. *Answers to Questions*, 247.

has illustrated how the interpretation of this passage has changed over time – and suggests some possible reasons for such changes.<sup>66</sup> Winston concludes that “almost all commentators, ancient and modern, consider 11:2-16 to be concerned with the public worship services of the church”.<sup>67</sup>

There are good *textual arguments* both in favour of and against the application of this section to church meetings, and in my view, these textual arguments are not in themselves strong enough to be *conclusive*. If you conclude from Acts 2 that women were vocal in the first church meeting, that their participation was purposed and driven by the Spirit (and therefore cannot be classed as ‘sinful behaviour’), then it seems quite natural to conclude that the section 11:2-16 *does* apply to church meetings.

If however, one takes ‘silent - don’t speak’<sup>68</sup> to mean that the apostolic intent was to exclude women from all audible participation in church meetings, then (a) women should not audibly ‘pray and prophesy’ in church meetings – leading to the conclusion that the section 11:2-16 *does not* apply to church meetings, and (b) women were not among those who received the Spirit and spoke in tongues at Pentecost - leading to the unlikely conclusion that women were not present in that first church meeting in Acts 2.

In balance, it seems reasonable to conclude that it is *more likely* that section 11:2-16 was written to provide guidelines on how men and women should ‘pray and prophesy’ in public spaces, including church meetings.

#### **4.5.3 1 Timothy 2:8-13 – When praying, dressing and teaching**

Given the great influence this text has on the degree of participation of women in the church, it has been the focus of much study and controversy. Some consider the whole letter non-authentic, probably written in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century in Paul’s name. Others consider it genuine apostolic material, but seeking to correct a local disorder and therefore not applicable generally. Here I consider the text authentic with a message intended to go beyond a local situation.<sup>69</sup>

These apostolic instructions are given in the context of church praxis.<sup>70</sup> First the men are addressed; “that the men pray in every place, lifting up pious hands, without wrath or reasoning” (v.8). Then women are encouraged to dress with “modesty and discretion” (v.9). What disorder was the apostle trying to correct? Did men have a weakness of being too passive in public prayer? Were men more prone to be angry or quarrelsome? Were women more prone to give excessive attention to their external appearance? Although men and women are addressed separately -

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<sup>66</sup> Mercadante, Linda. *From Hierarchy to Equality – A comparison of past and present interpretations of 1 Cor. 11:2-16 in relation to the changing status of women in society.*

<sup>67</sup> Winston, George & Dora. *Recovering Biblical Ministry by Women: An Exegetical Response to Traditionalism and Feminism*, 373.

<sup>68</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:34-5.

<sup>69</sup> Köstenberger, Andreas and Schreiner, Tomas. *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15.* This is a very thorough exegetical study of this passage.

<sup>70</sup> 1 Timothy 3:15.

probably due to their differing weaknesses - the general principles apply to both: men should also dress with 'modesty and discretion', and when praying, women should also 'lift up pious hands, without wrath or reasoning'. Whatever the apostolic motivation, these texts provide a very weak foundation for those who wish to argue that women should not pray audibly in family, public or church meetings.

Then, Paul adds, "let a woman learn in quietness in all subjection; but I do not suffer a woman to *teach* nor to *exercise authority* over man, but to be in quietness; for Adam was formed first, then Eve..." (v.11-13). In keeping with the 'headship' design principle which Paul sees as rooted in the creation story, he encourages the appropriate men to teach and exercise authority – and seems to explicitly exclude women from this role. As to application, this gender-based differentiated function should be evident at least in the church.<sup>71</sup> A broader application to society in general is fraught with exegetical, theological and practical difficulties.

#### **4.5.4 1 Corinthians 14 – When in church meetings**

The relevant text reads, "Let *your* women be silent in the assemblies, for it is not permitted to them to speak; but to be in subjection, as the law also says. But if they wish to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is a shame for a woman to speak in assembly" (v.34-35).

The meetings of the early church evidently involved the participation of many. The distinction between clergy and laity was unknown at that time. "What is it then, brethren? Whenever ye come together, each *of you* has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let things be done to edification" (v.26). The fact that the apostle provided practical guidelines for those who spoke in tongues, those who prophesied and women's audible participation, makes clear that, at least in Corinth and at that point in time, both men and women were participating audibly in the meetings of the church – but in a disorderly way. Some guidelines were therefore necessary to promote order, to ensure that the church meetings would continue to allow for multiple, free, Spirit-led participation and also remain edifying to those present.

Some suggest that the silence was intended to stop chit-chat among women. But men are also capable of chit-chat. If chit-chat was a problem, we would expect Paul to silence the chit-chat, and not women. Others suggest that women should not correct their own husbands in public. Perhaps; but why would they be allowed to correct the other men and only not their own husbands? More recently it has been common to interpret the silence as not allowing women to publically judge the prophets. This explanation has its merits. A weakness is the gap - that the judging of the prophets is mentioned 5 verses earlier (v.29). Furthermore, there is nothing in the chapter to suggest that the judging or weighing of the prophets' messages was done audibly. Perhaps all listeners were being encouraged to judge carefully *in their minds* all prophecy that was given.

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<sup>71</sup> Köstenberger, Andreas and Schreiner, Tomas. *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*.

In this letter to the Corinthian church, Paul is seeking to give some order to their church meetings. He defines some healthy and practical boundaries designed to protect the free participation of many and ensure that the meetings would serve to edify the congregation. The apostolic instructions were not given only to correct a local disorder - they were intended to be used as guidelines for all churches.<sup>72</sup>

He addresses and moderates three types of church-meeting participation. First the participation of those who *spoke in tongues* was moderated. Under certain circumstances the speaker should be silent and not speak. Then the participation of those who had a *prophetic message* for the congregation was moderated. Under certain circumstances the speaker should be silent and not speak. Then the *participation of women* was moderated: "Let *your* women be silent in the assemblies, for it is not permitted to them to speak." It is more likely that Paul is seeking to restrict a particular type of verbal participation among women rather than stop their audible participation completely. What restriction or moderation could the apostle have in mind here?

#### **4.6 Putting the puzzle together**

An *etiological* study of the Greek words translated 'silent' and 'speak' would lead us to conclude that their mouth should not open during church meetings. It seems very unlikely that women are being told not to sing or endorse prayers with their audible amen.

As to the *immediate context*, the expression 'silent' is used three times in chapter 14. Women in general, as the believer with a tongue who had no translator, and the believer with a prophecy who was being interrupted by another – were all asked to be 'silent' – to refrain from a certain type of verbal activity, to 'not speak in the congregation'.

Considering the evidence of the other three key New Testament texts, it is most likely that the apostolic instruction in 1 Corinthians 14 was aimed at moderating the woman's audible participation in the church meeting and not to eliminate it completely. In line with Acts 2, both men and woman could speak in a tongue – so long as an interpreter was available, and not more than 2 or 3 per meeting. In line with 1 Corinthians 11, both men and woman could 'pray and prophecy' – as long as they had the appropriate gender attire, and the prophetic participation was flexible (willingness to give way to another) and plural (2 or 3, more than one). In line with 2 Timothy 2, women's verbal participation in church meetings should exclude teaching, and their participation should be carried out in such a way that she does not take an 'authority' role in the congregation. The 'silent - don't speak' in 1 Corinthians 14 is most probably given to contain women from taking authority or teaching in church meetings.

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<sup>72</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:2; 14:33b,36.

## **4.7     *A possible canonical conclusion***

A natural conclusion based on the general flow of the canonical writings is that women and men are identical when it comes to worth, intelligence, creativity and moral virtue. Both created in God's image, both recipients of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's gifts. But these writings also present the consistent message that women and men are neither identical nor interchangeable. The canonical texts present a patristic gender model, clearly *reformed* in the New Testament but *not abolished*. The gender role differentiation finds expression in family and in church life.

As to the 1<sup>st</sup> century church, it appears likely that both men and women were free to pray and prophesy during church gatherings, that only suitably gifted men would teach, and only suitably gifted and experienced men would assume the leadership of such churches. This conclusion takes for granted some significant difference between 'teaching' and 'prophesying' – perhaps reflecting a situation where teaching was invested with an element of authority which was present to a lesser degree, if at all, in a prophetic utterance.

## 5. Relevant non-canonical literature from the first 3 centuries

The canonical literature gives us an insight into the likely development of the Christian churches during a good part of the first century. To trace their development into the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, tentative conclusions may be drawn from a variety of writings that have survived; from archeological discoveries including inscriptions and epigraphic information. What type of non-canonical literature from the first three centuries has survived? How reliable is it? Given the variety of Gnostic, mystic and heretic movements on the fringe of Christianity, how confident can we be that the non-canonical literature fairly represents what we today refer to as orthodox Christianity?

Before exploring the available literature, it is worth taking note that, “religions in the ancient world were not, as a rule, concerned with what people believed. Greco-Roman religions were principally concerned with appropriate *behaviour* towards the gods... What one happened to *believe* about the gods was of very little importance”.<sup>73</sup> Here Judaism and Christianity were very different: what you believed was of paramount importance, there were creeds to be confessed, and Scriptures to follow.

As one would expect, the life and actions of Jesus encouraged many to write their experiences and memories - as confirmed by Luke.<sup>74</sup> And then came the forgeries and the creative story tellers. Forgery was fairly common in the Greco-Roman culture – though not widely appreciated. The apostle Paul warns against such practice.<sup>75</sup> And yet there were different reasons for writing in the name of another: (a) Financial: Since large libraries were willing to pay substantial sums for original works of classical authors. (b) Humility: Sometimes students would sign their work with the name of their teachers, recognising their indebtedness. (c) Readership: Crediting a work to a classical author, apostle or known figure would increase the chance of it reaching a wider readership. The latter is most likely the strongest motivation behind what we now call ‘The New testament Apocrypha’.

From the beginning, Christian communities seeking to base their faith and practice on reliable sources gave special place to the writings of the apostles of Jesus. Most of what now forms the New Testament was widely accepted and circulated among the churches. In order to protect what is now known as ‘Christian orthodoxy’ from the corrupting effects of popular heresies, it became imperative to make a clear distinction between what the Christian communities considered to be the inspired ‘Word of God’ – which was later called the canon, and the other writings – which could be true, false or a mixture, but not considered ‘Divinely inspired’.

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<sup>73</sup> Ehrman, Bart D. *After The New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, 193.

<sup>74</sup> Luke 1:1.

<sup>75</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2:2.

## **5.1 Available non-canonical literature**

Apart from the 27 canonical writings which form the New Testament, there are many other church-related writings which most scholars agree were composed during the first three centuries. The website of Early Christian Writings has a fairly complete collection and makes available a total of some 300-350 writings from this period.<sup>76</sup> Where applicable, non-canonical documents are usually classified following the same genres found in the New Testament. For example:

**5.1.1 Gospels** – writings that consist basically of supposed teachings, deeds and experiences of Jesus, such as the Gospel of Thomas [50-140], the Gospel of Peter [70-160] and the Gospel of the Hebrews [80-150].

**5.1.2 Acts** – writings that describe events in the lives of the apostles or persons associated with them, such as the Acts of Peter [150-200], Acts of John [150-200], Acts of Paul (incl. Acts of Thecla) [150-200], the Acts of Andrew [150-200] and the Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas [203].

**5.1.3 Epistles** – letters written in the name of apostles, such as Epistle of Barnabas [80-120], Epistle to the Laodiceans [150-350] and the Letter of Peter to Philip [170-220].

**5.1.4 Apocalypses** – writings that consist mainly of descriptions or teachings about the future of the world, the end of time, the nature of afterlife.

The remainder of the non-canonical literature may be classified as:

**5.1.5 Church documents:** Such as the Didache [50-120], Authoritative Teaching [150-300], Didascalia [200-250] and the Apostolic Church Order [200-300].

**5.1.6 Writings and sermons of Church Fathers:** These are very numerous, making up over 1/3 of the available non-canonical documents of this period.

**5.1.7 Other:** Including writings of historians like Eusebius of Caesarea [300-340], of heretics like Marcion [130-140] and of others such as the Preaching of Peter [100-150] and Shepherd of Hermas [100-160].

The length and quality of these writings varies. Some are long treatises, others incomplete pieces or even fragments, and some are reconstructions from quotations made in other documents.

## **5.2 Selecting a sample of non-canonical texts**

Given the limited scope of this thesis and the vast amount of non-canonical literature available, a selection of a small sample was required. Since our goal is to trace the changing role of women in the church during the first three centuries, our small

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<sup>76</sup> <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com>

sample *excludes* all the Apocryphal Gospels - since the gospels generally cover the period before the church begun. Our sample contains **two Apocryphal Acts** - which are considered of good quality and which are often quoted in support of a wider participation of women in Christian ministry and in the church; **two church documents** – which by their nature have been compiled to provide local congregations with private and collective guidance, and **one of Church Father - Tertullian**, a prolific writer whose work has exerted great influence on the Christian church. Trends, attitudes and insights derived from this small sample may be indicative of the likely participation of women in church activities such as praying, prophesying, teaching and leading within Christian communities we would now refer to as 'orthodox'. As with all small samples, conclusions based on them should be taken as indicative and tentative.

## 6. The role of women in the sample of non-canonical texts

### 6.1 *Apocryphal Acts*

“In recent years the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles have increasingly drawn the attention of scholars interested in early Christianity.”<sup>77</sup> They are early legendary accounts of the exploits of the apostles and their close associates after the death of Jesus. They typically contain stories of miraculous deeds through which crowds are convinced of the power of God and become Christians. The Apocryphal Acts “reflect a community where the power of charismatic action was proof positive of religious doctrine, a community largely composed of people who took for granted the fact that special Christians could heal the sick and raise the dead in order to bring new adherents into the faith... even for the most intellectual Christians charismatic efficacy was an important apologetic device”.<sup>78</sup>

Although old, dated round the second century, and having the characteristics of a novel rather than representing ‘history as it actually happened’, these writings are useful in that they give us an insight into how some Christians in that period (at least among those who read, valued and circulated these writings) viewed their faith, and for our current purposes, how they viewed the role of gender in Christianity. For example, “on one matter all Apocryphal Acts are agreed: that sexual intercourse should not be part of Christian life”.<sup>79</sup> In this the Apocryphal Acts appear to reflect ‘history as it actually was’.

The Acts of John and the Acts of Thecla are dated together with the Apocryphal Acts of Peter, Paul and Andrew, in the second half of the second century. “The Apocryphal Acts are acutely aware of Christians as male and female. Their edificatory intent is directed more to females than to males, and, when contrasts are made between the sexes, female Christians are usually shown to be more pious than their male counterparts. From this we can propose with some confidence that the original community of the Apocryphal Acts was largely female in composition.”<sup>80</sup> However, this confident assertion of Davies’ has more recently been called into question by Bremmer and others.<sup>81</sup>

### 6.2 *The Acts of John*

This collection of stories of the apostle John can be fairly well reconstructed using Greek and Latin fragments. It is similar in length to the Gospel of Mathew. The beginning of the book is lost, which probably related John’s trial and banishment to the island of Patmos. In its first known chapters, it narrates how John heals a

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<sup>77</sup> Bremmer Jan N. *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

<sup>78</sup> Davies, Stevan L. *The Revolt of the Widows: The social World of the Apocryphal Acts*, 45.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>80</sup> Davies, Stevan L. *The Revolt of the Widows*, 64.

<sup>81</sup> Bremmer Jan N. *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 57.

paralyzed woman named Cleopatra. Seven days later, she discovers that her husband Lycomedes is dead. She is naturally filled with great distress. Then John instructs Cleopatra, “say thou to thy husband: Arise and glorify the name of God, for he giveth back the dead to the dead. And she went to her husband and said to him according as she was taught, and forthwith raised him up”.<sup>82</sup> Women are presented here in a very good light. “Cleopatra is a model of self-control, Lycomedes a model of excessive emotion. Cleopatra has faith enough to raise her husband; Lycomedes does not even attempt to raise his wife. The exemplary model is the woman, not the man”.<sup>83</sup> Here we see a woman of virtue under apostolic instruction being an agent of the miraculous.

Later, in sections 62 to 86, we encounter a gripping love story gone wrong which plays out in Ephesus. The beautiful Drusiana and her husband Andronicus are both Christians. Drusiana becomes aware that Callimachus, an unbeliever, strongly lusts after her. She cannot bear the thought of being the object of temptation and dies. Callimachus bribes Fortunatus to have access to the body of Drusiana in the burial vault. There are more deaths! At the end, John prays and brings Drusiana back to life. Then Drusiana, “taking the hand of the dead man she said: Rise up, Furtunatus, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And Furtunatus arose, and when he saw John in the sepulchre... he fled and went out of the sepulchre”.<sup>84</sup> Here we see again a woman under apostolic instruction being an agent of the miraculous. But why are women so empowered? Streete, in her essay on ‘Women as Sources of Redemption’, suggest that women, like “Drusiana in the Acts of John, rescues or resurrects men who have fallen into the grip of demonic powers, usually the power of lust. In almost every case, the women are given divine power to resist men who have socially sanctioned sexual authority over them”.<sup>85</sup>

Although women play an important and active role in the Acts of John, at no point are they presented as teachers or leaders of the church. In fact, the few times during which groups of people are gathered in a way that might be described as a ‘church meeting’, the apostle John is the only teacher.

### **6.3      *The Acts of Thecla***

The Acts of Thecla was in circulation towards the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century along with other stories found in the Acts of Paul. The apostle Paul appears only on the fringes of Thecla’s story, a story that is one of many in the Apocryphal Acts in which women give up riches and sexual activity to follow the apostles. The fact that it is quoted by many early historians and Church Fathers shows that it was circulated widely. For a number of centuries the martyr Thecla served as a model for Christian women. Cardman suggests that “The Acts of Thecla offers a window to the world of early

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<sup>82</sup> *Acts of John*, paragraph 24.

<sup>83</sup> Davies, Stevan L. *The Revolt of the Widows*, 57.

<sup>84</sup> *Acts of John*, paragraph 84.

<sup>85</sup> Streete, Gail Corrington, *Women as Sources of Redemption and Knowledge in Early Christian Traditions*, in Kraemer and D’Angelo, 1999, 347.

Christian women... chastity offered a way for Thecla and other early Christian women to assert some measure of autonomy and distance themselves from male control".<sup>86</sup>

Tertullian, however, sought to devalue the didactic value of Thecla's life. He claims that the Acts of Thecla is a well-intended forgery written by a presbyter in Asia and therefore not authoritative enough as a source to endorse Cartaginian women's request to 'baptize and instruct'.<sup>87</sup> Some, like Davies, doubt the historicity of Tertullian's comment.<sup>88</sup> But others, like Bremmer, conclude based on the accuracy of the geographical and historical data in the Acts of Thecla, that "Tertullian was well informed about the authorship of the Acts of Paul and Thecla", and that "there is no reason, then, to doubt his information that the author of the AP [Acts of Paul and Thecla] was a male presbyter".<sup>89</sup> Kraemer adds that, "although virtually no modern scholars consider Thecla to have been a disciple of the historical Paul, there is little consensus beyond this as to how to account for the tale".<sup>90</sup> Regardless of the authorship of the Acts of Thecla and the possible mix of history, legend and fiction, its early date and subsequent popularity says something about how Christian women were perceived or idealised among many Christians at that time. Some have suggested that "the story of Thecla might be related to the emergence of a prophetic Christian movement arising in Asia Minor in the late second century... Montanism".<sup>91</sup>

The Acts of Thecla opens with Paul preaching in Iconium. Thecla, an aristocratic young woman, then aged 18, upon hearing and accepting Paul's teaching, renounces her fiancé, Thamyris, to follow Paul. She miraculously survives several attempts on her life; threats to be burnt alive, to be destroyed by wild beasts, to be forced to marry a magistrate, Alexander, and to be raped by evil men. For a short time she follows Paul and spends the rest of her life in a monastic setting doing good to many. At the age of 90 she is miraculously taken by the Lord. Some versions of the text provide different endings that narrate more of a martyr's death.<sup>92</sup>

From the outset, Paul is credited with teaching and encouraging chastity and virginity. In his sermon he says: "Blessed are they who have wives, as though they had them not... Blessed are the bodies and souls of virgins... they shall not lose the reward of their virginity".<sup>93</sup> It is clear that when Paul preached, both men and women were present and welcomed.<sup>94</sup> Yet his antagonists were mainly concerned with the effect his teaching had on their wives and fiancées: "And all the multitude cried out, Away with this impostor (magician), for he has perverted the minds of our women".<sup>95</sup> In Roman times, magic had become a very serious crime.<sup>96</sup> Paul was also accused

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<sup>86</sup> Cardman, Francine, *Women, Ministry, and Church Order in Early Christianity*, in Kraemer and D'Ángelo, 1999, 301-2.

<sup>87</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism*, chapter 19.

<sup>88</sup> Davies, Stevan L. *The Revolt of the Widows*, 108.

<sup>89</sup> Bremmer Jan N. *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 57.

<sup>90</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *Women and Gender*, in Harvey and Hunter, 2008, 471.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 471.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

<sup>93</sup> *Acts of Thecla*, 1:16, 1:22.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 2.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:9.

<sup>96</sup> Bremmer Jan N. *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 45.

of discouraging marriage – another sensitive topic to Roman ears “he is one who teaches that matrimony is unlawful”.<sup>97</sup>

Socially, women in the Acts of Thecla are seen to have significant freedom. Both Thecla and Trifina, a widow who cared for Thecla, are considered women of standing in their respective home cities. In chapter 9, when Thecla is facing the wild beasts, it is explicitly mentioned four times that the women collectively shouted or acted in her defence. Here we see the voice of women being heard in public space.

Religiously, although other women are mentioned in the story, it is only Thecla who engages in some form of religious activity: Facing death, she baptises herself.<sup>98</sup> In explaining her action to Paul, she states that Jesus “who assists you in preaching has assisted me to baptise”.<sup>99</sup> Some, like Cardman, see here an act of gender equalisation; “By baptizing herself, she becomes the spiritual equal of Paul”.<sup>100</sup> On leaving, Paul instructs Thecla, “go, and teach the word of the Lord”.<sup>101</sup> When Paul preaches, it is clear that his audience consists of both men and women. This may also have been the case when Thecla taught, but nowhere is this explicitly stated. We meet generic statements such as “she went to Seleucia, and enlightened many in the knowledge of Christ”,<sup>102</sup> and when a reference is made as to the gender of her audience, it is feminine: “At length, certain gentlewomen hearing of the virgin Thecla, went to her, and were instructed by her in the oracles of God, and many of them abandoned this world, and led a monastic life with her”.<sup>103</sup> And yet there is no reason to doubt that both men and women were recipients of her “miraculous cures” and her expelling of “unclean spirits”.<sup>104</sup> Frequently Thecla is referred to as a “servant of God” and in closing, she is called a “martyr and apostle of God”.<sup>105</sup>

In the Acts of Thecla we find no reference to a Christian church, or to church order. Davies suggests that this is typical of the Apocryphal Acts. Offices such as deacon, presbyter and bishop, known to have existed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, are “hardly ever mentioned in the apocryphal Acts, and when they are it is usually in a haphazard manner... No church offices are mentioned in the Acts of Paul or in the Acts of John...”.<sup>106</sup> The closest we get is the description of a possible house church in chapters 1 and 2, probably semi-public meetings in the house of Onesiphorus, “a welcome testimony for the early Christian custom of meeting in private houses”.<sup>107</sup> In these meetings, the apostle Paul is the only speaker mentioned. The proposed “ancient Christian deployment of the concept of ‘becoming male’ in the Gospel of

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<sup>97</sup> *Acts of Thecla*, 4:2.

<sup>98</sup> *Acts of Thecla*, 9:6-7.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:2.

<sup>100</sup> Cardman, Francine, *Women, Ministry, and Church Order in Early Christianity*, in Kraemer and D'Angelo, 1999, 301.

<sup>101</sup> *Acts of Thecla*, 10:4.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:11.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:15.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, chapters 10 and 11.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:15.

<sup>106</sup> Davies, Stevan L. *The Revolt of the Widows*, 77-8.

<sup>107</sup> Bremmer Jan N. *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 39.

Thomas, the Acts of Thomas, then the Acts of Thecla, and elsewhere” evidently has its limitations.<sup>108</sup>

“The portrayal of women in the Acts of John and the Acts of Paul (and Thecla) also suggests that they were conscious of their high status and used to a degree of independence”. Further, Bremmer sees in the Acts of Thecla not a liberating message for women, but rather a life that would inspire them. He added, “We can hardly fail to notice that the Acts of Paul did not need to have a liberating effect on these women... once the Acts of Paul travelled the Mediterranean outside the south-west Asia Minor, these women could appropriate the example of Thecla and aspire to the same independence”.<sup>109</sup>

These Apocryphal Acts do seem to be biased towards pious women, a recurrent theme in Davies’ book. “The figures of Drusiana, Cleopatra, Maximilla, Mygdonia, and Thecla are all impressive models of piety intended to be suitable for the emulation of Christians and, in particular, Christian women. There are no comparable role models in the apocryphal Acts for Christian men”.<sup>110</sup> Although there is a clear positive feminine bias, Davies also notes that women in the Apocryphal Acts “are careful not to usurp the apparent masculine prerogative of preaching”.<sup>111</sup>

## **6.4 Church documents**

The early Christian churches were rather flat in terms of their leadership structure. “First Century sources do not attest even a basic division between priest and laity”.<sup>112</sup> The structuring within and between the churches developed fairly rapidly. “By the mid-second century, much of the church structure that would later develop into the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church was already in place... bishops were understood as standing in a spiritual line of descent from the apostles of Jesus... elders (literally: presbyters) assisted him in his administration and instruction of the congregation. Below them was a group of deacons”.<sup>113</sup> The following two early church documents give us some insight into how teaching and leadership functioned in at least some of the churches – the ones that used these documents - during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries.

## **6.5 The Didache**

The Didache, meaning ‘the Teaching’, is widely thought to be the first ‘church manual’ to have survived from early Christianity. It was discovered in 1873 in a monastery in Istanbul. Most scholars think it was written around 100AD. In its 16 chapters it provides guidelines for personal and corporate life within the early Christian communities.

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<sup>108</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *Women and Gender*, in Harvey and Hunter, 2008, 478.

<sup>109</sup> Bremmer Jan N. *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 58-9.

<sup>110</sup> Davies, Stevan L. *The Revolt of the Widows*, 63.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>112</sup> Ehrman, Bart D. *After the New Testament*, 317.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

The Didache contains instructions for personal life, like “Abstain from fleshly and worldly lusts”; for family life, like “Do not withhold your hand from your son or your daughter, but from their youth teach them the fear of the Lord”; for life in society, distinguishing between the “way of life” (loving God and your neighbour) and the “way of death” (which includes such activities as adulteries, murders, fraud and haters of truth).<sup>114</sup> It contains very practical instructions, such as, “In no way should anyone live among you unemployed as a Christian”.<sup>115</sup> Even the Christian’s relationship with the environment is addressed, pointing out that the “destroyers of God’s creation” belong to “the way of death”. It also has many instructions for church life, on the matters of baptising,<sup>116</sup> on fasting,<sup>117</sup> and on the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper. For instance, it recommends: “Do not let anyone eat or drink of your Eucharist meal except the ones who have been baptised into the name of the Lord”.<sup>118</sup>

In its last six chapters, the Didache addresses the role of gifted persons such as prophets, apostles and teachers. The Didache “reflects a time when the church found apostles to be so common as to offer a threat to church order... the apostles are implicitly devalued in that their presence in the church community is required to be as brief as possible”.<sup>119</sup> A prophet should be accepted “if *he* should have a lifestyle of the Lord’s character” and considered false “if *he* asks for money”.<sup>120</sup> As to apostles, “Every apostle coming to you, welcome as you would the Lord. And *he* should not remain more than one day, and if *he* has a need also another. But if *he* remains three days, *he* is a false prophet”.<sup>121</sup> “Likewise, a genuine teacher is worthy; like a workman, *he* is worthy of his food”.<sup>122</sup> Although gender is not explicitly mentioned in connection with prophets, apostles and teachers, they are consistently referred to as ‘he’. More recently, gender sensitive translations take the ‘he’ as generic, referring to both male and female apostles and prophets.<sup>123</sup>

Hogg sees in the Didache at least two instances of gender sensitivity: “One is that it is not gender specific: the literary convention in Jewish writings is to direct teaching to ‘my son’; yet the Didache is addressed to ‘my child’... the convert... may be male or female. Another significant piece of evidence is negative. It has been pointed out that nothing in the Didache restricted the roles women could take in churches. It seems the authors of the Didache felt no need to impose limits on what women could do”.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Roberts-Donaldson. *The Didache*. Chapters 1-6.

<sup>115</sup> Roberts-Donaldson. *The Didache*, Chapter 12.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., Chapter 7.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., Chapter 8.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., Chapter 9.

<sup>119</sup> Davies, Stevan L. *The Revolt of the Widows*, 29, 36.

<sup>120</sup> Roberts-Donaldson. *The Didache*. Chapter 11.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., Chapter 11.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., Chapter 13.

<sup>123</sup> Torjesen, Karen Jo. *When Women were Priests*, 25.

<sup>124</sup> Hogg, Sally. *Invisible Women*, 32.

The word 'church' is used once in the Didache.<sup>125</sup> As to church structure, we find references to bishops and deacons.<sup>126</sup> The churches are instructed to "appoint for yourselves ... bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord: gentle *men*,<sup>127</sup> not lovers of money, true and approved. For they minister also to you the ministry of prophets and teachers". Although etymologically some translators of the Didache may justify replacing the reference to 'he' with 'he or she', given the prevailing attitude towards women in that time among church leaders, it is fairly unlikely that the references to 'he' were intended to be read as 'gender neutral'.

## 6.6 *The Didascalia*

The 'Didascalia', meaning 'Teaching', was originally produced in Greek in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century. It is a church manual written pseudonymously in the name of the 12 apostles together with Paul and James the brother of Jesus. Cardman sees in these church documents a growing restriction in the participation of women in church life. She suggests that as this and other church orders "appealed to apostolic authority rather than the authority of Paul or the memory of Thecla, they began to change the patterns of power and the nature of leadership in the churches".<sup>128</sup> The Didascalia shows a clearly developed authoritative church structure, a structure that seeks to parallel the Old Testament temple worship: "... but the priests and Levites now are the presbyters and deacons, and the orphans and widows: but the Levite and high priest is the bishop... This is your chief and your leader, and he is your mighty king. He rules in the place of the Almighty: but let him be honoured by you as God, for the *bishop* sits for you in the place of God Almighty. But the *deacon* stands in the place of Christ; and do you love him. And the *deaconess* shall be honoured by you in the place of the Holy Spirit; and the *presbyters* shall be to you in the likeness of the Apostles; and the *orphans and widows* shall be reckoned by you in the likeness of the altar".<sup>129</sup> This altar metaphor is a 3<sup>rd</sup> century narrowing of the widow's role, making the widow "a passive subject of the church's charity rather than an active agent who ministers the church's benefits to others".<sup>130</sup>

### 6.6.1 Women and laymen

The Didascalia affirms that, on simple matters, women and laymen could teach and share their understanding with outsiders. "But concerning punishment and reward, and the kingdom of the name of Christ, and His dispensation, neither a widow nor a layman ought to speak; for when they speak without the knowledge of doctrine, they will bring blasphemy upon the word".<sup>131</sup> Limitation in knowledge is not the only argument; later, it adds that "it is neither right nor necessary therefore that women should be teachers, and especially concerning the name of Christ and the redemption of His passion. For you have not been appointed to this, O women, and especially widows, that you should teach, but that you should pray and entreat the

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<sup>125</sup> Roberts-Donaldson. *The Didache*, Chapter 14.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., Chapter 15.

<sup>127</sup> More recent gender sensitive translations of the Didache translate this word 'individuals'.

<sup>128</sup> Cardman, Francine, *Women, Ministry, and Church Order in Early Christianity*, in Kraemer and D'Ángelo, 1999, 308.

<sup>129</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Chapter 9, ii.26.

<sup>130</sup> Torjesen, Karen Jo. *When Women were Priests*, 148.

<sup>131</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Chapter 15, iii.5.

Lord God. For He the Lord God, Jesus Christ our Teacher, sent us the Twelve to instruct the People and the Gentiles; and there were with us women disciples, Mary Magdalene and Mary the daughter of James and the other Mary; but He did not send them to instruct the people with us. For if it were required that women should teach, our Master Himself would have commanded these to give instruction with us".<sup>132</sup>

### 6.6.2 Deacons and deaconesses

Although women, and specially widows were expected to make their *home* their base of prayer and service, in the Didascalia the active role of deaconess was definitely appreciated: "Wherefore, O bishop, appoint thee workers of righteousness as helpers who may co-operate with thee unto salvation... For there are houses whither thou canst not send a deacon to the women, on account of the heathen, but mayest send a deaconess. Also, because in many other matters the office of a woman deacon is required." And further on, in the same section when dealing with baptism, "But let a man pronounce over them the invocation of the divine Names in the water. And when she who is being baptized has come up from the water, let the deaconess receive her, and teach and instruct her how the seal of baptism ought to be (kept) unbroken in purity and holiness. For this cause we say that the ministry of a woman deacon is especially needful and important".<sup>133</sup> Some, like Cardman, see in the formalising of the office of deaconess, a growing restriction on the role of women: "The Didascalia both legitimates and limits the ministry of women...The widows' charismatic ministry was eclipsed and, to some extent, displaced by the hierarchically ordered ministry of the deaconess".<sup>134</sup>

The Didascalia presents a picture of fairly well structured churches, where laity and women are distanced from church leadership. Both deacons and deaconesses could teach informally on simpler matters of faith and be active in charity, with a strong preference to minister among their own gender: "But let a woman rather be devoted to the ministry of women, and a male deacon to the ministry of men... For it behoves each one to know his *office* and to be diligent in executing it".<sup>135</sup>

Elizabeth Clark, proposes that church documents of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century reflect a narrowing of the possibilities open to women, a trend that continued beyond the 3<sup>rd</sup> century: "The roles allowed to women as widows and deaconesses – but not as priests or public teachers – are further elaborated in the Apostolic Constitutions, a fourth century document, probably of Syrian origin, that lists various church laws... the order of deaconess was short-lived, however; from the early Middle Ages on, their role seems to have been subsumed under that of the nun".<sup>136</sup>

A structural analysis of the Didascalia shows that its author was concerned about the growing influence of the 'order of widows' in seven areas, four related to leadership, and three about the administration of material goods. Torjesen correctly observes

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., Chapter 15, iii.6.

<sup>133</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Chapter 16, iii.12.

<sup>134</sup> Cardman, Francine, *Women, Ministry, and Church Order in Early Christianity*, in Kraemer and D'Ángelo, 1999, 314.

<sup>135</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Chapter 16, iii.13.

<sup>136</sup> Clark, Elizabeth Ann. *Women in the Early Church*, 176.

that, “The overarching objective of the writer with respect to the first four was to disqualify widows from these areas of leadership. His objective with respect to the last three was to bring the remaining activities of the widows firmly under the bishop’s control”.<sup>137</sup> A strong male bias is therefore evident in the Didascalia.

## **6.7 Church Fathers**

‘Church Fathers’ is a name given to a number of influential ‘orthodox’ writers during the early centuries of the church age. These were not a homogeneous group of writers. On many issues they agreed with each other, but sometimes their differences were such that they would publically criticise each other’s writings, ignore or contradict each other’s decisions and even label each other as heretics. And yet their writings do give us a fairly good idea of the development of the Christian churches. In their sharp refutation of heretical movements on the margins of the faith, these men were instrumental in sharpening, clarifying and expressing in more precise words orthodox Christian dogma.

### **6.7.1 Church Fathers on women**

How did Church Fathers, in general, view the presence and role of women in the church? To say they were negative towards women is an oversimplification. The following words of Clark better describe their rather complex attitude: “The most fitting word with which to describe the Church Fathers’ attitude to women is ambivalence. Women were God’s creation, his good gift to men – and the curse of the world... the Fathers praised and blamed, honoured and disparaged the female sex”.<sup>138</sup>

### **6.7.2 Widowhood and Virginity**

Women who refused or renounced sexual activity appear to have had a special status in early Christianity. Kraemer suggest that such women were considered in some ways as ‘male’ with some possible consequences; “For instance, the possibility that virgins constitute a separate category distinct from ‘women’ undergirds certain early Christian discourse about ‘women’ holding office and exercising masculine authority”.<sup>139</sup> If this was so, virgins were no longer perceived as ‘male’ in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. And yet, women had a singular value in the eyes of Church Fathers if they remained a virgin or if they remained widows and did not remarry. Such women had a special status as prayer warriors and servants in the churches. As Clack remarks, “Christian women who in the patristic era renounced traditional sexual and domestic roles did indeed find new worlds open to them, worlds of scholarship and contemplation, pilgrimage and charitable endeavor”.<sup>140</sup>

### **6.7.3 The Virgin Mary as a model**

In Patristic literature, the attitude and lifestyle of Mary, the mother of Jesus, was often used to provide Christian women with a role model. They pointed out that Mary did not baptise Jesus but John, a man. They also noted that Mary supported the church

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<sup>137</sup> Torjesen, Karen Jo. *When Women were Priests*, 151.

<sup>138</sup> Clark, Elizabeth Ann. *Women in the Early Church*, 15.

<sup>139</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *Women and Gender*, in Harvey and Hunter, 2008, 466.

<sup>140</sup> Clark, Elizabeth Ann. *Women in the Early Church*, 16.

with her prayers. They argue that Mary and other women supported the ministry of the Lord Jesus in many practical ways, but that Mary was never counted among the 12 apostles. When Mary attempted to take a leadership initiative at the wedding at Cana, Jesus himself put her in her place.<sup>141</sup> Streete captures the value of Mary, a virgin, as a role model for Christian women: “In support of a virginal lifestyle that was honoured as holy, yet not remote, capable of being practiced by women within households and not claiming apostolic freedom or the authority reserved for male clergy, Christian writers praised Mary of Nazareth as the model virgin”.<sup>142</sup> And yet, in time, the veneration of Mary grew. Kraemer remarks, “Eventual veneration of Mary, whose history is itself thorny, raises other questions. Epiphanius construed women’s devotion to Mary as heretical, both because women’s offering of some sort of baked goods to Mary constituted an unacceptable exercise of *priesthood*, and because it made Mary the object of devotion that was appropriate only for God and Christ”.<sup>143</sup>

#### 6.7.4 Martyrdom

Christian men as well as women were persecuted. “The Church Fathers agreed that in martyrdom, no difference of sex obtained. Women proved just as strong in faith and resistant to the threats of the Roman persecutors as men”.<sup>144</sup> Further, Streete adds that “martyrdom was an ‘equal opportunity employer’ for women and men, slave and free... Martyrs... could safely be used as models of encouragement and edification by ecclesiastical authorities without being a source of trouble or challenge to earthly power”.<sup>145</sup> In the eyes of Church Fathers, martyrdom was definitely a gender equaliser.

### 6.8 Tertullian

Tertullian was a very influential Church Father. Born c. 160AD and brought up as a pagan in Carthage (North Africa). He became a Christian c. 197AD and then used his thorough training in secular schools of rhetoric to the defence of the Christian faith. He wrote most of his works during the next 25 years dealing primarily in areas of apologetics, heresy, and ethics. Between 35 and 40 writings credited to him survive. He died in the mid 220s. He is widely recognised as the father of Latin theology.

Unlike many other later church Fathers, Tertullian was a married man. In discourse and debate, Tertullian is usually harsh on women and negative towards sexuality. A letter to his wife shows, however, another angle: “Where can I find the word to describe adequately the happiness of that marriage which the church cements, which the oblation confirms and the blessing seals? The angels proclaim it and the heavenly Father ratifies it... What kind of yoke is that of two Christians united in one hope, one desire, one discipline and one service? Both are children of the same Father, servants of the same Master; nothing separates them, either in the spirit or in the flesh... They are both equal in the church of God, equal at the banquet of God,

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<sup>141</sup> John 2:1-5.

<sup>142</sup> Streete, Gail Corrington, *Women as Sources of Redemption and Knowledge in Early Christian Traditions*, in Kraemer, Ross Shepard and D’Angelo Mary Rose, 1999, 348.

<sup>143</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *Women and Gender*, in Harvey and Hunter, 2008, 474.

<sup>144</sup> Clark, Elizabeth Ann. *Women in the Early Church*, 22.

<sup>145</sup> Streete, Gail Corrington, *Women as Sources of Redemption and Knowledge in Early Christian Traditions*, in Kraemer and D’Angelo, 1999, 349.

equal in trials, persecutions, consolations”.<sup>146</sup> Given that this letter was not written to win an argument, it likely represents Tertullian’s genuine feelings at that time.

However Tertullian wrote many formal essays. As Kreamer remarks, “Numerous theological treatises pertain explicitly to women’s practices, such as the works of Tertullian: *On the veiling of Virgins*, *On the Apparel of Women*, *On Modesty*, and others”.<sup>147</sup> On the issue of gender, and the role of women in particular, Tertullian reflects fairly well the general attitude of the Church Fathers of his day, perhaps differing slightly from some when it came to the use of *charismata*. Here follow some of Tertullian’s remarks on women:

### **6.8.1 ‘On the Apparel of Women’ – A negative view of women**

In this text, like other Church Fathers elsewhere, Tertullian is very critical of women in general, and sees them as the cause of much evil. “God’s judgement 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 the tree; you are the first foresaker of the divine law, you are the one who persuaded him who the Devil was not brave enough to approach; you so lightly crushed the image of God, the man Adam”.<sup>148</sup> If church leaders had this attitude towards the Christian women in their churches, it is to be expected that they would be inclined to reduce rather than increase their participation in church life – if and where that participation was present.

### **6.8.2 ‘On Exhortation to Chastity’ – A negative view of sex and marriage**

The prevailing negative view among many Christians of sexual intercourse and marriage is also clearly expressed here by Tertullian. “If we completely understand Paul’s meaning, second marriage must be said to be nothing else than a kind of fornication... Does not some aspect of fornication seem to you to be implicated in marriage, since the same acts are found in both? ... nor does he become a husband in any different way than he becomes an adulterer!”.<sup>149</sup>

### **6.8.3 ‘On the Veiling of Virgins’ – Women in public space**

Tertullian understood the church meeting not as private space but as public space. This he makes clear in Chapter 13 of *On the veiling of Virgins*; “Young women, you wear your veils out on the streets [*in vicis*], so you should wear them in the church [*in ecclesia*], you wear them when you are among strangers [*extraneos*], then wear them among your brothers [*fratres*].” He adds the challenge, “If you won’t wear your veils in church, then I challenge you to go round in public without them”.<sup>150</sup>

Elsewhere in this work, Tertullian makes clear that the restrictions on women go beyond attire: “It is not permitted to a woman to speak in church, but neither is it permitted her to teach, nor to baptize, nor to offer, nor to claim for herself a lot in any manly function not to say [in any] sacerdotal *office*”.<sup>151</sup> What he means by ‘speak’ he

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<sup>146</sup> Hogg, Sally. *Invisible Women*, 59-60.

<sup>147</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *Women and Gender*, in Harvey and Hunter, 2008, 469.

<sup>148</sup> Clark, Elizabeth Ann. *Women in the Early Church*, 39. On the dress of women 1,1,2.

<sup>149</sup> On Exhortation to Chastity, chapter 9.

<sup>150</sup> Torjesen, Karen Jo. *When Women were Priests*, 165-166.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

clarifies elsewhere, making allowance for women led by the Spirit to prophesy but barring them from anything that could be considered teaching or 'sacerdotal office'.

#### **6.8.4 'On Modesty' – The church as a 'spiritual body'**

The church leadership structures described in the New Testament texts are very dynamic and task oriented. Potential leaders are encouraged to desire and to aspire to a 'good work' rather than a 'good office'.<sup>152</sup> Probably, "because Christians distanced themselves from the polytheism of Greek and Roman religions, they avoided using the pagan term 'priest' [*hieros*] for their clergy. Instead they used a variety of terms taken from secular life: *diakonos* [minister], *apostolos* [missionary], *presbyteros* [elder], *episcopos* [overseer], prophet and teacher. Eventually the titles of bishop [*episcopos*], priest [*presbyteros*], and deacon [*deakonos*] came to be identified with the principal offices of the Christian church".<sup>153</sup>

But this initial simple structure, where there was little difference between clergy and laity did not survive long. Torjesen suggests that "in the provinces of the Roman Empire, the clergy who collectively shared the tasks of leadership began to model themselves after city councils. As a consequence the concept of leadership began to shift subtly from *ministry* to *governance*. An important element of this transition was the growing divide between the clergy and the laity".<sup>154</sup>

Tertullian supported the church structure of his day, but in his latter writings he shows signs of frustration with the church as an increasingly controlling institution. He noticed that enthusiasm or direct communion with God often presented a threat to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. He writes, "And thus, from that time forward, every number (of persons) who may have combined together into this faith is accounted 'a Church,' from the Author and Consecrator (of the Church). And accordingly 'the Church,' it is true, will forgive sins: but (it will be) the Church of the Spirit, by means of a spiritual man; not the Church which consists of a number of bishops [*ecclesia spiritus per spiritalem hominem, non ecclesia numerus episcoporum*]. For the right and arbitrament is the Lord's, not the servant's; God's Himself, not the priest's".<sup>155</sup>

#### **6.8.5 'On Baptism' – Laymen could also baptise**

Tertullian, in his treatise *On Baptism* discredits the use of the Acts of Paul and Thecla as legitimation for women baptising. By reducing the status of the Thecla narrative, some, like Cardman, argue that in doing so Tertullian "furthered the exclusion of women from ministry by erasing the memory of her [Thecla] as a woman who had preached and baptized".<sup>156</sup>

Tertullian wrote, "But if the writings which wrongly go under Paul's name, claim Thecla's example as a licence for women's teaching and baptizing, let them know that, in Asia, the presbyter who composed that writing, as if he were augmenting

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<sup>152</sup> 1 Timothy 3:1.

<sup>153</sup> Torjesen, Karen Jo. *When Women were Priests*, 5.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>155</sup> Tertullian, *On Modesty*, 21.17.

<sup>156</sup> Cardman, Francine, *Women, Ministry, and Church Order in Early Christianity*, in Kraemer and D'Angelo, 1999, 302.

Paul's fame from his own store, after being convicted, and confessing that he had done it from love of Paul, was removed from his office. For how credible would it seem, that he who has not permitted a woman even to learn with over-boldness, should give a female the power of teaching and of baptizing! 'Let them be silent,' he says, 'and at home consult their own husbands'".<sup>157</sup> On this explanation Kraemer remarks, "Tertullian's report points to a crucial issue: namely, ancient contestations over the legitimacy of Christian women exercising authority in various forms, contestations that appear grounded not merely in debates about gender, but in arguments over actual practices".<sup>158</sup>

Who was allowed to baptise? In the same chapter Tertullian explains, "Of giving it [baptism], the chief priest (who is the bishop) has the right: in the next place, the presbyters and deacons, yet not without the bishop's authority, on account of the honour of the Church, which being preserved, peace is preserved. Beside these, even laymen have the right; for what is equally received can be equally given. Unless bishops, or priests, or deacons, be on the spot, other disciples are called i.e. to the work." Teaching and baptizing were considered by Tertullian the function church officials, but when such were not present, other Christian laymen were expected to baptise.

Hilhorst stresses the masculine element intended by 'laymen': "De Bautismo... belongs to Tertullian's pre-Montanist period... As Tertullian aptly remarks, 'what is equally received can be equally given'. It is well known, however, that some persons are more equal than others: baptising by women is out of the question".<sup>159</sup> Torjesen prefers the gender neutral rendering 'laypeople', seeking to make room also for women to baptise: "According to Tertullian, the laity also possessed, in a latent way, the same rights as the clergy – the right to offer the Eucharist and then right to baptize; but *laypeople* could not exercise those rights when the clergy was present".<sup>160</sup>

#### **6.8.6 'Against Marcion' – Women; prophesy 'yes', teach 'no'**

Although Tertullian was very strict on church order and ascetic lifestyle, he could not be classed as a cessationist: to him, the gifts of the Spirit, the *charismata*, were present in the church of his day. Such gifts were equally bestowed on women as they were on men. Tertullian distinguishes between teaching and prophesying,<sup>161</sup> stating that a woman must not teach, but has the right to prophesy in a church gathering as long as she is veiled: "Once more, when he [the apostle Paul] enjoins upon women silence in the church, that they are not to speak, at all events with the idea of learning—though he has already shown that even they have the right to prophesy,

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<sup>157</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism*, chapter 19.

<sup>158</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *Women and Gender*, in Harvey and Hunter, 2008, 472.

<sup>159</sup> Hilhorst, A. *Tertullian on the Acts of Paul*, in Bremmer, 1996, 150-1.

<sup>160</sup> Torjesen, Karen Jo. *When Women were Priests*. 164.

<sup>161</sup> Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*. He distinguishes between the authoritative prophecies in the Old Testament (which should be accepted) and that of the New Testament (which should be judged). In chapter 6 he distinguishes between Prophecy and Teaching, providing a rationale as to why Paul allowed women in the churches to prophesy by not teach.

since he insists that a woman must be veiled, even when prophesying”.<sup>162</sup> This reference to being veiled when prophesying is based in a Pauline instruction to the Corinthian church that women should wear a veil when ‘praying or prophesying’.<sup>163</sup> Therefore, if Tertullian thought it right for a woman to prophesy in a church gathering as long as she was veiled, it is natural to conclude that Tertullian also thought it right for a woman to pray in a church gathering as long as she was veiled.

Cardman describes Tertullian’s position on the role of women as “complicated” and “provocative”. She explains that “although he acknowledged women prophets and accepted their prophecies... he nevertheless was adamant that women were not permitted to speak in church...”.<sup>164</sup> She appears to suggest that Tertullian would accept a woman’s prophetic ministry but not in the church.

Torjensen, however, highlights Tertullian’s apparent distinction between teaching and prophesying: “Tertullian did, paradoxically, accept women prophesying in the church and managed to reconcile this with his condemnation of women teaching, discussing, or asking questions by his interpretation of Paul’s insistence on women’s silence. Tertullian saw this passage *not* as forbidding women to teach but *forbidding them* to engage in public discussions for the purpose of learning. He extrapolated from this interpretation that if women were forbidden to participate public discussion, then they certainly would not have been allowed to do public teaching”.<sup>165</sup>

### **6.8.7 ‘Apology’ – Activities in a church meeting**

In chapter 39 of his well-known work, *Apology*, Tertullian describes the contents of a church meeting, the ‘agapé meal,’ to show the critics of the faith the innocence and the practical benefits reaped by the love Christians had for one another and those in need. “Now I myself will explain the practices of the Christian church... We come together for a meeting and a congregation, in order to besiege God with prayers, like an army in battle formation” (v.1-2). No mention of gender is made in connection with these community prayers. He goes on to describe a time for the “consideration of Scripture” during which “we nourish our faith with holy conversation... there are words of encouragement, of correction, and of holy censure” (v.3-4). As to leadership, the masculine reference is explicit: “Certain approved *elders* preside, *men...* of good character” (v.5). After the meal time in which rich and poor participate together, “hands are washed and lamps are lit, and *each one*, according to his ability to do so, reads the Holy Scriptures or is invited into the centre to sing a hymn to God” (v.18).<sup>166</sup> Given the way in which Tertullian differentiates between prophecy [charismata] and teaching [authority], it would be natural to understand from this selective silence on gender that the voices of women were also heard as the congregation ‘besieged God with prayers’, and that women would also participate with a prophetic word of encouragement or the singing a hymn to God – but not with teaching.

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<sup>162</sup> Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 5.8.II.

<sup>163</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:4-5.

<sup>164</sup> Cardman, Francine, *Women, Ministry, and Church Order in Early Christianity*, in Kraemer and D’Angelo, 1999, 307.

<sup>165</sup> Torjensen, Karen Jo. *When Women were Priests*, 160-1.

<sup>166</sup> Ehrman, Bart D. *After The New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, 350-1.

### 6.8.8 Tertullian, the Miraculous and the Spirit

The influx of intellectuals in the church had a strong influence, especially on its leadership. “In the middle of the second century well trained and highly educated apologists begun to appear among the ranks of the Christians, intellectuals like Justin of Rome, Athenagoras in Athens, Tertullian in Carthage, and Origin in Alexandria”.<sup>167</sup> These tended to emphasise the more intellectual aspects of Christianity, establishing the innocence of Christians, defending the faith against the infiltration of strange teachings, and arguing for the superiority of Christianity over other religions – including Judaism. There was a growing pressure to intellectualise Christianity, and yet, as part of their difference in the faith, some apologists claimed that “miracles continued to occur down to their own time. On occasion, the apologist challenged their readers to bring forth anyone who was demon-possessed and watch the person be healed in the name of Jesus”.<sup>168</sup> In Christianity, at the turn of the second century, there appears to have been a comfortable mix between the rational and the supernatural. Although rational argumentation was on the increase, Ehrman points out that this did not replace the supernatural: “Accounts of conversions from the second and third centuries continue to emphasize the miraculous”.<sup>169</sup>

When considering the charismata and the other works of the Spirit, it is difficult to make gender distinctions. The Spirit can use who He will whenever He will. In both canonical and non-canonical sources we encounter examples where the Spirit uses both men and women, in the sphere of the charismatic and miraculous, and also in church meetings. Perhaps this is where Tertullian sees the chief difference between ‘prophecy’ and ‘teaching’ - the first being a charismatic gift worked by the Spirit and therefore freely available to both men and women, the second containing elements of authority.

This close association between the workings of the Spirit and the participation of women is also noted by Clark. From the second century onward, various sects on the fringes of mainstream Christianity “allowed women high leadership positions, including sacramental ones. Various Gnostic sects probably let women baptise. Charismatic movements that appealed to the Holy Spirit’s inspiration were also natural ones in which to allow women a larger role, for it could be argued that God did not discriminate sexually in distributing *charismata*, the spiritual gifts”.<sup>170</sup>

In time, the miraculous, the Spirit work, gave way to church structures, authority and right dogma. The area in which men and women served together gave way to an area in which only men could fully participate. It is therefore not surprising to note that the work of the Spirit and the participation of women seem to decrease simultaneously. Davies also draws attention to this shift from ‘supernatural works’ to ‘words’ of truth: “As some misogyny [*hatred, dislike, or mistrust of women*] is present in many writings of the Church Fathers, so some misanthropy [*hatred,*

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>168</sup> Ehrman, Bart D. *After The New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, 52.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>170</sup> Clark, Elizabeth Ann. *Women in the Early Church*, 20.

*dislike, or distrust of humankind]* is present in the apocryphal Acts... by the beginning of the third century... men of *charismatic works* gave way to men of *words*".<sup>171</sup>

It appears then that in Christian churches and communities where the miraculous and the workings of the Spirit were appreciated and practiced, the role of women was usually greater – and vice versa.

### **6.8.9 Tertullian and Montanism**

Montanism was an early Christian movement of the late second century. "Its proponents called it the 'New Prophecy', its opponents called it Montanism".<sup>172</sup> On its basic doctrinal tenets it was orthodox but had its own peculiarities. For example, it had a strong emphasis on ethical purity and asceticism; it forbade remarriage after divorce or the death of partner; their prophets dyed their hair and stained their eyelids. Unlike the orthodox, Montanus, its founder, provided salaries to those who preached his doctrine. And yet, descriptions of Montanism should be taken with caution. As Kraemer remarks, "the evidence for the New Prophecy is itself complex: much of it comes from its opponents, including Tertullian, Epiphanius, Eusebius, and others, and poses all sorts of problems for historical and social reconstruction. The claim that women founded the New Prophecy and were many of its subsequent followers and leaders may reflect social reality that itself requires explanation. Yet, not inconceivable, the gendering of the New Prophecy as female is part of a rhetoric of opposition that genders orthodoxy as masculine and heresy as feminine".<sup>173</sup>

It is said that the Montanists and their leaders claimed prophetic successions stretching back to Agabus and the four daughters of Philip the evangelist. Montanus had two female leading colleagues, Prisca and Maximilla, who likewise claimed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Montanism offered considerable freedom to women, allowing them to participate equally with men in church meetings, and in some parts, even recognising female bishops and presbyters. The response to the New Prophecy polarised Christian communities. The more orthodox clergy mostly sought to suppress it. Eventually Montanist teachings came to be regarded as heresy.

In his later years, Tertullian was attracted to a number of Montanist teachings. Some today affirm that Tertullian decisively left the orthodox Christian church and joined the Montanist sect. Others argue that "Tertullian was for a time a member of the movement, and that his eventual dissatisfaction may have had something to do with the movement's views of women prophets and leaders".<sup>174</sup> And others propose that he remained in the church but welcomed some of the teachings typical of Montanism, particularly the requirement of a strict ethical lifestyle and the freedom given to the work of the Spirit in their meetings. Tertullian's thought was that the Holy Spirit cleared up the ambiguities of Scripture through the New Prophecy.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Davies, Stevan L. *The Revolt of the Widows*, 116.

<sup>172</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *Women and Gender*, in Harvey and Hunter, 2008, 471.

<sup>173</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *Women and Gender*, in Harvey and Hunter, 2008, 473.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 473.

<sup>175</sup> Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 63:9.

#### **6.8.10 Summary of Tertullian's view**

In keeping with the view of other Church Fathers, Tertullian is rather negative about women's sexuality and is generally negative toward marriage. Women were valued as examples of purity if they remained virgins or unmarried widows. They were also valued in their formal support role as deaconesses in the churches. Tertullian agreed that Christian women had the right to participate in the more spontaneous - Spirit inspired - elements of church meetings, especially where charismata were involved. Women were allowed to prophesy (and most likely also audibly pray) in his church in Carthage but they were firmly barred from activities associated with authority, such as teaching, leading and other 'priestly' activities such as baptising<sup>176</sup> and celebrating the Eucharist or Lord's Supper.

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<sup>176</sup> For modesty reasons, sometimes women were authorized to baptize other women.

# 7. Overview, Conclusion and Further Research

## 7.1 Overview

From the Gospels we learn that the teaching and actions of Jesus often went against the Jewish culture of His day. He invested women with dignity and offered them new opportunities of service as His followers. In the rest of the New Testament we observe that the first generation of Christian churches appears to have shared strong common ground but was definitely not homogeneous. There were differences, even tensions, between churches with Jewish majorities (commonly associated with Peter) and Gentile majorities (commonly associated with Paul).<sup>177</sup> Some churches had serious internal differences and others resisted the visit of particular apostles.<sup>178</sup> And yet significant common ground is evident. Teachers and apostolic writings encouraged similar practice among the churches. Both Peter and Paul promoted a reformed, more enlightened, patristic family structure.<sup>179</sup> Although men and women have equal access to salvation, equal inherent value, equal giftedness and could equally be used by the Holy Spirit, in the early church some form of gender asymmetry is consistently evident.

The canonical texts suggest the churches in the 1<sup>st</sup> century had a rather flat and informal church leadership structure. Both men and women, without reference to the priest-layman divide, participated fully in community life and were able to 'pray and prophesy' in their church meetings. Teaching in such meetings was restricted to gifted men, and church leadership roles or offices appear also to be restricted to suitable qualified men.

But it is also plain from non-canonical literature that Christian churches grew and changed as that first generation of believers passed away and the church responded to changing social circumstances, such as a shift from spontaneity towards liturgy, from ministry towards governance, from leadership through moral authority towards formal authoritative offices, from small public meetings in houses towards larger public meetings in basilicas, from the charismatic towards the dogmatic.

After the first century, church structure became increasingly important and church leadership by one man, a Bishop, developed rapidly; the view on women changed, downgrading them as sexual-beings but praising them as virgins; a strong 'anti-marriage' current developed in the church. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> century there is a noticeable shift among Christians (at least the more educated ones – which would most probably include most of its leadership) from the 'supernatural' to the 'rational', from the 'Word and Spirit' to the 'Word'. Christianity continued to develop into the 4<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Acts 15 shows the tension in connection with Jewish customs such as circumcision.

<sup>178</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 3 John 1:9-11.

<sup>179</sup> 1 Peter 3; Ephesians 5.

century as the church changed from a persecuted minority to a rich and politically powerful imperial religion – from ‘dying for your faith’ to ‘benefitting from your faith’; from ‘internal devotion’ to a more external and public religion with a growing taste for ritual and symbols of power.

Commonly egalitarian scholars, like Elizabeth Clack, explain these post-first-century church developments as natural consequences of a growing anti-egalitarian church bias. “Given the new avenues open to ascetic women, it is sobering to note that those avenues had definite roadblocks placed in them: women were not to be priests or public teachers”.<sup>180</sup>

## 7.2 *Conclusion*

Both in the canonical and the sample of non-canonical literature explored, it is plain that women were very present and active in their diverse Christian communities, as prayer warriors, as prophetesses, as teachers, as agents of miracles and in practical support roles associated with deaconesses. It is also evident that early Christianity promoted and practiced a *reformed patriarchal arrangement* (rather than an egalitarian one) at home and in the church, an arrangement that gave enhanced value and offered new freedoms to women, slaves and outcasts.

Praying and prophesying: The two Apocrypha Acts and the two church documents explored suggest that the role of Christian women in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries was not any different from that of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The writings of Tertullian suggest that the Spirit-led, verbal contributions in church meetings, such as prophecy, were also open to women. And if women could prophesy in church meetings, it would be reasonable to conclude that they were also given space to ‘pray and prophesy’.

Teaching and leading the church: In the apocryphal Acts of John and Thecla, there is evidence that women were agents of miracles to both men and women, and that they were teachers of the Gospel – but nothing is said about church settings. Tertullian appears to defend the right of women to prophesy in church but strongly opposes their involvement in teaching, leading the church and any participation in ‘priestly’ activities.

Given the male dominated society, the rather negative view of women expressed by most Church Fathers, and the various changes in the church as outlined above (7.1), it is to be expected that any new freedoms given to Christian women in the 1<sup>st</sup> century were put under increasing pressure in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries.

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<sup>180</sup> Clark, Elizabeth Ann. *Women in the Early Church*. 20.

### 7.3 *Further Research*

Given more time and space, at least three areas of this study would benefit from further investigation and research. One would be to expand the sample of non-canonical writings of the first three centuries and also to include inscriptions and epigraphic information to see if the above tentative conclusion still holds.

Second, to explore some 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century literature and non-literature to trace the role of women as the Church is absorbed into the Roman Empire. As Kraemer points out, as we move away from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries, new interesting sources become available: “Like that for Christian men, identifiable non-literary evidence for Christian women is rare before the third century and increases significantly and unsurprisingly in the fourth century”.<sup>181</sup>

A third area of study would be to research the difference between ‘prophecy’ and ‘teaching’. In the first century, the apostle Paul differentiates between them. At the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Tertullian also seems to understand them as being different activities. Somewhere towards the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Augustine of Hippo refers to his mentor, Aurelius Ambrosius (the 4<sup>th</sup> century archbishop of Milan) as a ‘prophet’,<sup>182</sup> possibly indicating a narrowing or elimination of the difference between a ‘teacher’ of holy Scripture and a ‘prophet’. Many today see little difference between ‘prophesying’ and ‘teaching’, some suggesting that a ‘prophetic ministry’ is practical Biblical teaching applied to the current needs of the audience and ‘teaching ministry’ is more focused on explaining truth and doctrine.

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<sup>181</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *Women and Gender*, in Harvey and Hunter, 2008. 470.

<sup>182</sup> Augustine, Sermon 372, chapter 10, “Iste ergo *propheta*, qui et speciosum dixit et fortem, ... gigantis excursum brevissime ac pulcherrime cecinit beatus *Ambrosius* in hymno, quem paulo ante cantastis. ...”

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