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Unveiling precedent: Reclaiming the power of women in the early church

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Unveiling precedent: Reclaiming the power of women in the early church

Abstract

Beginning in the earliest Christian churches in the first century and continuing in Christianity today, the religious role of women has been the subject of constant debate. Time and time again, the position of women in the church has been used to gauge orthodoxy, and delineating their proper roles has been the focus of numerous church councils, theologians, and religious authorities. However, unlike other church doctrines, the orthodox position of women has yet to be definitely established. Rather, it has been perpetually in flux, not only within the Catholic Church, but also among the many denominations of Christianity. As a result, Christian women who wish to dedicate their lives to some form of ministry are faced with the difficult question of where they can or should serve. How do we reconcile, for example, the apostle Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28 that there is neither "male nor female" with his assertion that women were not to teach or speak in church? For this reason, I found it necessary to investigate the position of women in the early church to discover exactly what roles women held, how their roles changed, and the reason behind this change.

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UNVEILING PRECEDENT: RECLAIMING THE POWER OF WOMEN IN THE
EARLY CHURCH

By

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Introduction

Beginning in the earliest Christian churches in the first century and continuing in Christianity today, the religious role of women has been the subject of constant debate. Time and time again, the position of women in the church has been used to gauge orthodoxy, and delineating their proper roles has been the focus of numerous church councils, theologians, and religious authorities. However, unlike other church doctrines, the orthodox position of women has yet to be definitely established. Rather, it has been perpetually in flux, not only within the Catholic Church, but also among the many denominations of Christianity. As a result, Christian women who wish to dedicate their lives to some form of ministry are faced with the difficult question of where they can or should serve. How do we reconcile, for example, the apostle Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28 that there is neither "male nor female" with his assertion that women were not to teach or speak in church?¹ For this reason, I found it necessary to investigate the position of women in the early church to discover exactly what roles women held, how their roles changed, and the reason behind this change.

In the earliest Christian churches, women almost always took a secondary position to men, but there were communities in which women were allowed to serve as presbyters and bishops. In early mainstream Christianity, even though women often did not function as the primary teachers, they were still highly regarded as assistants to their husbands and fathers, and served as instructors, apostles, prophets, deaconesses, widows, and virgins. In the second century, women's roles began their steady descent as a few influential theologians spread the notion that female sinfulness and inferiority demanded their subordination to men. With Tertullian (ca. 155-230), the theologian-turned-heretic,

we see the beginnings of passionate religious misogynistic rhetoric. He even went so far as to label women as the embodiment of evil and blame them for the fall of the angels.² On the other side of the fence was Clement of Alexandria, writing around 200, who sanctioned marriage for the clergy and also sought to continue the active participation of women in the church.³ Then, as the church hierarchy developed in the early fourth century and became connected to the Roman Empire, the clergy acquired newfound prestige and religious authority became centralized. Consequently, increasing corruption and worldliness filled the ranks of the church, and secular misogyny was incorporated into church doctrine.

The tradition began by Tertullian continued into the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, when the fathers of the late Roman church took for granted the inferiority of women's reasoning ability, yet still accorded them full responsibility for the fall of humankind. Though Augustine was a Neo-Platonist, he adopted the Aristotelian view that "woman's subordination to man was a natural condition." Suzanne Wemple argued that "theories about the inferior condition of woman, whether culled from Genesis or found in the Roman tradition, enabled the Latin fathers to accept the legal subordination of women and to justify sexual dimorphism in social and religious tasks."⁴ These powerful men set the precedent for women's religious roles that would prevail into modern times. The fifth through eighth centuries witnessed further reductions in women's roles in the Merovingian church as ecclesiastical ambition fueled misogyny. Meanwhile, some churchmen spoke against the sexual double standards and mistreatment of women in Frankish society. These men, such as Caesarius of Arles and Columban, were able to provide women with powerful roles within the church as abbesses and nuns.

Despite the efforts of those influential men who argued in favor of active female participation in the church, history often only remembers the misogynistic teachings of the patristic thinkers and the justified oppression of women. Just as the male historians must have intended, a glance over the past two thousand years of church history gives the impression that women always occupied a much lower religious position than men, and that it was divinely ordained for them to do so. As a result, the trend of basing orthodoxy on women's "traditional" roles within the church has continued into the twenty-first century. However, a close analysis of Christ's teachings, the epistles of the apostle Paul, the writings of the patristic thinkers, and the roles that women actually held in the earliest church will reveal clearly that women's position was the result of much more than divine ordinance.

In the earliest church, it was possible for women to hold powerful roles within the church in accordance with, not opposed by, the teachings of Christ and the guidelines laid out by Paul. At this time, their position was based primarily upon the Christian principle of equality, though secular gender roles were beginning to have an effect. Then, as the church became fused with the secular, misogynistic society of Rome, Christ's attitude toward women and the doctrine of equality were purposely forgotten. It became male ambition, not Christ's teachings, that determined the roles of women, and the male ecclesiastical hierarchy adopted secular misogyny and a misinterpretation of Paul as its vehicle.

¹1 Corinthians 14.34-5; 1 Timothy 2.11-12 New International Version.

² Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500-900*, The Middle Ages, ed. Edward Peters and Henry C. Lea (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 22.

³ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 23.

⁴ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 23.

Chapter One The Apostolic Period to the Edict of Milan

In the scholarship on women's roles in the first three centuries of the early church, there are two poles at which historians tend to gather. The more traditional position assumes that women never exercised any authority within the early church while the opposite position, which has gained a large following in recent decades, argues that in the earliest stages of the church women could exercise authority equal to that of their male counterparts.¹ This more recent research has made it clear that women did indeed exercise significant authority within the early church as "apostles, prophets, teachers, presbyters, enrolled widows, deacons, bishops and stewards."²

This chapter will investigate why women were able to acquire such positions of authority, why these roles were challenged, and why, despite these challenges, women were able to maintain their authority. Our analysis will focus primarily upon women who lived from the days of the early apostolic church in the first century until the Edict of Milan in 313, and who exercised leadership roles within "orthodox" Christian communities. Because of the significant influence and the nearly identical theology of the New Prophecy or Montanist movement to orthodox Christianity during this period, women from these communities will be included in my analysis as well. My research will demonstrate that women were able to acquire positions of authority within the early church because of Greco-Roman and Jewish influences, which were enhanced by early Christian egalitarian ideals. Moreover, my research will also show that a lack of a central religious authority in early Christianity enabled women to enjoy positions of authority in numerous locales throughout the Mediterranean area.

The scholarly community largely acknowledges the fact that women served as widows and deaconesses within the early church.³ As widows, Christian women were free from the traditional Roman patriarchal system in which they were obligated to marry and assume private, domestic responsibilities.⁴ As enrolled widows, women could receive financial support from their local Christian communities. In return, widows performed sacramental and liturgical duties in addition to prayer during the first and second centuries.⁵ Even in later centuries, these widows taught, anointed women at baptism, tested the deaconesses, cared for the sick, and received offerings.⁶ The other traditionally acknowledged role of deacon (or deaconess by the third century) also carried with it significant power and influence within early Christian communities. These women assisted bishops at baptisms and with the Eucharist, and they also provided the ill, pregnant, or otherwise homebound with communion and theological instruction.⁷

Traditional scholarship maintained that it was only the offices of widow and deaconess that were held by women throughout the first five centuries of the church. Yet recent epigraphical and literary research has lent significant credibility to the notion that women's religious roles were far more numerous and their authority far greater than originally believed. One such role that was traditionally assigned to men but which we now know could also be held by women is that of "apostle". Apostles, both male and female, were generally (but not always) those who knew Christ personally and went forth proclaiming the good news of his resurrection and the forgiveness of sins. They were evangelists and missionaries, respected as the bearers of Christ's message.⁸

We have several biblical and extra-biblical references to female apostles. In Romans 16:7 of the New Testament, Paul of Tarsus (ca. 3-67) wrote about a female

apostle named “Junia”. Since the twelfth century, this textual reference to a female apostle in Paul was assumed to have been inaccurate and the name was changed to the masculine “Junias”, despite the fact that this was not an actual name in antiquity and the oldest manuscripts read “Junia” or “Julia”.⁹ Besides Junia, the early church considered other women, such as the Samaritan woman spoken of at John 4:5-30, and Mary Magdalene, mentioned repeatedly in the Gospels, worthy of the title “apostle” although they were not referred to as such in the New Testament. Origen (ca. 182-251), for example, considered the Samaritan woman an apostle when he wrote, “Christ sends the woman as an apostle to the inhabitants of the city, because his words have enflamed this woman.”¹⁰ With regard to Mary Magdalene, the third-century author Hippolytus of Rome interpreted Christ’s first appearances to the women at the tomb as having the direct purpose of allowing women to serve as Christ’s apostles.¹¹

Not only were women regarded as apostles in the ancient church, but it was clear that they could function as prophets as well. The New Testament contains several references to female prophets, women who were respected for their apparent ability to speak for God, to know the will of God, or to accurately proclaim that which was unknowable by any normal means, such as the future. Prophetesses were referred to in general by Paul at 1 Corinthians 11:5. Luke also mentioned several specific female prophets, such as Anna (Luke 2:36) and the four daughters of Philip of Caesarea (Acts 21:9). In addition, Luke attributed prophetic characteristics to Elizabeth (Luke 1:41-45) and Mary, the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:46-55).¹²

Women could also function as prophets during the second and third centuries. We find evidence for such female prophets in writings of Justin Martyr (ca. 100-168),

Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130-202), and Origen, who all agreed that both men and women were the recipients of the gift of prophecy. We have references to the prophetesses Theonoe, Myrta, Ammia, Priscilla, Maximilla, and Philomena, as well as prophetic women who appear in Tertullian's writings, along with an unnamed woman from Cappadocia.¹³ Interestingly, female prophets, like deaconesses, were also responsible for the instruction and baptism of women.¹⁴

By the third century, the roles of martyr and confessor began to replace that of the prophet.¹⁵ Through martyrdom, women could transcend the supposed limitations of their sex in their identification with Christ in his suffering.¹⁶ Both male and female martyrs and confessors (those who were imprisoned and released) could exercise vast power while imprisoned and sometimes, as with the Montanists, even after release from prison. The best example of one such powerful woman is that of Perpetua, who was martyred at Carthage in 203.

While imprisoned, Perpetua came to be addressed with such honorary titles as "Lady sister" by one of her brothers and as "Lady" by her father. In her prison diary, she recorded, "My brother then said to me, 'My lady sister, you have already earned such great honor that surely you may ask for a vision to learn whether you must suffer or be granted a reprieve.'" Later, she wrote of her father, saying, "Weeping, he no longer called me 'daughter' but 'Lady,'" and, "He prostrated himself before me and cursed the years of his life, speaking the kinds of words that would move every living creature." Perpetua also noted that she was revered even by the prison warden, writing, "After a few days, an officer named Pudens, the warden of the prison, began to notice us with respect for he observed that there was some great power in us."¹⁷ She, as with other martyrs and

confessors, was thought to possess the power to forgive the sins of those who had died as non-Christians. Perpetua, for example, prayed for her dead brother Dinocrates, after which she received a vision confirming the success of her intercessory prayers.¹⁸

Despite such familiar verses as 1 Timothy 2:12 which aimed to prohibit women from assuming the role of teacher, women could and frequently did assume this position with the approval of the church. In the early church, the role of “teacher” was held not only by those belonging to an explicit group of teachers, but also by apostles, prophets, widows, deacons, presbyters, and bishops. As we have already seen, women were among these apostles and prophets and therefore possessed the authority to teach, but women could also function solely as teachers. For example, at Acts 18:26, we read about Priscilla, who functioned as the theological teacher of Apollos, a man who, by the time he met Priscilla, had already converted to Christianity and been educated in the Scriptures.¹⁹

According to epigraphical and literary evidence, women could also function as presbyters and bishops in the early church. As presbyters (priests), women would have held authority over other male and female clergy, such as deacons and elders, and worshipers. They, unlike other members of the clergy, would have celebrated the Eucharist in addition to the performance of other sacramental and liturgical duties. Inscriptions from second through fourth century tombstones mention female presbyters named Ammion, Epikto, Artemidora from Asia Minor, Greece, and Egypt, respectively. Though it is from the fourth century, we also have literary evidence from Epiphanius, who wrote of and criticized Christian communities that allowed women to serve as presbyters and bishops.²⁰

With regard to female bishops, although they are frequently referred to in tombstone inscriptions, they are generally and incorrectly assumed to have been merely the wives of bishops. Given that the earliest bishops functioned as community administrators and are mentioned in general in the New Testament without a particular gender prescription, it is probable that many women did, in fact, serve this role. The leaders of house churches, such as Priscilla,²¹ Lydia,²² Nympha, Tavia, and the widow of Epitropus were examples of such early female bishops.²³ Not only could women function as bishops in this fashion, but they were also appointed as bishops in the more traditional sense in that they oversaw metropolitan church communities, whether Montanist or of mainstream Christianity.²⁴ As Jo Ann McNamara wrote, “As directors of house churches, where communal meals were organized, charity dispensed, and hospitality given to itinerant preachers, they could put themselves at the center of a new social grouping.”²⁵

Thus, it is clear that women’s roles within the pre-Constantinian church were extensive as was also the range of authority that they could command. Not only could women exercise the traditionally recognized offices of widow and deaconess, but they could also wield a significant amount of influence as apostles, prophets, martyrs, teachers, presbyters, and even bishops. We must now direct our attention to the cultural elements from Greco-Roman, Jewish, and early Christian societies which enabled women to acquire such roles during the first centuries of the church.

In Roman religion, there was a practice of emphasizing the similarities between men and women through the portrayals of goddesses, elite women, and female worshippers all pursuing the activities and practices characteristic of men. This did have

its benefits as it helped to elevate the status of all Roman women, enabling even lower-class women to pursue similar careers and activities as men. However, at the same time Greek misogynistic attitudes permeated Roman society.²⁶ It was, after all, Sophocles who said, “Silence is a woman’s glory.”²⁷ Despite the efforts to show how women and men were similar, the pervading belief that all women were the same and inferior to men held sway throughout the centuries. From ancient Greek society, the Romans adopted the identification of women with the domestic sphere. The primarily female cults that existed within Roman society, such as those devoted to Bacchus or Demeter and Persephone, also attest to this perception of women as a collective, inferior whole, rather than individuals with different abilities.²⁸

Although the all-female religious cults were based on a negative view of women, they as well as non-gendered exclusive cults offered opportunities for women to exercise leadership roles. Women in Roman society wielded a large amount of influence in the cults devoted to goddesses, such as the Egyptian goddess Isis, as well as the radical mystery cults.²⁹ The fact that Roman paganism was made up of localized cults instead of a common religion under centralized authority allowed women to act as religious leaders in their communities throughout the Mediterranean world.³⁰ Through religion, whether paganism, Judaism, or Christianity, Roman women exercised a certain degree of limited autonomy that was otherwise impossible in secular life.³¹ In pagan cults, however, the strict requirement of female chastity set paganism apart from early Christianity in that it inhibited the freedom of women to a much greater degree.³² For example, the Vestal Virgins, who were free of male authority, suffered capital punishment for breaking their vows of chastity.³³

Another interesting influence upon Christianity from Greco-Roman society was the custom of benefaction, the practice of the upper-class members of society providing support for those of the lower-class, their clients, who in turn “bestowed honor on their patrons and were subject to their authority.” This practice was quite popular in early Christianity, as illustrated by the New Testament figures of Lydia and Phoebe, both of whom, acting as patrons, provided Paul with the resources for his missions.³⁴ As benefactors, these women controlled the purse strings, so to speak, of the early Christian churches. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that this function gave certain women a great degree of leverage with regard to the administration of their Christian communities.

As in Greco-Roman society, women in Jewish society were limited in the types of roles and the amount of authority they could exercise. Jewish women were restricted in their participation in the temple cult in that their only duties or privileges were to bring sacrifices and, for those belonging to priestly families, to eat of certain sacrifices. Though women’s access to higher Jewish learning was also limited, they did attend synagogues and a few acted as heads of the synagogues, as members of the council of elders, or by providing financial assistance to synagogues.³⁵

The misogynistic attitudes held by these patriarchal societies influenced the position of women in the early Christian Church. As a result, the Church adopted views based on the dominant perception of women as dangerous beings.³⁶ Compared to the influences of the fourth century and later, however, Greco-Roman and Jewish misogynistic attitudes seem to have had a minimal impact on the roles of women in the early church.

Many factors ranging from early Christian theology to the loose structure of the

Apostolic Church enabled women to exercise a wide variety of roles in the early church. Based on the epigraphical and literary evidence, it is clear that these roles were frequently identical to those held by men.

According to Suzanne Wemple, in the Greco-Roman world, “Christianity became a liberating force in the lives of women.”³⁷ Here, an extremely important theological factor was the Christian notion of spiritual equality among men and women, as it was laid out by Paul of Tarsus in Galatians 3:28, which reads, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”³⁸ We see this ideal manifested in the elimination of the marital double standard between men and women. In Christian marriages, husbands were expected to love, respect, and remain faithful to their wives. Though Christian women were still expected to function primarily as housewives, as Henry Chadwick wrote in his history of the early church, “Christianity cut across ordinary social patterns more deeply than any other religion...”³⁹

Christian society not only elevated the status of women with respect to their husbands, but it also elevated the status of lower class women with respect to their elite contemporaries. Early Christian society, unlike the surrounding Roman society, offered women of lower social classes a new sense of significance.⁴⁰ While it was primarily lower class women who were initially attracted to Christianity, by the end of the second century Christianity was beginning to take hold among the upper class as well, frequently through the wives of aristocrats.⁴¹

Also significant was that, as mentioned above, chastity was not nearly as important in the early church as it was in pagan cults and as it would become by the fourth century. As chapter two will show, the push to enforce chastity among the clergy

in the fourth century was due primarily to the perception of women's bodies as contaminating or evil. The earthly nature of the female body as perceived by the male populous became the basis upon which women were increasingly restricted not only from the ministry but even from contact with male clergy. This movement began to gain momentum in the third century as an effect of Tertullian's writings.

The internal structure of the early church and its position in society also contributed to the autonomy and influence of women in pre-Constantinian Christianity. First of all, during the first century, Christians were an anti-social group totally unconcerned with political affairs and noted for their "indifference to the possession of power in this world."⁴² This low level of political ambition slowed the process of corruption among the church leaders. In addition, the early church lacked a hierarchical structure, which allowed for community participation and equality in the administration of the church. Even while the hierarchy was evolving during the early period of the church, it remained astonishingly underdeveloped up until the fourth century.⁴³

A final, significant, factor in making it possible for women to exercise roles of authority in the early church was the Montanist movement, also known as the "New Prophecy". The movement developed in the late second century in Phrygia in Asia Minor under the influence of a man named Montanus, along with two women named Priscilla and Maximilla. Though Montanism was soon rejected by the church as heretical, this rejection was not so much based on theological grounds, but rather on the Montanist practice of voluntary martyrdom.⁴⁴ Through Montanism, women were able to more freely exercise leadership roles than they could in the dominant form of contemporary Christianity. As Chadwick concluded, "The prominence of women in

Montanism revived the relatively high participation of women in the life of the early Church.”⁴⁵

Due to its emphasis on voluntary martyrdom, the New Prophecy gave women a much greater potential to exercise ministerial authority as confessor-martyrs. Frederick C. Klawiter, an associate professor of religion, stated, “it is highly probable that from the beginnings of Montanism, women were permitted to rise to ministerial status through their role as confessor-martyrs in the early Christian church.” Perpetua was one such example of a Montanist woman who was able to gain a significant amount of power and influence while imprisoned.⁴⁶

As has been shown, many factors from Greco-Roman and Jewish societies, in addition to elements from early Christianity, aided in defining the roles that were available to women in the early church. However, despite the initial liberating effect of early Christianity, these Greco-Roman, Jewish, and early Christian influences combined with a shift in the power structure of the church to provide fuel for many attacks that would soon be brought to bear against the authority of women. We must now turn our attention to the causes and effects of this shift in the balance of power.

The earliest Christian communities were characterized by a lack of hierarchy.⁴⁷ The first form of a rough hierarchical structure in the early church is found in 1 Corinthians 12:28 (c.55 CE)⁴⁸ in Paul’s ordering of the spiritual gifts: first are the apostles, then the prophets, teachers, miracle-workers, healers, helpers, and lastly, administrators. By the late first century, the hierarchy had developed into a two-tiered structure of bishops/presbyters and deacons. Among the presbyters of church communities, one presbyter eventually acquired authority over the whole, received the

title of 'bishop' and was seen as first among equals. These churches may have been following the examples set by those at Jerusalem and Antioch, which from the beginning had had a single authority figure over the entire body of elders.⁴⁹

During the second century, this two-tiered hierarchical system developed a third level: deacons.⁵⁰ Also during the second century, the notion of 'office' and the distinction between clergy and laity began to take hold. This distinction became more pronounced during the third century, when there also developed a distinction between higher clergy (bishops, presbyters, and deacons) and lower clergy (confessors, widows, readers, virgins, subdeacons, and healers).⁵¹ During the third century we also see a rise in the significance of the episcopates of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch.⁵² It is interesting to note that the pre-Constantinian church managed to amass some wealth, despite its precarious position within the empire. By the year 251, the Roman church was providing financial support for 153 persons including its bishop, presbyters, deacons and subdeacons, acolytes, exorcists, readers and doorkeepers, as well as over 1500 widows and poor persons.⁵³

This shift in the power structure of the church came as a response to the growing need to establish authority in the face of divergent Christian sects, doctrinal disputes, and the desire for acceptance within Roman society. One obvious divergent sect was Montanism, which proved itself to be a viable competitor of the church. Also a threat to the authority of the church was Gnosticism, a system of beliefs and practices which were based on "theosophical adaptations of Christianity propagated by a dozen or more rival sects which broke with the early church between A.D. 80 and 150."⁵⁴

Among the doctrinal disputes which created divisions in the early church were the dating of Easter and the Monarchian controversy, both of which developed during the late second century. The Monarchian controversy arose in response to Justin Martyr's Logos theory, which stated that the divine Logos was actually another god. The church, however, insisted in the existence of a single 'monarchia'; in other words, there was only one eternal, all-powerful being: God. In the third century, this controversy culminated in a heated disagreement between the eastern churches and those in the west.⁵⁵ These rifts further accentuated the need of the early church to establish a centralized religious authority.

As Chadwick asserted in his history of the early church, "From the start the Christians were a society abnormally sensitive to outside opinion. The enemies that they had to conquer were prejudice and misinformation." He argued that it was the prominence of women in the early church that led to the efforts to exclude them from influential roles.⁵⁶ Margaret Y. MacDonald, in her essay "Rereading Paul: Early Interpreters of Paul on Women and Gender," stressed that the first-century apostolic church was receiving harsh criticism from the surrounding community based on its value of women as prophets and leaders in the church.⁵⁷

As a result of these challenges, the church took several measures in order to cement its authority. First, bishops came to be seen as God's earthly representatives and the successors of the apostles. We see this expressed in the early second century in Ignatius of Antioch's assertion that "we ought to regard the bishop as the Lord himself." Secondly, the Montanists and their New Prophecy made it clear to the church that an authority needed to be established with regard to spiritual revelation. This resulted in the

formation of the New Testament canon during the second through fourth centuries, which gave the church a new degree of authority to exercise against its opponents, such as the Gnostics and Montanists, who did not possess such a document. Also, the church developed its 'Rule of Faith', which primarily advocated the "unity of the divine plan from Old Testament to New," far different from the Gnostic distaste for the Old Testament and the creator of the earth, whom they believed not to be the supreme god.⁵⁸

Amid the attempts to solidify its religious authority and dismantle any potential threats, the church also focused many of its reforms on women and the roles they should exercise in Christian society and religion. Starting in the late first century through the mid second century, the Pastoral Epistles were written. These documents (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus), which were attributed to Paul (though his actual authorship is hotly contested), exhibit a marked change from the undisputed letters of Paul in their attempts to restrict the leadership roles of women, especially widows, in the church.⁵⁹

Unlike Paul's recommendation in 1 Corinthians 7:39-40 that all widows remain unmarried, the author of 1 Timothy 5:14 declared, "So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander." Further, the author argued that in order for a widow to be enrolled and receive support from the community, she must be at least sixty years old, have been married only once, raised children, and been of a hospitable, charitable, and benevolent character. In addition to limiting who could be enrolled as a widow, the Pastoral Epistles restricted the activities of widows to solely that of prayer. Despite the advice given in these letters, widows were, however, able to maintain their high level of influence within Christian

communities, as evidenced by the further attempts at their restriction made during the third century.⁶⁰

With regard to women in general, the author of the Pastoral Epistles demanded that, in the structure of the church, women should submit to the authority of men, meanwhile exhibiting feminine modesty and virtue and acquiring their salvation through motherhood and domestic responsibilities. The author also forbade women to teach and lead prayer in public in addition to excluding them from the offices of bishops, elders, and deacons. As the evidence from the first section of this chapter has demonstrated, women were able, despite these challenges, to maintain many influential roles in Christian communities. In this period, however, the increasing power of bishops and other male clergy allowed the church, by the end of the second century, to push to the periphery the Christian communities in which women still exercised influential roles.⁶¹

In the third century, we see an increase in the amount of argumentation against women's leadership roles within the church as well as an increase in the level of restraint being argued for. Tertullian (ca. 155-230) was one source of such argumentation. This seems unusual, as Tertullian ascribed to Montanism later in life, which as we know was more favorable towards women serving as leaders within the church. Still, the puritanical Montanist ethic led Tertullian to believe in the absolute necessity of sexual abstinence, leading him to conclude that women were sexually dangerous. In addition to calling women "the gateway of the devil," he commanded them to bow their heads to their husbands, spend their time at home spinning wool, and dress themselves in the "silk of modesty, with the linen of holiness, and with the purple of chastity."⁶² Tertullian also

vehemently argued that women should not speak in church, teach, baptize, make the offering, or hold a priestly office.⁶³

As a result of the teachings of Paul, Tertullian and Origen, the requirement of clerical celibacy began to develop during the third century, although it remained unpopular until the fourth century. Both Tertullian and Origen attacked the institution of marriage, especially among the clergy, for reasons including their assertion that women were burdens upon their husbands.⁶⁴ Tertullian, in his *On Purity*, argued that purity was no less than the complete renunciation of lust. He was outraged at the pronouncement that a particular bishop was willing to forgive the sins of adultery and fornication. He criticized those who eagerly sought a second marriage and justified themselves by citing Paul's statement at 1 Corinthians 7:9 that those who cannot control their lusts should get married.⁶⁵ Instead, Tertullian argued that Paul's real desire was for all to completely abstain from marriage based on the Apostle's declaration at 1 Corinthians 7:1 that "it is good for a man not to marry."⁶⁶ He made the same argument in a letter to his wife and in *An Exhortation to Chastity*.⁶⁷

In addition to the documents written by Tertullian and Origen, the *Apostolic Tradition* also served to marginalize the roles of women, especially that of widows, in the church. Written in the early third century by a Roman presbyter named Hippolytus, this work argued that widows were no longer to be ordained to their office, nor were they to be given any specific duties. However, Hippolytus's views only took hold in the eastern churches, and not until the fourth century.⁶⁸

Also from the third century came the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, probably written in Syria or Palestine, which aimed to elevate the status of the bishop, but which delimited

the roles of women in the church. According to the *Didascalia*, widows were to do only what was asked of them by the bishop and deacons. They were to seek permission in order to accept donations and fast with, pray over, or lay hands on anyone. Widows were not allowed to baptize or engage in any sort of ministry, and they were expected to be silent and remain at home. At the same time, the *Didascalia* recognized the office of deaconess, the duties of which were to assist in female baptisms, instruct newly-baptized women, and visit ill Christian women.⁶⁹ Still, the influence of women who exercised the office of deaconess in the late third century was considerably less than that of their counterparts in the first century.⁷⁰

It is clear that many male authorities within the church of the second and third centuries wished to dramatically reduce the influence that women held and they made efforts to do so. Despite these attempts to restrict the roles of women, especially during the third century, women were able to maintain a significant amount of power and influence. Let us now turn our attention to those forces which enabled women to maintain their leadership roles in the Apostolic Church despite the challenges posed by the developing male hierarchy.

The primary reason women were able to maintain much of their power and influence in the early church was that the development of the church hierarchy was extremely handicapped up until the early fourth century. From the time of the apostolic church until the reign of Constantine the Great (ca. 272-337), the church suffered from sporadic persecutions. From 1 Thessalonians 2:14, we learn of the persecution suffered by the Palestinian church at the hands of other Jews. Also, the emperor Nero persecuted the Christians, blaming them for the fire that destroyed much of Rome in the year 64 CE.

In the early second century, the Christians suffered at the hands of Pliny under the emperor Trajan, causing many Christians to return to paganism. In 177, the Christians were persecuted under Marcus Aurelius, in 202 in Carthage under Septimius Severus, and in the 250s under Decius and also Valerian. In 303 under the emperor Diocletian, an edict was issued demanding the destruction of all churches, the surrender of all Bibles, liturgical books, and sacred vessels, and the cessation of all Christian gatherings. Soon after, Diocletian ordered the arrest of the clergy, and in 304 all Roman citizens were forced to sacrifice or suffer the death penalty.⁷¹

Evidence of the hindering effect that the persecutions had on the advancement of the church hierarchy can be found in the examples of bishops Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) and Dionysius of Alexandria (who held office from 248-264), who were forced to go into hiding under the persecutions of Decius in the middle of the third century. Also at this time the bishops of Rome, Antioch, and Jerusalem were martyred, and the office of bishop in Rome was to remain unoccupied for over a year. The most damaging effect of the persecutions was, as Henry Chadwick put it, schism. When Stephen became the bishop of Rome in 254, a controversy emerged between Rome and Carthage, leading Stephen to denounce Cyprian as the antichrist while claiming himself to be the successor of Peter, Christ's apostle. Christians were divided on the level of submission to the Roman authorities which was to be considered acceptable. As a result, the Donatist schism and a schism in Egypt were formed.⁷² This breakdown in the church structure caused a decentralization of authority, allowing women to continue to operate as powerful members of their Christian communities.

In summary, women exercised a wide variety of influential roles in the pre-

Constantinian church. They functioned as apostles, prophets, martyrs, teachers, presbyters, deacons, widows, benefactors, and even bishops. But with the onslaught of religious controversies, the church took steps to create a more centralized church authority. As the hierarchical structure of the church developed and as bishops and clergy increased in power, the church made efforts to restrict the influence of women. After all, not only were women interfering with the control that male religious authorities were attempting to exert on the community, but their activities in the church invited criticism from the surrounding society. Despite these challenges, however, women continued to maintain a large degree of influence, though they were gradually being pushed to the periphery. Had it not been for the frequent and harsh persecutions suffered by the church, which hindered the development of a hierarchy, the suppression of women would have occurred much more rapidly. As it was, however, the suffering church of the first three centuries made possible a great degree of freedom and power for the women who served in it.

¹ Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 1-12.

² Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 224.

³ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 1.

⁴ Jo Ann McNamara, "Matres Patriae/Matres Ecclesiae: Women of the Roman Empire," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 2nd ed., ed. Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 119.

⁵ Francine Cardman, "Women, Ministry, and Church Order in Early Christianity," in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 304.

⁶ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 148-152.

⁷ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 13-14, 185.

⁸ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 48-50.

⁹ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 47.

¹⁰ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 50.

¹¹ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 51.

¹² Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 68-69.

¹³ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 70-73.

¹⁴ McNamara, "Matres Patriae", 119.

¹⁵ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 71.

¹⁶ Gail Corrington Streete, "Women as Sources of Redemption and Knowledge in Early Christian Traditions," in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 351.

¹⁷ Perpetua, "The Prison Journal and Dreams of Perpetua," in *The Writings of Medieval Women: an Anthology*, trans. Marcelle Thiebaut (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), 10-14.

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- ¹⁸ Frederick C. Klawiter, "The Role of Martyrdom and Persecution in Developing the Priestly Authority of Women in Early Christianity: A Case Study of Montanism," *Church History* 49 (1980): 254-257; Brent D. Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," *Past and Present* 139 (1993): 7.
- ¹⁹ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 100.
- ²⁰ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 116-128.
- ²¹ 1 Cor. 16.19 New International Version.
- ²² Acts 16.14-15 NIV.
- ²³ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 206.
- ²⁴ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 209.
- ²⁵ McNamara, "Matres Patriae", 119.
- ²⁶ Judith P. Hallett, "Women's Lives in the Ancient Mediterranean," in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 27-31.
- ²⁷ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 53.
- ²⁸ Hallett, "Women's Lives", 32-34.
- ²⁹ McNamara, "Matres Patriae", 111.
- ³⁰ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 72.
- ³¹ Averil Cameron, "Neither Male nor Female," *Greece and Rome* 27 (1980): 63.
- ³² Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500-900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 129.
- ³³ McNamara, "Matres Patriae", 112.
- ³⁴ Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Rereading Paul: Early Interpreters of Paul on Women and Gender," in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 239.
- ³⁵ Ross S. Kraemer, "Jewish Women and Women's Judaism(s) at the Beginning of Christianity," in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 62-72.
- ³⁶ Margaret A. Farley, "Sources of Sexual Inequality in the History of Christian Thought," *The Journal of Religion* 56 (1976): 164.
- ³⁷ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 191.
- ³⁸ Gal. 3.28 NIV.
- ³⁹ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 58-59.
- ⁴⁰ Hallett, "Women's Lives", 31.

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- ⁴¹ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 29.
- ⁴² Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 69.
- ⁴³ Christoph Marksches, *Between Two Worlds: Structures of Earliest Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1999), 173.
- ⁴⁴ Klawiter, "A Case Study of Montanism," 251-254.
- ⁴⁵ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 53.
- ⁴⁶ Klawiter, "A Case Study of Montanism," 251-257.
- ⁴⁷ Marksches, *Between Two Worlds*, 173 and 184.
- ⁴⁸ Kenneth L. Barker et al., eds., *Zondervan NIV Study Bible (Fully Revised)* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 1773.
- ⁴⁹ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 46-50.
- ⁵⁰ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 51.
- ⁵¹ Marksches, *Between Two Worlds*, 188 and 193-194.
- ⁵² Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 51.
- ⁵³ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 57-58.
- ⁵⁴ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 34.
- ⁵⁵ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 84-86 and 114.
- ⁵⁶ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 53 and 55.
- ⁵⁷ MacDonald, "Rereading Paul," 238.
- ⁵⁸ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 28-29, 41-44 and 53.
- ⁵⁹ Cardman, "Women, Ministry, and Church Order," 245-249.
- ⁶⁰ Cardman, "Women, Ministry, and Church Order," 245-249 and 302-305.
- ⁶¹ Cardman, "Women, Ministry, and Church Order," 246 and 303-305.
- ⁶² Tertullian, "The Appearance of Women," in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 50-58; Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 91-92.
- ⁶³ Cardman, "Women, Ministry, and Church Order," 307.
- ⁶⁴ Marksches, *Between Two Worlds*, 197; Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 129-130.
- ⁶⁵ Tertullian, "On Purity," in *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 28, *Tertullian: Treatises on Penance*, eds. Johannes Quasten and Walter J. Bughardt, trans. William P. Le Saint (Westminster: The Newman Press,

1959), 53-54.

⁶⁶ Tertullian, "On Purity," 100.

⁶⁷ Tertullian, "To His Wife" and "An Exhortation to Chastity," in *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 13, *Tertullian: Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage*, eds. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, trans. William P. Le Saint (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1956), 12-14 and 47-50.

⁶⁸ Cardman, "Women, Ministry, and Church Order," 305-308.

⁶⁹ Cardman, "Women, Ministry, and Church Order," 308-314.

⁷⁰ Cardman, "Women, Ministry, and Church Order," 304.

⁷¹ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 21-121.

⁷² Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 122-124.

Chapter Two The Edict of Milan to the Fall of Rome

Beginning with the Edict of Milan in 313 under the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (272-337) and cemented under the Emperor Theodosius in 381, the Christian church was transformed from a group of persecuted outcasts into a body comprised of some of the most powerful and influential figures in Roman society. With this sudden increase in power showered upon select males within the church came a dramatic upsurge of religious conflict and the perceived need to delineate orthodox and heretical Christian doctrine. It was in this context that women and the roles they played within the church became the focus of passionate religious discussion among the most prominent members of the Church throughout the fourth and fifth centuries. This chapter will investigate why the religious roles of women, that originally had allowed females a great deal of autonomy and influence within the early church, were so ardently challenged during this period. This chapter will also attempt to answer why, despite the challenges posed them, many women continued to play a large role in the post-Constantinian church. My research will clearly demonstrate that women's roles within the church during the fourth and fifth centuries were challenged primarily because the increasing prestige of the episcopate created a highly competitive atmosphere which, when combined with a deep-seated misogyny, catalyzed an increase in the oppression of women. However, my work will also argue that women were able to maintain a great degree of autonomy because of the instability within the church and the Roman Empire at this time.

As chapter one has shown, the Christian communities in which women functioned as leaders were pushed outside the norm of church practice by the end of the third

century.¹ Despite this disadvantageous shift, many women in the fourth and fifth centuries were still able to function as highly influential members of Christian society as deaconesses, monastic foundresses (and their successors), anchoresses, widows, and virgins. As Gillian Cloke declared, “There were large numbers of extremely active women of high-profile piety at this time, some of them enormously wealthy, powerful and influential, the stars of their contemporary Christian stage no less than the men.” Within the church hierarchy itself, the only office now available to women during this period was that of the deaconess. In some churches, especially in the east, deaconesses were ordained by the laying on of hands. Generally, any woman could qualify for the office of deaconess as long as she had a reputation of good character and agreed to remain celibate once the title of deaconess was conferred upon her.²

The activities of the deaconesses were the same as those performed by the deacons, except the female deacons could only minister to other women. The deaconesses instructed women, prepared them for baptism, and anointed their bodies after baptism. In addition to pastoral and liturgical duties, deaconesses also served as intermediaries between female members of the laity and the clergy and as doorkeepers on the women’s side of the church. In addition, many deaconesses chose to combine their roles within the church with the responsibilities of heading a community, an act which limited the exercise of what authority they did have within the general church.³ Unfortunately, it appears that the office of deaconess had for the most part died out in the western half of the empire by the end of the fifth century.⁴

This brings us to the next category of influential women during the fourth and fifth centuries: monastic foundresses and their successors. These extremely powerful

women were the heads of female monastic communities, many of which they themselves established. Paula (ca. 347-404) and Melania the Elder (d 410) were excellent examples of women who established fairly large monastic communities. Although many of these women were of high social status and/or the close relatives of prominent patristic thinkers such as Ambrose and Augustine of Hippo, such wealth and connections were not necessary, as we have examples of women from both ends of the social spectrum who functioned as prominent heads of communities. For example, we have records of a Mother Theodora, a lower-class woman who functioned as the abbess of a convent during the fourth century, whose wisdom was widely sought after, especially by monks.⁵

If a lower-class woman could exercise some influence and power within society during this period, the sway held by aristocratic women was immeasurable. As Gillian Cloke wrote of these audacious women:

For this is the other side to the dynamic leadership exercised by pious aristocratic women in this twilight period of the Roman empire: armed with their moral righteousness, they would sally unconcernedly into battle with formidable authorities fortified by the knowledge that when they took up the cudgels for a foray into the men's preserve of public affairs, because of the 'special' motivation, they would likely receive support and approbation, not vilification, for their unwomanly behavior.⁶

Several of these women were the companions of patristic thinkers such as Jerome, Augustine, and Chrysostom. Paula, Eustochium (d. 418), and Marcella (325-410), for example, influenced much of Jerome's work as they pushed him to supply them with critical analyses and answers to textual and spiritual questions.⁷

Throughout Jerome's letters to his female pupils, there appeared several examples of his high regard for women and the important roles that they played in the church in the late fourth century. In his letter to Eustochium, he addressed her as "Lady,"⁸ "daughter,"

“fellow-servant,” and “sister.”⁹ He commended Asella, writing, “God alone is able to give the reward due your pure spirit.”¹⁰ Again, regarding Paula, he wrote, “But when, recognizing the holiness of her life, I began to revere, respect, and venerate her, all my good qualities at once forsook me.”¹¹ Likewise, he wrote to Furia that he wished men would follow the example of women, and that her father should learn from her.¹²

Jerome’s letters also show a great amount of respect for the intellect of his female disciples. In his letter to Principia, he criticized those who judged virtue based on the sex, rather than on the mind, of a person.¹³ Writing to Eustochium, he advised her, “Read often and learn all you can. Let sleep steal upon you with a book in your hand, and let the sacred page catch your drooping head.”¹⁴ About Eustochium he also wrote,

Oh, if you could see your sister, and be allowed to listen to the eloquence of her holy lips, and behold the mighty spirit that dwells within her small body! Oh, if you could hear the whole contents of the Old and New Testament come bubbling from her heart!¹⁵

Another excellent example of Jerome’s high regard for the feminine mind is in his memoir of Marcella. In addition to praising her widowhood, modesty, and generosity, he also applauded her tenacious study of the Scriptures.¹⁶ Jerome admired Marcella’s aptitude for theology, claiming that “she first sipped, then learned, and finally took for her own” all that he had “gathered together by long study, and by constant meditation made a part of [his] nature.”¹⁷

Included in Jerome’s veneration of Marcella’s intellect was an intriguing explanation for the controversial passage frequently cited by those who desire to suppress the influence of women. According to Jerome, when the apostle Paul said at 1 Timothy 2:12, “I do not permit a woman to teach,” it was in order to keep from offending the men of the patriarchal Roman society. Consequently, Jerome exalted Marcella for teaching

Roman men while pretending the instruction she was giving was from Jerome or another man.¹⁸ Exceptions were made even to this rule, and Marcella was commended for boldly challenging a “heretic,” having “publicly withstood him, choosing to please God rather than men.”¹⁹

Between 350 and 450, Marcella, Melania the Elder, Melania the Younger (ca. 383-439), and Olympias (ca. 360-408) were also influential heads of communities who, like deaconesses, served as the theological instructors and assistants during baptism of other women. Melania the Elder, for example, had an enormous impact on the church officials of her time and was a key figure in the mending of a division in the church at Antioch. Her daughter, Melania the Younger, was known for her church-building and her healing powers. She exercised sole authority over church and monastic compounds, which included prescribing the daily round of prayer, providing for the welfare and administering the discipline of her nuns. Olympias, also vastly influential, exercised a firm grasp on Nectarius, the bishop of Constantinople. Later, she functioned as a formidable defender of Nectarius’ successor, John Chrysostom (347-407), when he was removed from the see of Constantinople. As Cloke wrote of Olympias’ relationship with Chrysostom, “She was one of his main instruments and sources of intelligence while he was in exile.”²⁰

A third religious role which women could play during the fourth and fifth centuries was that of the anchoress, an especially popular choice for women in the eastern empire. These ascetic women abandoned all of their worldly possessions, entered into the seclusion of eremitic monasticism, and spent their lives in full devotion to God. Frequently, these women posed as men for the purposes of gaining greater respect and

avoiding sexual harassment by monks, as it was not uncommon for those who chose to maintain a female identity to have to rebuke monks who had propositioned them. With the adoption of the ascetic lifestyle came the honor and influence inherent in being regarded as ‘holy’, ‘soldiers of Christ’, ‘renowned’, and ‘known for virtue’. Pelagia was one example of these anchoresses, who entered the ascetic life, posing as a male, after renouncing her former occupation as courtesan and actress. Her fellow monks so revered her that upon her death and their discovery of her true sex, they began to shout, “Glory to you, Lord Jesus Christ, who has such treasures hidden away on earth, women as well as men.”²¹

Another way in which women were able to exert influence in the early church was through their positions as widows, the most influential of whom were able to make their own rules “according to their own circumstances and inclinations,” living lives of considerable autonomy. Melania, Marcella, Paula, and Blesilla were examples of widows who refused to remarry and who “regarded the station as a commandment to greater devotional and ascetic efforts.”²² Although its functions had been drastically reduced during the third century, the office of widow managed to survive until the end of the fourth century when it was absorbed by the office of deaconess. In their communities, widows represented the “quest for a perfected lifestyle and a mission to the younger women in the community.”²³

For devout women during this time period, the highest status they could attain in society came from pledging to remain virgins throughout the entirety of their lives. Virgins were expected to live in almost complete seclusion except for during periods of worship. They were to follow a “regime of frequent prayer, study and some physical

work, combined with fasting and deprivation.” It was thought that the virgins, unhindered by the world and sexuality, were the source of untainted power within their communities, “lending sanctity and the luster of their dedication to those around them.” In addition to providing their Christian communities with the prestige of having virgins in their midst, these women were also frequently the sources of large monetary donations to their churches. Not only did this lifestyle of abstinence glorify those who undertook it, but it also further elevated their frequently already-distinguished families.²⁴

In examining the various ways by which women gained religious power and influence within Roman society of the fourth and fifth centuries, we witness a unifying trend: there was an increasing amount of attention given to sexuality and a rising importance placed on celibacy. Already in the third century there was a growth in the stigma attached to women’s bodies as seen in the writings of Tertullian. It was then that we first witness martyrdom being used as the means for women to transcend their sexual ‘limitations.’²⁵ As Cloke affirmed, martyrdom allowed women to “aspire to the very pinnacle of Christian regard.”²⁶

In the fourth and fifth centuries there was a dramatic development in the necessity of women to disassociate themselves with their sex, especially if they were to be seen as virtuous and praiseworthy members of Christian society. The virtue of women was judged in the context of their being female rather than in comparison to Christian achievements in general. When patristic writers from the period commented on women they deemed virtuous, they emphasized their female sex, not to elevate the commonly held low regard for women, but rather to show how these virtuous women “surpassed their sex.” In this society, virtue implied masculinity, and many women themselves felt

compelled to disassociate themselves with their gender. Such women used confrontational, aggressive, or in other words, ‘masculine’ tactics in order to achieve this end, as we have seen with many of the women mentioned above, regardless of social status.²⁷ Perpetua of Carthage was a perfect third-century example of a woman who employed masculine imagery to express her spiritual triumph. In her prison diary, she recorded a vision in which she became a male athlete who engaged in combat with an Egyptian and was victorious. She wrote, “I awoke then, knowing that I would have to fight not against beasts but against the Devil, and that I would win,” and later referred to her upcoming execution, along with other commentators, as a “battle”.²⁸

Other women, however, sought virtue by embracing their ‘femaleness’. As Cloke explained of these women with regard to femininity, “They accepted with complete passivity its innate subjection and being submissive to the harshest of its burdens; then turning these to advantage.” Cloke lists Alexandra the maid-servant and Maryana, the girl-monk, as two extreme examples of such femininity-embracing women, “who displayed total, accepting passivity in taking on sins which they had not committed.” Their ‘femininity’ led male monks to envy the humility and sorrowful repentance that these women displayed, thereby placing these women in positions of significant influence over their male peers.²⁹

The increasing negative associations attached to femininity during this period were due to several factors. One, as already mentioned, was the association of virtue with masculinity. Other factors were the identification of women with evil and the identification of the *imago Dei* (the image of God) with men. The first of these, the identification of women with evil, has its roots in the perception of the body as inferior to

the soul or mind and of being earthly and corrupted. This belief led to a fear of sexuality, which, according to Margaret A. Farley, always led to misogynistic attitudes in society. Christianity inherited these perceptions from the Hebrew myths about the Fall and its connections between nakedness and shame, Hellenistic philosophical dualisms (Neoplatonism), ancient blood taboos, and “the rise of an ‘alienated experience of bodily reality’ in every religion in late antiquity, and a fear of passion as an enemy of contemplation.” As a result, Christian women had to either identify with their bodies and redeem them through reproduction or disassociate themselves from their bodies through virginity.³⁰

Not only did Neoplatonism play a role in the identification of women with evil, but it also served in the identification of men with the full *imago Dei*. Men were identified with the mind and the soul, while women were identified with the earthly body. In nature, the body submits to the will of the mind, and it was believed that women must therefore submit to men. Because of this philosophical dualism, it was believed that only in spirit could Christian women bear the full expression of the *imago Dei*, though in body it was believed that only men reflected the image of God. As Farley elaborated, “the central stumbling blocks to attributing the full *imago Dei* to woman have been the failure to find femininity in God, the insistence that woman is derivative from and hence secondary to man, the assumption that woman is characterized by passivity, and the tendency to identify woman with bodiliness as opposed to transcendent mind.”³¹

Also a contributing force in defining the ways in which women could exercise influence within Christian society was the increasing importance given to celibacy due to the rising view that sexuality was incompatible with the priesthood. Christianity had

adopted the Jewish perception of sex as a source of uncleanness, a barrier between the clergy and God. In the fourth century, church councils began to address the issue of the sexuality of the clergy, starting in the early fourth century with Synod of Elvira (c. 305), held in a town on the Iberian Peninsula. The council forbade married members of the clergy from having sexual relations with their wives.³² Soon after, the council of Nicaea in 325 forbade priests from marrying after they were ordained and prohibited bishops, priests, and deacons from having any women in their households who were not mothers, sisters, or other close family members.³³

From the fourth to early fifth centuries, St. Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330-379) and church fathers such as Ambrose of Milan (ca. 340-397), Augustine of Hippo (354-430), and especially Jerome, also propagated the notion of clerical celibacy. Basil, for example, stated that celibacy “makes man like the incorruptible God” and “preserves the body from corruption.” Ambrose strongly encouraged clergymen to remain celibate, writing, “you must remain strangers to conjugal intimacy, for you know that you have a ministry, whole and immaculate, which must never be profaned by any sexual relations.” Likewise, Jerome argued, “in the presence of the purity of Christ’s body, all sexual union is impure.”³⁴ Beginning in the latter half of the fourth century with Pope Damasus in 366 and continuing up to Pope Leo I the Great (d. 461), the bishops of Rome began to promote a celibate clergy through letters to other churches. The local councils at Carthage in 390 and 401, at Turin in 398, Orange in 441, and Tours in 461 each passed legislation in accordance with the rules regarding celibacy that had been promoted by the bishops of Rome.³⁵

As this chapter has so far established, there were many circumstances which helped to define the types of roles that women were allowed to exercise within fourth and fifth century Christian society. Yet the association of virtue and the *imago Dei* with masculinity, the association of women with evil, and the rise of clerical celibacy all contributed to the creation of an atmosphere in which women would become the subjects of even greater discrimination and repression within the church. Of this, the church fathers were the most significant sources, as they and their teachings were in the spotlight of the Christian arena. Paradoxically, these men were also ardent defenders of women's equality, taking very seriously Paul's writing at Galatians 3:28, which states, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."³⁶ Let us now examine both the positive and the negative aspects of the church fathers' attitudes and teachings regarding women and their positions in Christian society.

Ambrose of Milan was one of these aforementioned church fathers, taking up both offensive and defensive positions toward women during the second half of the fourth century. For example, he sought to elevate the position of women within marriage when he preached, "You are not her lord but her husband; and she is not the maidservant but your wife. God desires that you guide the inferior sex, not dominate it."³⁷ While Ambrose made an argument in defense of women, he also took for granted their 'inferiority'. Likewise, in *On Widows*, he proclaimed that "women should not be restrained from valorous actions by the weakness of their sex."³⁸ He similarly promoted the idea of the weakness of women in his *Commentary on Luke*, where he argued that Mary Magdalene was "sent to those who are stronger (by whose example let her learn to believe), in order that they may preach the Resurrection." He then offered this as an

explanation for the restriction of women from the ministry: “But since she is too inferior in steadfastness for preaching, and her sex is weaker in carrying things through, the evangelical role is assigned to men. . .”³⁹

Like Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo had conflicting views regarding women and their positions within church and society. On the one hand, he “denied that Paul had ever intended to equate the wife with the flesh except to command that men should love their wives as they love their own bodies.”⁴⁰ However, in his *Confessions* (c.400), he stated of woman in general, “In her mind and in her rational intelligence she has a nature the equal of man’s, but in sex she is physically subject to him in the same way as our natural impulses need to be subjected to the reasoning power of the mind. . .” Based on this perception, Augustine made his argument that only men bore the true resemblance of God.⁴¹ He further limited the roles of women to domestic responsibilities when he remarked, “I do not see in what sense the woman was made as a helper for the man if not for the sake of bearing children.”⁴²

Jerome was probably best known for his adamant condemnation of sexuality and promotion of virginity. He not only argued that “it is bad to touch [a woman]”, but he even went so far as to say that “Christ loves virgins more than others.”⁴³ We also see his exaltation of female virginity in a letter to Eustochium, the daughter of his follower and friend Paula. In this letter he encouraged Eustochium in her vows of chastity, reminding her of the devil’s power through ‘the loins’. He elaborated on his conviction regarding female chastity by writing, “Death came through Eve: life has come through Mary. For this reason the gift of virginity has been poured most abundantly upon women, seeing that it was from a woman it began.”⁴⁴

To justify his position that women should be restricted from authority within the church, he expounded:

It was with the help of the whore Helena that Simon Magus founded his sect; troops of women accompanied Nicholas of Antioch, that inventor of pollutions; it was a woman that Marcion sent as his precursor to Rome, to undermine the souls of men in readiness for his traps;...Montanus...used two wealthy noblewomen, Prisca and Maximilla first to bribe then to subvert many churches;...when Arius was determined to lead the world into darkness, he commenced by deceiving the Emperor's sister; it was the resources of Lucilla that helped Donatus to pervert many people throughout Africa with his filthy version of baptism.⁴⁵

Despite his obvious pessimism with regard to sexuality and women, Jerome also posed as a strong opponent to the sexual double standard prevalent in Roman society, arguing that Christian men and women were both held to the same expectations of marital fidelity.⁴⁶

Though much of his success was due to his close relationship with Olympias, John Chrysostom (c.347-407) was one of the most vehement opponents of women in this era.⁴⁷ As Jo Ann McNamara described him, "The controversial Byzantine bishop Chrysostom was the exception in his belief that women were suited only to the lesser and more delicate activity of the home."⁴⁸ In *Homily IX on St Paul's Epistle to Timothy*, this attitude of his becomes clear. Of his reasoning behind his restriction of women from the role of teacher, he stated flatly: "The woman taught the man once and made him guilty of disobedience, and ruined everything." He even went so far as to assert, "The extent of the silence required of women is that they are not to speak even of spiritual matters, let alone worldly ones, in the church."⁴⁹

As these examples show, with the exception of Chrysostom and despite their vulnerability to the traditional misogynistic tendency to degrade the nature of women, overall the church fathers fought to elevate the status of women within Christian society.

They demanded equal expectations of both men and women, such as “modesty, simplicity of dress, decorum in behavior, avoidance of temptation and care not to be tempting oneself.” Though the church fathers preached the spiritual value of virginity, they (with the exception of Jerome) did not condemn sexuality itself, nor were they motivated by negative attitudes toward women. To them, the only way in which a woman was inferior was by her status as a wife. Therefore, women in this society could only possess complete autonomy and equality with men as unmarried virgins. However, this was seen as a spiritual equality and the church fathers did not attempt to reform the patriarchal social structure.⁵⁰ As Rosemary Radford Reuther summarized this new perception of women, both “misogynism and the praise of the virginal woman...stand together as two sides of a dualistic psychology that was the basis of the patristic doctrine of man.”⁵¹

Despite their emphasis on spiritual equality, in temporal life the misogynistic position prevailed both in the minds of the church fathers, as we have seen, and in the legislation of the church.⁵² In 364, the Council of Laodicea in canon 11 made it clear that “so-called senior women...or female presidents...are not to be appointed...in the church.” This canon may have been prohibiting the ordination of deaconesses or aiming to lower the status of high-ranking, appointed widows. From the same council, canon 45 also declared that women were not to have access to the altar. Later, in 396, the council at Nîmes forbade the ordination of women. Likewise, the Council of Orange in 441 declared, “Deaconesses are absolutely not to be ordained; and if there are still any of them, let them bow their head[s] under the benediction which is given the congregation.” Interestingly, in 494, Pope Gelasius I wrote to the bishops of southern Italy and Sicily,

condemning the practice of some of the bishops who encouraged women to minister at the altar, probably as ordained priests.⁵³

The *Apostolic Constitutions* from late fourth century Syria is a document based on earlier texts which aimed to restrict the ministerial roles of women, but it goes further in its explicit portrayal of women as having weak character in addition to dangerous powers. The *Apostolic Constitutions* imposed even greater restrictions on widows than had existed in earlier documents, such as the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. For example, the *Apostolic Constitutions* raised the minimum age requirement for widows to sixty, commanded that they not teach or baptize, and placed them under the control of the bishops, presbyters, deacons, and deaconesses. Though the *Apostolic Constitutions* recognized the office of deaconess, the document allowed them only to minister to other women and prohibited them also from teaching and baptizing. The role of deaconess was thus diminished and was lowered to the rank of subdeacons, readers, and singers.⁵⁴

The *Apostolic Constitutions* further restricted the ministry of women by defining ministry as priesthood and then limiting the priesthood to men. Although it required deaconesses to be ordained by the bishop, this collection of treatises also stipulated that women were not to be ordained in general.⁵⁵ In defense of its prohibition against the ordination of women, and thus its exclusion of women from the priesthood, the *Apostolic Constitutions* emphasized the “natural pollutions of the female body [which] rendered women ineligible to participate in the sacrifice of the altar.” In addition, the author of the *Apostolic Constitutions* justified the restriction against women assuming the role of teacher by appealing to the fact that there were no women among Christ’s twelve apostles. Further, it deprived women of the right to perform baptisms on the basis that

Christ would have been baptized by his mother if he had intended to grant women such a responsibility. Finally, the *Apostolic Constitutions* went so far as to proclaim that women who assumed the role of priest were “contrary to the laws of nature.”⁵⁶

Why, then, when the church fathers were so passionately convinced of the spiritual equality of women with men, did they and the rest of the church authorities impose such restrictions upon women? The answer lies within the changes experienced by the church beginning with the rule of the emperor Constantine the Great; namely, the increasing centralization of religious authority and the expanding wealth and prestige of those men who administered that authority. As Henry Chadwick wrote of the impact of Constantine’s conversion to Christianity, “The sovereign autocrat was inevitably and immediately involved in the development of the church, and conversely the Church became more and more implicated in high political decisions.”⁵⁷ The emperors soon had authoritative influence over the election of bishops and church policy, leading church officials to compete for their emperor’s favor.⁵⁸

With the Council of Nicaea in 325, the bishops of major provincial cities were given the power of veto over who could become bishops in their respective areas, which accelerated the concentration of their authority. By 381, the bishops of Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople had acquired an enormous degree of power.⁵⁹ And by the middle of the fourth century, the bishop of Rome had nearly unchallenged authority over the entire church.⁶⁰ By the fifth century, the bishop of Constantinople had “precedence before the highest state officials.” Also during the fourth century, men from high social status had a better chance of becoming bishops or attaining other high-ranking positions within the church than did men from the lower strata of society. As Chadwick explained

of the rising prestige of bishops, “In worldly terms of status and social influence, the episcopate of even moderately important cities had become an established career to which a man might aspire for reasons not exclusively religious.”⁶¹ Aristocratic Roman males began to vie for positions within the church hierarchy, and as a result, women were increasingly pushed aside and stripped of their powers.

Both Augustine of Hippo and Jerome were critical of this new influx of corruption among the bishops and clergy. Augustine claimed that, before being conscripted to the bishopric at Hippo, he had purposely avoided cities with a vacant see for fear of being pressured to fill the position and exposed to the dangers associated with “high office.”⁶² Similarly, in his letter to Eustochium, Jerome criticized several of his male contemporaries, saying,

There are other men—I speak of those of my own order—who only seek the office of presbyter and deacon that they may be able to visit women freely. These fellows think of nothing but dress; they must be nicely scented, and their shoes must fit without a crease. Their hair is curled and still shows traces of the tongs; their fingers glisten with rings; and if there is wet on the road they walk across on tiptoe so as not to splash their feet.⁶³

Augustine’s life story provides an excellent example of the incredible advancement available to those men who were able to ascend the church hierarchy. Though Augustine’s father was poor, he made the necessary sacrifices in order to provide Augustine with an education.⁶⁴ He became a professor of rhetoric in Carthage and an ardent defender of Manichaeism. Soon after, the prospect of ‘better earnings’ and ‘high honors’ led Augustine to teach in Milan.⁶⁵ While in Milan, Augustine converted to Christianity, partly as a result of Ambrose’s ability to defend the Old Testament against the Manichees.⁶⁶ In 391, Augustine came to Hippo in order to persuade a friend to join a

monastery that he was planning to establish. While he was there, the bishop Valerius and the congregation forced Augustine to become a priest, upon which he “wept from the shame of having once thought ill of clergymen and their congregations.”⁶⁷ Soon thereafter, he took Valerius’ place as bishop.

Despite Augustine’s sincere Christian faith and disgust with clerical decadence, even he was unable to avoid the temptations provided by the power of his office. Evidence that he used his influence toward his own personal agenda was his attitude toward women, the Donatists, and the Pelagians. Augustine was not just a Catholic bishop; he was also a Neo-Platonist who expected his congregation to “love the sexuality of their wives and the physical bonds of their families only as a Christian must love his enemies.”⁶⁸ In addition, Augustine also used his position as bishop to crush the “heretical” Donatists and Pelagians. Donatists held that those bishops who had renounced their faith under the persecutions of the emperor Diocletian should not be readmitted to the episcopacy. However, the Catholic authorities disagreed with the Donatists on this point and condemned them as heretics. The Pelagians, who rejected the doctrine of original sin, also fell victim to such judgment, and it was primarily Augustine who dealt the death-blow.⁶⁹

As the example of Augustine has shown, the rising wealth and prestige of the church led to an atmosphere of bitter rivalry among its authorities, characterized by competing factions, riots, accusations of heresy, religious controversies, and deep schisms. Frequently these confrontations were violent, ending in the execution or exile of powerful bishops. In the two decades between 320 and 340, bishops Eustace of Antioch, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Marcellus of Ancyra were all deposed and sent

into exile by the emperor Constantine. Shortly afterward, in 362, Antioch was torn between three rival bishops. Also, in 385, bishop Priscillian of Avila was accused by another bishop of witchcraft and executed.⁷⁰ Of this tumultuous period, Chadwick explained that “each bishop seemed to suspect all his colleagues of heresy.”⁷¹ As a result, church authorities felt an even greater need to establish a strong, centralized religious authority.⁷² This had an impact on the status of women; as Cloke described, the centralization of authority “followed a well-noted tendency of such processes to squeeze out extremist or dubious fringe elements—such as those advocating an equal female ministry.”⁷³

The growing emphasis on hierarchy and male domination within the church, in addition to the increasing value given to feminine virginity beginning in the fourth century were materialized in the architecture and artwork of the church buildings during this period. Prior to the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century, churches were small and indistinguishable from ordinary Roman buildings or residences.⁷⁴ This changed when Constantine linked the church to the empire, and the increased wealth and power of Christianity can immediately be recognized in the architecture and artwork of its churches, such as that of the Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. In the fourth century, the historian Eusebius praised Constantine’s churches “because they made Christianity’s dramatic change in status visible.”⁷⁵ In 358 CE, a church dedicated to Mary was built on the Esquiline Hill in Rome under the direction of Pope Liberius. In 432, it was replaced by the Santa Maria Maggiore, as commissioned by Pope Sixtus III (432-440).⁷⁶ The construction of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, the most important Catholic church

dedicated to the Virgin Mary, came as a direct result of the Council of Ephesus in 431. The council declared that Mary was to be regarded as *Theotokos*, the Mother of God.⁷⁷

The interior architecture and mosaics of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore show quite clearly the increasing emphasis the male hierarchy in the fifth-century church. As Margaret R. Miles argued, “The building and decoration of Santa Maria Maggiore played an important role in the consolidation and public announcement of papal power.”⁷⁸ The architecture was based on Hellenistic principles and “closely resembles a second-century imperial basilica.”⁷⁹ The interior architecture and decoration was designed to lead the eye to the altar and its surrounding mosaics. These mosaics are located on the more-advanced architecture of the triumphal arch, which stands in stark contrast to the less-advanced column-and-lintel-type architecture that separates the nave from the aisles. The mosaics decorating the upper walls of the nave depict scenes from the Hebrew Bible, while those on the triumphal arch depict scenes from the New Testament surrounding the birth of Christ. The visual progression from the Old Testament mosaics to those of the New Testament on the triumphal arch were “crucial to the articulation of Christian—more specifically, papal—triumphalism.”⁸⁰ In effect, these architectural and artistic elements were combined and used to illustrate the triumph and the power of the papacy over competing religions and sects. (See Image 1)

The triumphal arch mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore near the high altar also bear evidence to the strong emphasis placed on chastity in the fifth-century church, which limited positions of power to only those women who remained virgins. For example, compare the mosaic depicting the women and children of Bethlehem with that of the Annunciation. (See Image 2) In the first mosaic, normal Jewish women were shown

dressed in typical, rather plain attire. In the Annunciation mosaic, however, Mary was shown seated on a throne and dressed as a Byzantine empress. She was depicted as aloof and hierarchical, not as an approachable mother. (See Image 3) Not only was Mary to be revered as the Mother of God, but she was also held up as the “model of the life of virginity and self-denial.”⁸¹ Jerome and Ambrose both argued in favor of the perpetual virginity of Mary. Ambrose wrote in Book II of his treatise *Concerning Virgins*, “Let, then the life of Mary be as it were virginity itself, set forth in a likeness, from which, as from a mirror, the appearance of chastity and the form of virtue is reflected. From this you may take your pattern of life, showing, as an example, the clear rules of virtue: what you have to correct, to effect, and to hold fast.”⁸² While this basilica was in fact dedicated to a woman (i.e. to Mary), it is important to note that it represented the growing obsession with virginity and male imperial hierarchy, and therefore the declining status of normal women within the fourth century Christian community.

While different religious powers were struggling to gain control, partly by attempting to subdue the influence of women, the empire in the west was collapsing. Starting around 375, there were massive migrations of Germanic tribes into the western half of the Roman Empire, causing political and social disturbances. By 429, the Vandals had crossed through Gaul, Spain, and North Africa, wreaking havoc throughout the empire. By 439, they had captured Carthage. As Chadwick observed, “The collapse of Roman political control and administration was rapid, and the task of organizing local resistance often fell into the hands of the bishops.” By 476, the disintegration of the western empire was complete.⁸³ As the empire crumbled, the church which had been so closely tied to it suffered from an even greater degree of instability. This crisis put even

more power, at least temporarily, into the hands of the bishops, but the disintegration of the Roman Empire also opened up new possibilities for women.

In conclusion, women were able to exercise a vast measure of influence within the society of post-Constantinian Rome, whether as recognized members of the clergy or as virgins, anchoresses, or the heads of communities. The conversion of Constantine to Christianity began a process of increased centralization in religious authority and the prestige of bishops, creating a highly competitive atmosphere in which women became the targets of discrimination. The attempts made to restrict the power of women were influenced by the increasing popularity of clerical celibacy and the traditional Roman patriarchal tendency to view women as inferior to men. Though the church fathers strongly advocated spiritual equality, it was overruled by their desire to create a strong, centralized religious authority—which, in their minds, required the exclusion of women from the clergy. However, as bishops had their hands full with the responsibility of defending their cities against invasion in addition to being preoccupied with the constant inter-episcopal conflict, the issue of women in the church was located low on the list of priorities. Thus, women were able to maintain a large degree of autonomy and influence within religious, and even secular, contexts during these two eventful centuries from Constantine the Great to the fall of western Rome.

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- ¹ See chapter one, “The Status of Women in the Pre-Constantinian Church: Ascent and Perseverance,” 12.
- ² Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450* (London: Routledge, 1995), 4, 157 and 205-207.
- ³ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 207-210.
- ⁴ Francine Cardman, “Women, Ministry, and Church Order in Early Christianity,” in *Women and Christian Origins*, eds. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 319.
- ⁵ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 167-187.
- ⁶ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 181.
- ⁷ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 169.
- ⁸ Jerome, “Letter XXII: To Eustochium,” in *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, trans. by F.A. Wright (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1963), 57.
- ⁹ Jerome, “Letter XXII,” 111.
- ¹⁰ Jerome, “Letter XLV: To Asella,” in *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, trans. by F.A. Wright (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1963), 179.
- ¹¹ Jerome, “Letter XLV,” 183.
- ¹² Jerome, “Letter LIV: To Furia on the Duty of Remaining a Widow,” in *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, trans. by F.A. Wright (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1963), 231 and 255.
- ¹³ Jerome, “Letter CXXVII: To Principia,” in *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, translated by F.A. Wright, (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1963), 451.
- ¹⁴ Jerome, “Letter XXII,” 87.
- ¹⁵ Jerome, “Letter LIV,” 253.
- ¹⁶ Jerome, “Letter CXXVII,” 441-443 and 445-447.
- ¹⁷ Jerome, “Letter CXXVII,” 455.
- ¹⁸ Jerome, “Letter CXXVII,” 455.
- ¹⁹ Jerome, “Letter CXXVII,” 459.
- ²⁰ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 173-181.
- ²¹ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 6 and 189-204.
- ²² Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 85.
- ²³ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 85-91.
- ²⁴ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 61-70.

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- ²⁵ See chapter one, "The Status of Women in the Pre-Constantinian Church: Ascent and Perseverance," 3 and 12.
- ²⁶ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 158.
- ²⁷ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 213-220.
- ²⁸ Perpetua, "The Prison Journal and Dreams of Perpetua," in *The Writings of Medieval Women: an Anthology*, trans. Marcelle Thiebaut (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), 14-17.
- ²⁹ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 216-217.
- ³⁰ Margaret A. Farley, "Sources of Sexual Inequality in the History of Christian Thought," *The Journal of Religion* 56 (1976): 164-167.
- ³¹ Farley, "Sources of Sexual Inequality", 167-174.
- ³² Charles A. Frazee, "The Origins of Clerical Celibacy in the Western Church," *Church History* 41 (1972): 151-154.
- ³³ Christoph Marksches, *Between Two Worlds: Structures of Earliest Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1999), 198.
- ³⁴ Frazee, "The Origins of Clerical Celibacy", 155-156.
- ³⁵ Frazee, "The Origins of Clerical Celibacy", 156-157.
- ³⁶ Gal. 3.28 New International Version.
- ³⁷ Jo Ann McNamara, "Sexual Equality and the Cult of Virginitly in Early Christian Thought," *Feminist Studies* 3 (1976): 145-148.
- ³⁸ Ambrose of Milan, "On Widows," in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 60.
- ³⁹ Ambrose of Milan, "Commentary on Luke," in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 61-62.
- ⁴⁰ McNamara, "Sexual Equality," 146.
- ⁴¹ Augustine of Hippo, "Confessions," in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 78.
- ⁴² Augustine of Hippo, "The Literal Meaning of Genesis," in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 79.
- ⁴³ Jerome, "Against Jovinian," in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 64-66.
- ⁴⁴ Jerome, "Letter XXII: To Eustochium," in *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, trans. F.A. Wright (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 77 and 99.
- ⁴⁵ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 9.

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- ⁴⁶ Jerome, "Letter 77, to Oceanus," in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 76-77.
- ⁴⁷ Alcuin Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 58.
- ⁴⁸ McNamara, "Sexual Equality," 147.
- ⁴⁹ John Chrysostom, "Homily IX on St Paul's Epistle to Timothy," in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 59.
- ⁵⁰ McNamara, "Sexual Equality," 146-154.
- ⁵¹ Rosemary Radford Reuther, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Studies in Early Christianity*, vol. XIV, *Women in Early Christianity*, ed. David M. Scholer (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 262.
- ⁵² McNamara, "Sexual Equality," 146.
- ⁵³ Cardman, "Women, Ministry," 318-320.
- ⁵⁴ Cardman, "Women, Ministry," 314-317.
- ⁵⁵ Cardman, "Women, Ministry," 315.
- ⁵⁶ McNamara, "Sexual Equality," 146 and 155.
- ⁵⁷ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 125.
- ⁵⁸ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 50 and 132.
- ⁵⁹ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 131 and 165.
- ⁶⁰ Marksches, *Between Two Worlds*, 176.
- ⁶¹ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 163-164 and 174.
- ⁶² Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 131.
- ⁶³ Jerome, "Letter XXII," 119.
- ⁶⁴ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 9.
- ⁶⁵ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 54-61.
- ⁶⁶ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 74.
- ⁶⁷ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 130-132.
- ⁶⁸ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 136.
- ⁶⁹ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 131-138 and 340-353.

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- ⁷⁰ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 134-147, 160-161, 170.
- ⁷¹ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 148.
- ⁷² Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 238.
- ⁷³ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 158.
- ⁷⁴ Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, Pelican History of Art, ed. Richard Krautheimer and Slobodan Ćurčić, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 23-37.
- ⁷⁵ Margaret R. Miles, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics: Triumphal Christianity and the Jews," *Harvard Theological Review* 86 (1993): 156.
- ⁷⁶ Miles, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics," 157-158.
- ⁷⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 56.
- ⁷⁸ Miles, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics," 155-156.
- ⁷⁹ Miles, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics," 158.
- ⁸⁰ Miles, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics," 157.
- ⁸¹ Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 116.
- ⁸² Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 118-120.
- ⁸³ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 224-225, 247-250.

Chapter Three The Merovingian Church

As the western Roman Empire of the late fifth century was crumbling in the hands of Germanic invaders from the north, the Roman church was faced with the new difficulty of bringing these “barbarians” under its control. As a result, the Gallo-Roman church underwent dramatic changes during the fifth through eighth centuries, most of which were dominated by the Merovingian Franks. What developed was a new era in western church history, that of the Frankish church, which was particularly intriguing for the new opportunities it provided women at the same time they were being restricted from their earlier roles of widow and deaconess. As Suzanne Wemple testified, “Religion in the Frankish Kingdom, as in the late Roman Empire, offered women an opportunity to transcend biological and sexual roles and to seek spiritual fulfillment.”¹ Though their status within the church was diminishing, Frankish women were able to exploit the roles which they could still hold according to Catholic orthodoxy, such as “Christian wives or mothers, ascetics, pilgrims, abbesses, mediators and negotiators, scholars and teachers, or saints.”²

This chapter will focus on women’s most influential and respected roles in the Merovingian church, those of nuns and abbesses. In particular, this chapter will investigate why women’s religious roles were even further reduced and how the roles of nun and abbess acquired such great importance during this period. My research will demonstrate that the weak relationship between church and state in addition to political instability created the lack of centralized power in the Merovingian Kingdom that was necessary to allow religious women to retain a degree of autonomy and authority,

restricted and localized though it was. This chapter will also argue that it was Roman and Frankish misogynistic attitudes, empowered by an increasing centralization of political and religious authority, which ultimately led to the further reduction of women's roles in the church.

The Frankish system of governance, and therefore the Frankish method of dealing with the church, was quite different from that of the Romans. Perhaps the most important difference was that recorded by Julius Caesar and the Roman historian Tacitus, both of whom came to the conclusion that kinship was “the most cohesive bond of the Germanic tribes.”³ In addition, Merovingian society was composed of only four institutions, all male-dominated: the monarchy, the church, the monastery, and the family.⁴ Elements of Frankish society such as these caused the political instability that marked the sixth through eighth centuries in addition to the Merovingians' unique relationship with the church.

Unlike the Romans, the Franks did not practice primogeniture; rather, Frankish custom called for an equal division of land among sons. When practiced by Merovingian kings, this tradition caused immense political instability that rocked the entire kingdom as power and land were continually divided, consolidated, and divided again. For example, when Clovis died in 511, the Frankish kingdom was divided between his sons, in accordance with Frankish custom. The kingdom was gradually consolidated again as Clovis's sons died, and in 555 Clovis's last surviving son, Clothar, came into control of the reunified Frankish Kingdom. However, when Clothar died six years later, it was once again divided between his four sons.⁵ This political instability allowed aristocratic families and monasteries to retain power and autonomy, and as a result, “the role of

women was open-ended and their contributions to all aspect of life were extensive.”⁶

In addition to this political instability, the relationship between the Merovingian rulers and the church was extremely important in determining the level of influence women could wield during this era. When the Franks came into contact with the church, it was suffering from the effects of having been recently severed from the strong political authority of the Roman Empire. With the decline of centralized control caused by the fall of the Roman Empire in the west, “regional divisions... flourished and regional varieties of Christianity developed, though normative Christianity remained enshrined in ideals, in law and in church books.”⁷ In addition, the church hierarchy was still not fully developed during the early Middle Ages.⁸ Evidence of the relatively undeveloped hierarchy can be seen in the canonization process of the Merovingian period, which began at the individual’s local community, free from intervention by higher ecclesiastical authorities and the necessity for their approval.⁹

In addition to the canonization process, monasteries were also free of much episcopal interference, although beginning in the fifth century bishops had been attempting to “authorize their initial foundations, regulate their clergy, restrict their rights over their own property, and supervise their abbots and abbesses.”¹⁰ However, the Merovingian nobility maintained a benevolent attitude toward the monastic life. This favorable disposition caused the Merovingian rulers to go so far as to encourage the creation of such “privileged and professional societies of prayer enjoying immunities of one kind or another; that is, freedom from public burdens or from interference by secular or clerical officials.”¹¹ This was due partly to the belief that monasteries “ensured perpetual intercession with the spiritual world for the security of rulers”¹² and partly to

the fact that the Merovingians viewed monasteries, as well as bishoprics, as a “Gallo-Roman preserve.”¹³

Another effect of the Frankish conquest of Gaul was a shift in the balance of ecclesiastical power, as the Merovingians sought to control the church within their conquered territory.¹⁴ Men like Caesarius of Arles, who had “operated in Gothic Provence as the ecclesiastical equivalent of a praetorian prefect, with the full cooperation of the Goths and the bishops of Rome” were reduced in status and power, as were their once-prestigious cities, as they came under the control of their new Frankish rulers.¹⁵ Soon after, the Merovingian kings and nobles began to appoint their own bishops and papal vicars and even interfere in the administration of monasteries.¹⁶ For example, when Caesarius died, his successor was chosen by the local clergy. However, when Caesarius’s successor died, the Merovingian king Childebert chose the 23-year old Aurelianus as the new bishop of Arles. Aurelianus was the relative of Sacerdos, a patrician and political ally of Childebert who had made bishop of Lyon in 541.¹⁷ Aurelianus and the king founded new monasteries for men and women in Arles which were funded by the royal family and threatened the prestige of the older monasteries, such as that founded by Caesarius, St. John’s.¹⁸

Aurelianus was just one example of the type of interference in the church perpetrated by the Merovingian nobles. Besides Aurelianus, many other lay people had become bishops at the request of the Merovingian rulers. In fact, Clothar II and his son Dagobert frequently chose bishops from their own court-circles.¹⁹ In 614, Clothar II called for the Council of Paris, during which he “declined to forbid simony or rule out of the royal appointment of bishops, and revised a number of other canons in favor of royal

interests as well. His actions made it clear that even a reform-minded king was not prepared to give the church the kind of autonomy its leaders sought for themselves."²⁰ Clothar's actions were also representative of the prevailing tendency of Merovingian kings to exercise their authority in religious issues whenever it involved their own personal interests.²¹ As Joseph Lynch asserted, "The Catholic Franks were ruled by brutal, immoral kings who dominated their bishops and had little regard for the wider church or the papacy."²² Fortunately for the Merovingian rulers, the church leaders regarded the kings as having been appointed to their position by God, and therefore submitted themselves to the secular authorities. On occasion, the bishops in council would protest the unorthodoxy and interference of the "bewildering number of Merovingian masters," but with little effect.²³

The Merovingian appointment of religious officials inevitably led to the corrosion of the church structure, with the exception of monasteries. By the seventh century, bishops placed an increasing emphasis on their own wealth and power, their connections to royalty, and their endowment of monasteries and shrines.²⁴ Corruption accelerated in the middle of the seventh century, when Merovingian kings lost control over their lands as local dukes gained increasing power.²⁵ From then on, Merovingian kings were merely figureheads as the real power was in the hands of Pippin of Herstal (d. 714), the mayor of the palace.²⁶ Also, Gaul had become a "land-locked agricultural society" in which "trade had become rare, cities vestigial, violence common and brutal poverty the norm for all but the elite." Literacy, even among the clergy, was sparse. Finally, bishops went unsupervised as the "organization of the bishops into provinces under archbishops had disappeared as had the practice of holding councils to define and enforce discipline."²⁷

These unsupervised bishops had acquired their positions through kinship ties or other secular vehicles, and religious degeneration ensued. By the end of the eighth century, bishops had to be urged by their more serious colleagues in Merovingian councils to "say Mass in their own cathedrals on Easter, Christmas, and Pentecost, to preach to their congregations on Sundays and feast days, to live in a spiritual fashion, and not to carry weapons or spend their time hunting."²⁸

At this point, it is important to note that although the connection between the Frankish church in Gaul and the Merovingian Kingdom was clearly strong, the link between the Merovingians and the larger Catholic Church was much weaker. In spite of the fact that the Merovingian nobles frequently disregarded the desires of the pope, their relationship was not completely adverse. As Lynch explained, "The Frankish rulers regarded the popes as dignified, respected figures. They corresponded with them and even accorded them a vague authority in theology, liturgy and moral matters, but they did not permit them to intervene in the financial or personnel decisions of the Frankish church."²⁹ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill stressed the favorable relationship between the Frankish kings and the papacy. He maintained that, despite their "spasmodic" communication and relations, it was important to recognize that there was indeed communication, affection, and mutual respect between the two. In addition, he insisted that although "the judgment of the popes might be challenged from time to time," their authority never was.³⁰ Not only that, but "to live within the peace of St. Peter was the aim and hope of every Frankish bishop and abbot," regardless of their close connections to the Merovingian rulers.³¹

In addition to the political instability and the relatively weak bond between the

papacy and the Merovingian rulers, other forces that worked in favor of women during the Merovingian period included the religious revitalizations that were taking place throughout the continent in various locales. In the sixth century Irish monks, including St. Columban, began coming to the European continent as missionaries. Christianity and monasticism had flourished in Ireland separate from Roman influence, and had not suffered the same episcopal domination and corruption characteristic of that on the continent. Consequently, these Irish monks were “sometimes admired for their zeal, asceticism, learning and missionary work, and sometimes criticized for their independence, their peculiar ways and their disruption of local practices.”³² The Irish missionaries also served to reform the Anglo-Saxon church, which turned out to be “the most orderly and dynamic church in the west.” Unlike the Irish Christians, the Anglo-Saxon Christians had been subject to Roman influence, and they preferred the more moderate Benedictine Rule as opposed to the harshly ascetic Irish monasticism. In addition to the Irish monks, many of the missionaries to the continent were also of the “Rome-loyal, normative Christianity of Anglo-Saxon England.”³³ Fortunately, the Franks were willing to help these missionaries, as conversion of neighboring peoples would make their conquest easier.³⁴

Despite the decentralization of political and religious authority and the religious revitalizations that, as we shall see, ultimately benefited women who chose the religious life in the Merovingian Kingdom, women could not escape the traditional misogyny of Frankish and Roman society. In a way, when Germanic and Roman societies combined in the fifth century, women’s status was improved in that their “cooperation was essential for the creation of a new society.”³⁵ However, Frankish society also inherited Roman

misogynistic attitudes, which combined with their own and were eventually adopted by the church.³⁶ For example, Roman minds harbored two “contradictory and confining female stereotypes: woman as a sexual object and woman as a dutiful wife and mother.” These stereotypes were reinforced by “double standards of sexual behavior imposed on women of the upper classes, as well as the sexual exploitation of women of the lower classes by men of the upper classes.” In addition, the Romans also had a tendency to blame women for the moral decay of their society.³⁷

The Franks also brought with them their own perceptions of women, which would help to define the female religious roles that developed in the early Middle Ages. Not every attitude toward women was entirely negative: Tacitus recorded that the Germanic peoples believed that “there resides in women an element of holiness and prophecy, and so they do not scorn to ask their advice or lightly disregard their replies.” However, as Wemple deduced, “this special regard...must have been limited to a few prophetesses, for women were excluded from the assemblies.”³⁸ Another aspect of Germanic society, which may at first appear to place a high value on women, was the way in which women served as companions to their husbands, even in battle. Nevertheless, women remained “dominated by, and dependent upon, men’s superior physical strength” and daughters were viewed as property and were at the mercy of their male relatives.³⁹

Other Germanic customs that more clearly displayed the misogynistic attitudes of the society were based on the over-emphasis of the “biological function and sexual nature of women.”⁴⁰ For instance, more than a woman was viewed as her husband’s helpmate, she was seen as her husband’s chattel; rather than enter the union willingly, wives were frequently acquired by being captured or purchased.⁴¹ Once married, wives were

expected to remain faithful to their adulterous, and sometimes polygamous, husbands. At the same time, Tacitus testified, if a woman were found guilty of committing adultery, she was subject to humiliating punishments.⁴² In addition, the division of labor in Germanic communities, which was based upon sex, prevented women from exercising autonomy. While men served as warriors, women were expected to bear the heavy labor by raising children, farming, and maintaining the home.⁴³ Clearly, Frankish society was permeated by its own low regard for women, which would gradually infiltrate the church. In the meantime, Christianity offered women opportunities free of male domination that were otherwise unavailable in the Merovingian Kingdom.⁴⁴

These misogynistic attitudes, which began the process of progressively limiting women's roles in the church in the later Roman Empire, also enabled this process to continue throughout the Frankish domination. The church continued its tradition of degrading marriage and women, humiliating and ridiculing those women who sought active ministerial roles, when it served the ambitions of the developing male hierarchy.⁴⁵ The Merovingian church, aiming to create a "celibate male hierarchy," "waged an active war against deaconesses and priests' wives."⁴⁶ Consequently, these women's roles were increasingly restricted beginning in the sixth century. Merovingian bishops eliminated the office of deaconess and removed the order of widows from the clergy in addition to excluding the wives of clergymen from assisting with pastoral duties.⁴⁷

We see evidence of this progressive reduction in women's roles within the developing church doctrine of the fifth and sixth centuries. Around 475, ancient statutes of the church pronounced, "Young widows who are frail in body shall be supported at the expense of the church whose widows they are." Although this particular provision was

clearly beneficial to some women, these statutes also decreed, “A woman, however learned and holy, shall not presume to teach men in the assembly,” “A woman shall not presume to baptize,” “Widows or nuns who are chosen for ministry to women who are to be baptized shall be so instructed in this office that they can, by clear and sound speech, teach ignorant and rustic women how they should live after they have received baptism,” and finally, “Widows who are supported by a stipend from the church should be so assiduous in the work of God that they delight the church with their good works and their prayers.”⁴⁸ The restrictions placed upon women that denied them of the opportunity to teach and baptize men showed that women were still seen as inferior to men, both mentally and spiritually, despite the apostle Paul’s statement in Galatians 3:28 that there is “neither male nor female.” Fortunately, at this time, widows were still cared for by the church and allowed to teach other women.

Earlier, the Council of Orange in 441 had prohibited women, such as deaconesses, from leading the Christian rituals that they had performed in the earlier church, including instruction, baptism, and the administration of sacraments to women. For example, Queen Radegund, the wife of the Merovingian king Clothar, became a deaconess, “but only achieved recognition and security among her religious colleagues as an abbess under vows.”⁴⁹ The 441 Council of Orange declared, “Deaconesses of any sort shall not be ordained. If any now exist, they shall bow their heads for the same blessing which is given to the people.” The assembled bishops also condemned consecrated widows who chose to remarry, declaring, “the abductor of such women, or the woman who deserts such a profession, deserves to be eternally damned.”⁵⁰

Soon after the 441 Council of Orange, the Council of Arles (442) further reduced

the roles of women in the church by ordering, “He who is to be received into the priesthood may not be bound by the tie of marriage, unless a conversion is promised.” It went even further by insisting, “If any clergyman from the rank of the diaconate shall presume to have a woman for his comfort, other than his grandmother, mother, sister, daughter or niece, or his wife who has converted with him, he shall be excommunicated. And this penalty shall equally affect the woman too, if she does not wish to separate herself from him.” The belief that women were polluted, sinful beings was also made clear in the following statute from the Council of Arles: “No deacon or priest or bishop shall bring a girl, whether freeborn or slave, into his personal chamber.”⁵¹

In 517, the bishops assembled at the Council of Epaone also addressed the position of widows and placed greater restrictions upon them. They announced, “We utterly annul in this whole region the consecration of widows who are called deaconesses, and only the blessing of penitence, if they agree to be converted, is to be given them.” As at the councils at Orange and Arles, the bishops threatened not only consecrated widows, but also the former wives of priests and deacons who chose to remarry. They dictated, “If any widow of a priest or deacon remarries, let her be expelled from the church, until she shall be separated from the unlawful union, and her husband too shall be punished with similar severity until he has been corrected.”⁵²

At the 533 Council of Orange, the male ecclesiastical hierarchy once again attacked women’s roles in the church. At this gathering, the men in power demanded that “women who have until now received the diaconal blessing, against the prohibitions of the canons shall be excommunicated if they are shown to have fallen again into marriage.” The bishops also declared, “It was also pleasing [to the council] that the

diaconal blessing be given to no woman from now on, on account of the frailty of the [female] condition.”⁵³ Then, in 549 at the Council of Orléans, in addition to condemning heresy and working on the structure of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the bishops also delineated who could become a nun and called for the excommunication of those women who left the cloister for marriage.⁵⁴ At the Council of Tours in 567, bishops once again ordered that the only women allowed inside the homes of the clergy, now comprised solely of men, were those who performed housework.⁵⁵ The decrees of these councils through the fifth and sixth centuries clearly illustrate the ever-diminishing roles of women in the Merovingian church as they were barred from the clergy, from marrying and even associating with members of the male clergy, and threatened with excommunication or eternal hellfire if they chose to remarry.

Fortunately for women during the Merovingian era, “there was a sufficient number of influential churchmen in the sixth and seventh centuries...who did not share this haughty, authoritarian attitude toward women.” These men, such as Caesarius of Arles (ca. 470-543) and Columban (543-615), “acted as spokesmen for women seeking an autonomous existence and safeguarded female communities from encroachments by men.”⁵⁶ Wemple praised such men, asserting,

Female monasticism as envisioned by Caesarius of Arles, Columban, and the monks of Luxeuil, who assisted in the establishment of the double monasteries, kept alive the Gospel’s promise that women had the same spiritual potential as men. The rules for female communities that these men composed or helped to formulate were predicated on the principle that women could and indeed needed to develop their own independent form of spirituality. The same group of men did not hesitate to denounce the asymmetry of sexual relations as contrary to Christian morality.⁵⁷

For this reason, any investigation of women’s roles in the Frankish church necessitates analysis of the roles of Caesarius of Arles and Columban in shaping women’s religious

life in the Merovingian Kingdom.

Caesarius of Arles was probably best known for his contributions to female monastic life, but he was also a powerful women's advocate in his sermons. In the late fifth and early sixth centuries, Caesarius began to deliver sermons in which "he unmasked the hypocrisy of men who wanted to marry virgins, expected fidelity from their wives, and loved chastity in them and required it from their daughters while they sought sexual exploits and even boasted about them to their friends."⁵⁸ For example, in Sermon 43, he criticized men for the sexual double standard, which they used to excuse their own infidelity and sexual promiscuity.⁵⁹ Caesarius also broke away from misogynistic tradition in Sermon 150, in which he blamed the Fall on Adam and made no mention of Eve.⁶⁰ In addition, Wemple claimed that Caesarius "also enhanced the dignity of women by attaching a moral value to women's function of nurturing," and that "in proclaiming that obedient wives and dutiful mothers served as moral guides to their menfolk, Caesarius paid a tribute to women." Similar to the patristic thinkers, Caesarius pointed to the burdens of marriage and motherhood and "encouraged women to eschew marriage altogether, or to persuade their husbands to transcend sexuality by practicing abstinence." Finally, he promoted female monasticism "as a call to corporal and spiritual freedom" and "at the same time, he also issued a challenge to married women to use their ingenuity and influence to transform society according to Christian ideals."⁶¹

In late 506 and early 507, Caesarius began to work on a monastery outside the walls of Arles for his sister Caesaria and her group of ascetic women. As there was no women's monastery in Arles at that time, Caesarius was able to "provide women, particularly the daughters of aristocratic households, with the same opportunities for

monastic life as he had long sought to promote for men." The monastery also increased the city's prestige "by functioning as a tangible symbol of its prosperity and status" and by providing it with "divine protection."⁶² From 507 to 508, the women fled to a monastery in Marseilles as invading Burgundians and Franks destroyed their convent and besieged Arles.⁶³ Caesarius then had the convent rebuilt inside the city walls of Arles, which was dedicated on August 26, 512 and placed under the patronage of John the Baptist. Caesarius wanted the monastery to be a "model for perfect Christian living" for his community.⁶⁴ He appointed his sister, Caesaria, as the abbess of the monastery and gave her his first rule for nuns, which was "arguably the first rule written specifically for a women's monastery in either east or west."⁶⁵

Caesarius believed that monastic women required more protection from the outside world, which included male sexual aggression, "temptations to immodesty, and a loss of reputation," than did their male counterparts. His rule also emphasized the monastery's seclusion, self-sufficiency, and independence, which he had hoped would serve to protect the institution from outside interference.⁶⁶ Consequently, Caesarius's Rule for Nuns stated that a woman who entered the monastery "must never, up to the time of her death, go out of the monastery, nor into the basilica, where there is a door."⁶⁷ In addition, men were rarely allowed to enter the monastery and could only do so with permission from the abbess.⁶⁸ In light of the widespread clerical corruption and the multiple attempts to restrict women's position in the church, Caesarius found it vital to add to his Rule the following exhortation:

I admonish and I charge you before God and the angels, holy and highly venerated mother of the monastery, and you, the prioress of the holy congregation, let no one's threats or persuasions or flattery ever relax your spirit, and do not yourselves take away anything from the established form

of the holy and spiritual rule.⁶⁹

In addition to these regulations, Caesarius's Rule also required that no woman retain any private property once she entered the monastery and that each woman must learn to read.⁷⁰

Thanks to Caesarius's provisions for the monastery, it was the abbess, rather than the bishop, who was the main authority over the institution and "responsible for the spiritual well-being of the sisters, the material workings of the monastery, and relations with outsiders."⁷¹ The abbess was assisted by a prioress, who ranked only slightly lower than the abbess. In Caesarius's Rule for Nuns, he charged, "All shall obey the mother after God; all should defer to the prioress."⁷² In addition, his Rule required that "the abbess must take care that she does not go without guests in the reception room without the honor due her, that is, without two or three sisters."⁷³ Caesarius's veneration for the abbess of the monastery was also shown by his assertion,

Because the mother of the monastery has to be solicitous for the salvation of souls, and, concerning the temporalities of the monastery, has to think continually of the need for bodily nourishment, and also to entertain visitors and to reply to letters from the faithful, all care of the wool work, by which clothing is provided for the holy sisters, shall be the concern of the prioress or the sister in charge of the weaving.⁷⁴

The prioress was also highly regarded, and Caesarius's Rule declared that she did not have to seek pardon except from the Lord and could discipline as she saw fit. He also commanded, "The mother who bears the care of all of you, and the prioress, should be obeyed without murmuring," and, "With reverence humbly obey not only the mother but also the prioress and the choir mistress and novice mistress."⁷⁵

The abbess also determined what type of work each woman did or which position she held,⁷⁶ and in addition to being an abbess, prioress, choir mistress, or novice mistress,

women could also perform leadership roles within the monastery as treasurers or by being entrusted with the keys for the clothes-chests and cupboards. Others were in charge of storerooms, such as the wine cellar or of those containing clothing and books.⁷⁷ All of the sisters, with the exception of the abbess and prioress, took turns cooking, weaving, and performing other daily tasks such as copying manuscripts.⁷⁸

Toward the end of his life, Caesarius took steps to ensure the safety and autonomy of St. John's. He produced a final version of the Rule, which ordered that future abbesses were not to be appointed by the bishop of Arles, but were to be elected by the sisters themselves. He also "warned abbesses against falling under the control of future bishops of Arles. . .and against making changes in the rule that would compromise the autonomy, isolation, or security of the monastery."⁷⁹ Caesarius feared that his successor might be tempted to "meddle in the monastery's internal affairs or to seize its property or revenues for his own use."⁸⁰ In his personal testament, he commanded the sisters to obey the new bishop of Arles, but more importantly, he strongly entreated his successor, writing,

And although I shall take for granted your piety, lord bishop, nevertheless, in the fear that you might by chance adopt the dangerous suggestions of others to the detriment of my monastery, I entreat you earnestly by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and by the fearful day of the Last Judgment that the old enemy may never prevail over you in such a way that you allow your servants to be unjustly saddened or that you permit any of the possessions that I have bestowed upon them to be taken away from them.⁸¹

He further emphasized his concern for the well-being of the monastery, pleading with his successor, "I ask you again and again, holy bishop, through divine grace, that above all you treat the monastery of holy virgins as having been entrusted to your very great care, and that you very kindly allow the community of these women to be provided for."⁸²

Clearly, Caesarius of Arles was one of the few men in Merovingian Gaul who sought to

improve the position of women in his society and in the church as a whole. As he fought his society's own misogyny and sexual double standards, he helped enable a small but significant number of women to maintain autonomy and respect in the early Middle Ages.

A half-century after Caesarius's death, in 590 the Irish monk and missionary, Columban, and twelve companions left Ireland for a pilgrimage to the European Continent. He traveled throughout western Europe, where he met with kings and bishops, and founded monasteries at Luxeuil, Corbie and Bobbio.⁸³ Because of Columban's efforts, Frankish monastic life flourished during the late sixth and early seventh centuries.⁸⁴ He also revived a type of religiosity that had not been seen probably since the third or fourth century. When Columban arrived in Gaul, the piety of the Frankish Church was based on relics and the patronage of saints. Columban preached a piety focused not upon saints, but directly upon God and man's relationship with Him. Columban's was a personal, not institutional, religiosity.⁸⁵

Columban also wrote two monastic rules, which were unlike that of St. Benedict. Columban was primarily concerned with moral perfection, and his rules stressed obedience to the abbot, and private, inner penance rather than public penance, in addition to "poverty and charity, silence and abstinence."⁸⁶ His rule was also based on Ireland's severe asceticism, not on Benedict's policy of moderation.⁸⁷ Most importantly, as Wemple argued, "Saint Columban did not harbor prejudices against women. Instead of shunning their company, he sought their friendship. Instead of emphasizing their impurity, he recognized their spiritual equality."⁸⁸ As a result, Columban's example "inspired a new attitude toward women among his Frankish collaborators and

disciples.”⁸⁹ These men were influential aristocrats, abbots, and bishops, and they “cultivated spiritual friendships with women and sought feminine cooperation in building a network of monasteries throughout the kingdom.”⁹⁰ This led to the creation of double monasteries, as groups of monks were attached to convents in order to protect the nuns, assist in administration of the monastery, and provide sacerdotal services. In addition, “they also set up separate, affiliated communities for men and women in close proximity to each other.”⁹¹ These double monasteries were relatively rare, but they were significant because, though they contained both men and women, they were more often than not led by women, who held complete authority over the entire community.⁹²

Though Columban was no doubt a significant figure in reviving monasticism during the Merovingian era, certain women were also extremely influential in this area. For example, when Baudonivia of Poitiers (fl. ca. 605-610) recorded the life of Radegund (520-587) in the early seventh century, she clearly indicated that Radegund, along with Genovefa (423-502) and Clothild (d. 544), had “made a profound change in the life of Gaul.” Powerful women such as these “turned to religion, and they sanctified public life in a way quite unlike that of the martyrs and confessors.”⁹³ Though these women were secluded within the walls of monasteries, they were powerfully influential figures within the communities.⁹⁴

The political, social, and religious climate of the Merovingian Kingdom, as well as the influential men of the period, served to redefine the accepted position of women in the church during the early Middle Ages. The roles which women could perform in the Merovingian church had been gradually reduced over the preceding centuries, and besides a nun, the only “professional religious roles left to Christian women were those

of virgin, penitent, and widow under vows of chastity.” As Wemple described women’s roles during this era,

Women seized upon and used these roles in ways many and marvelous. They occasionally usurped men's clerical jobs and tried to revive the ancient offices they had once performed. But even as nuns and abbesses, even as famous saints, Christian women faced pragmatic limits on their practice of religion.⁹⁵

It is also unfortunate to note that no woman, not even a nun, was given the authority to preach, nor could they perform the sacraments or any other clerical duties. As abbesses, they could provide healthcare or hospitality.⁹⁶ In addition, abbesses served as mothers to their nuns and to their family. They cared for children, maintained the farmyards and estates of the clerics, created the embroideries and ritual garments required by clergymen, and copied manuscripts.⁹⁷ The intelligent and talented nuns of the Merovingian era kept scriptoria where they “produced fine gospels, the theology of church fathers, ecclesiastical history, sacramentaries, vitae, and personal letters.”⁹⁸

While it is true that only a few women, such as powerful aristocrats, could exercise genuine political and religious authority, “many more used traditional feminine postures as students, dependants, and muses to wield considerable influence in other, subtler ways.”⁹⁹ We find evidence of this in the writings of early medieval nuns, such as Baudonivia’s biography of St. Radegund, which revealed “that female ideals and modes of conduct were upheld as the way to salvation and as modes of sanctity in monasteries led by women.”¹⁰⁰ Wemple elaborated upon the benefits of this high esteem placed on feminine virtues during this period, as she asserted that, “By facilitating the escape of women from the male-dominated society to congregations where they could give expression to their own emotions, ascetic ideals, and spiritual strivings, Christianity

became a liberating force in the lives of women.”¹⁰¹ Consequently, we have several examples of such powerful, influential religious women during the few centuries of Merovingian control, ranging from virgins to widows and abbesses, though most of them were of noble birth.

Genovefa, as already noted, had been mentioned by Baudonivia of Poitiers in her biography of Radegund as an early example of a woman who had had a profound influence upon Gallic and Frankish society. Genovefa was a virgin from the Gallic upper-classes, whom St. Germanus had consecrated as such at a young age. Though her biographer portrayed the young Genovefa as having eagerly desired to be consecrated as a virgin, St. Germanus offered her the option as if virginity were the only real choice for a girl who wished to devote her life to God.¹⁰² Though she followed no strict behavioral guidelines and never joined a convent, she was highly influential and respected within her community. Her biographer wrote that her mother’s blindness was cured when Genovefa brought her water, which the young virgin had “signed with the power of the cross.”¹⁰³ Apparently, there was no consensus regarding the pollution of the feminine touch. In addition to performing miracles, she also built a basilica, led the people of Paris in prayer against the Huns, prophesied, and persuaded the Frankish king, Childeric, to have mercy on his captives.¹⁰⁴

Clothild (d. 544) was also a dynamic religious woman during the Merovingian period. She was a Catholic Burgundian princess who had become the wife of Clovis, the king of the Franks, though he was not a Christian. She continually tried to persuade him to convert to Christianity, but it was not until a certain battle that he finally conceded. His prayer to his wife’s god for help resulted in immediate victory, and he converted to

Christianity. Clothild brought her husband to a priest named Remigius, who instructed and baptized the king.¹⁰⁵ After Clovis's baptism, Clothild counseled him to "build churches in his land and endow them with copious gifts. He gave alms generously to the poor and helped widows and orphans and persevered sedulously and devoutly in every good work."¹⁰⁶ Afterward, she persuaded him to build a church dedicated to St. Peter, saying that God would reward him with victory over the Arians. He did so, and after he defeated the Arians, he built several monasteries and "led a religious life even to the end."¹⁰⁷ In addition to being responsible for the Frankish conversion to Catholicism, Clothild also built a church dedicated to the apostles and several monasteries, performed miracles, and prophesied.¹⁰⁸ Finally, she subjected herself to asceticism and "diminished the wealth of the royal treasury with the abundance of her largess in distribution of alms."¹⁰⁹

Caesaria of Arles (fl. ca. 550) also deserves mention, as she succeeded the former Caesaria of Arles, sister of Caesarius, as abbess of St. John's. She corresponded with Radegund, wife of the Frankish king Clothar and abbess of her own monastery in Poitiers, where she adopted Caesarius's Rule for Nuns. We have an extant copy of a letter written by Caesaria to Radegund, from which we can acquire a deeper understanding of these powerful women. From her letter to Radegund, it is apparent that Caesaria believed in a more personal, one on one relationship with God, and that the intervention of male clergy was unnecessary. She wrote, "May our lord God...himself guide you along the right path. May he himself teach you how to do his will, and may he grant you to walk in his ways, guard his teachings, and meditate on his law."¹¹⁰ What was even more contradictory to the opinions of the male hierarchy was her statement,

"And because God has designed to choose you, ladies most beloved to me, in hereditary succession to him, render thanks to him, bless him in every season."¹¹¹

Caesaria also believed that women were equal to men in mental and spiritual capacity, as shown by her instruction to Radegund, "You must pay attention when divine lessons are read, as carefully as men of the world give heed when royal commands are read. Let the whole mind, though, and contemplation dwell on the Lord's precepts."¹¹²

Caesaria also charged, "Let there be no woman from among those entering who does not study letters. Let them be bound to know all the Psalms by memory. And as I have already said, be zealous to fulfill in all things what you read in the Evangelists."¹¹³

Caesaria's faith in women's capabilities, strength, and potential for holiness was further expressed when she wrote, "If you had been men, you would be going out, strongly and manfully, to fight your enemies so that your body might not be injured. Fight the Devil just as strongly and manfully, so that he cannot slay your souls with his counsels and exceedingly evil stratagems."¹¹⁴

Radegund (ca. 525-587), to whom Caesaria of Arles wrote regarding the management of a monastery, became a nun after she escaped from her husband, Clothar, the Merovingian king. In addition to founding a monastery at Poitiers in 547 and adopting Caesarius's Rule for her nuns,¹¹⁵ she confronted the pagan Franks as she burned down one of their temples, who "marveled at the queen's strength and self-possession."¹¹⁶ Baudonivia was one of Radegund's biographers and had also been a nun at her monastery. Baudonivia praised Radegund for her discretion in conversation, piety, temperance, fortitude, humility, generosity, chastity, and asceticism.¹¹⁷ Baudonivia emphasized Radegund's "feminine" virtues as well as her competency as a religious

leader, writing, "Yet with devout concern and motherly affection she would never give up preaching about what the lesson contained for the soul's salvation,"¹¹⁸ and, "Within her glowed so many virtues: modesty with seemliness, wisdom with simplicity, sternness with mercy, erudition with humility."¹¹⁹

Another of Radegund's biographies was written by her friend, Venantius Fortunatus (d. 609).¹²⁰ It is saddening to note the difference of approach between the two biographers. More specifically, Fortunatus's praise of Radegund was filled with condescension and based primarily upon his surprise that a woman could achieve such holiness. His misogynistic predisposition was clearly displayed in his introduction to Radegund's biography, in which he marveled,

Our Redeemer is so richly and abundantly generous that He wins mighty victories through the female sex and, despite their frail physique, He confers glory and greatness on women through strength of mind. By faith, Christ makes them strong who were born weak so that, when those who appeared to be imbeciles are crowned with their merits by Him who made them, they garner praise for their Creator who hid heavenly treasure in earthen vessels.¹²¹

Based on such an introduction, it is surprising that he even continued to praise Radegund for having lowered herself to the status of a servant, given away her wealth, performed miracles, and bore harsh austerities.¹²²

Eustadiola (594-684), a widow of Bourges, also requires mentioning, as her life was "typical of the urbanized asceticism of the sixth century characterized primarily by small communities with few permanent institutional qualities" and represented "the sort of religious free-enterprise system that Pope Gregory I opposed in his patronage of the Benedictine Rule and that also concerned Gallic councils of the sixth century." This type of asceticism would wane during the seventh century as Irish monks like Columban

encouraged stricter regulation of the monastic life and as the Benedictine Rule regained popularity on the continent.¹²³ Like many other influential women during the Merovingian age, Eustadiola was of noble birth. In addition, she was literate and “wise in religious ways.”¹²⁴ After her husband’s death, she refused to remarry and she consecrated herself to God. She donated her wealth to the churches, and she donated her homes to be turned into churches. In addition, “she built a monastery and a worthy convent for herself and her maids where she enclosed a large flock of the female sex prepared to live according to the norms of the rule.”¹²⁵ She also applied her diplomatic skills by acting as a peacemaker within the kingdom.¹²⁶

These remarkable women—Genovefa, Clothild, Caesaria of Arles, Radegund, and Eustadiola—were just a few of a wide array of powerful female leaders, in both the political and religious spheres, who operated within the Merovingian church. Many others also found freedom within the walls of the monastery, whether as abbesses, prioresses, or other administrative figures. Even those women who served no administrative function within the convent still found autonomy, respect, and opportunities not available in the secular world. In spite of the elimination of women’s clerical roles as deaconesses and widows, within their monastic communities, women could sustain each other in “spiritual, intellectual, scholarly, artistic, and charitable pursuits.”¹²⁷ This was enabled by the political instability of the Merovingian Kingdom, the disintegration of centralized religious authority, and the deep-seated corruption among the clergy. Women in the Merovingian church also found powerful advocates, such as Caesarius of Arles and Columban, who spoke out against the misogyny, corruption, and sexual double standards in their communities, and elevated women both

in the church and in society. Finally, we must not forget about Genovefa, Clothild, Caesaria of Arles, Radegund, Eustadiola, and many others who chose freedom over domination and expression over silence. These spirited women continually proved themselves equal to men in ambition, intelligence, fortitude, and holiness. What is more, they worked within the guidelines, but also exploited the opportunities, provided by the male ecclesiastical hierarchy. By doing so, they earned veneration, and frequently sainthood, as they exercised power, autonomy, and self-expression within the Merovingian church.

¹ Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500-900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 127.

² Lisa M. Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe, 400-1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 97.

³ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 10.

⁴ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 195.

⁵ William E. Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles: the Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, Fourth Series, ed. D. E. Luscombe and (advisors) R. B. Dobson and Rosamond McKitterick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 266.

⁶ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 196.

⁷ Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (London: Longman, 1992), 35.

⁸ Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, 96.

⁹ Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 4.

¹⁰ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 252-253.

¹¹ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, Oxford History of the Christian Church, eds. Henry and Owen Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 58.

¹² Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 58.

¹³ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 55.

¹⁴ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 95.

¹⁵ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 257 and 261.

¹⁶ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 261.

¹⁷ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 262.

¹⁸ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 263.

¹⁹ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 105.

²⁰ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 268-269.

²¹ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 258.

²² Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 53.

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- ²³ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 104 and 107.
- ²⁴ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 262.
- ²⁵ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 270.
- ²⁶ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 56.
- ²⁷ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 59-60.
- ²⁸ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 270.
- ²⁹ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 58.
- ³⁰ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 112.
- ³¹ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 122.
- ³² Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 48.
- ³³ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 55.
- ³⁴ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 56.
- ³⁵ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 189.
- ³⁶ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 189.
- ³⁷ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 17.
- ³⁸ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 11.
- ³⁹ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 14-15.
- ⁴⁰ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 190.
- ⁴¹ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 12.
- ⁴² Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 11.
- ⁴³ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 13-14.
- ⁴⁴ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 190.
- ⁴⁵ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 191.
- ⁴⁶ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 191.
- ⁴⁷ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 127.
- ⁴⁸ "Ancient Statutes of the Church (ca. 475)," in *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, ed. Emilie Amt (New York: Routledge, 1993), 219.

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- ⁴⁹ Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, 107.
- ⁵⁰ “Council of Orange (441),” in *Women’s Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, ed. Emilie Amt (New York: Routledge, 1993), 220.
- ⁵¹ “Council of Arles (442-506),” in *Women’s Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, ed. Emilie Amt (New York: Routledge, 1993), 220.
- ⁵² “Council of Epaone (517),” in *Women’s Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, ed. Emilie Amt (New York: Routledge, 1993), 220.
- ⁵³ “Council of Orange (533),” in *Women’s Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, ed. Emilie Amt (New York: Routledge, 1993), 220.
- ⁵⁴ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 100.
- ⁵⁵ Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, 108.
- ⁵⁶ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 192.
- ⁵⁷ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 192.
- ⁵⁸ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 24.
- ⁵⁹ Caesarius of Arles, “Sermon 43,” in *The Fathers of the Church. Vol. 31, Saint Caesarius of Arles: Sermons, Volume I*, ed. Roy Joseph Defarrari, trans. Mary Magdeleine Mueller (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1956), 214.
- ⁶⁰ Caesarius of Arles, “Sermon 150,” in *The Fathers of the Church. Vol. 47, Saint Caesarius of Arles: Sermons, Volume II*, ed. Roy Joseph Defarrari, trans. Mary Magdeleine Mueller (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 323.
- ⁶¹ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 24.
- ⁶² Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 104-105.
- ⁶³ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 107.
- ⁶⁴ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 117.
- ⁶⁵ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 118.
- ⁶⁶ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 120.
- ⁶⁷ Caesarius of Arles, “The Rule for Nuns of St. Caesarius of Arles,” in *The Rule for Nuns of St. Caesarius of Arles*, ed. Mother Maria Caritas McCarthy, vol. XVI, *The Catholic University of America Studies in Mediaeval History, New Series* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1960), 171.
- ⁶⁸ Caesarius of Arles, “The Rule for Nuns,” 182-183.
- ⁶⁹ Caesarius of Arles, “The Rule for Nuns,” 187.

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- ⁷⁰ Caesarius of Arles, "The Rule for Nuns," 174-175.
- ⁷¹ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 120.
- ⁷² Caesarius of Arles, "The Rule for Nuns," 175.
- ⁷³ Caesarius of Arles, "The Rule for Nuns," 183.
- ⁷⁴ Caesarius of Arles, "The Rule for Nuns," 179.
- ⁷⁵ Caesarius of Arles, "The Rule for Nuns," 182.
- ⁷⁶ Caesarius of Arles, "The Rule for Nuns," 180.
- ⁷⁷ Caesarius of Arles, "The Rule for Nuns," 181.
- ⁷⁸ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 121.
- ⁷⁹ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 251.
- ⁸⁰ Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 252.
- ⁸¹ Caesarius of Arles, "The Testament of Caesarius," in *Caesarius of Arles: Life, Testament, Letters*, trans. William E. Klingshirn, vol. 19, *Translated Texts for Historians* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994), 73.
- ⁸² Caesarius of Arles, "The Testament of Caesarius," 74.
- ⁸³ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2002), 26.
- ⁸⁴ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 70.
- ⁸⁵ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 63.
- ⁸⁶ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 64-65.
- ⁸⁷ Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 26.
- ⁸⁸ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 159.
- ⁸⁹ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 159.
- ⁹⁰ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 159.
- ⁹¹ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 159.
- ⁹² Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 159-162.
- ⁹³ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 56.
- ⁹⁴ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 57.
- ⁹⁵ Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, 108.

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- ⁹⁶ Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, 125.
- ⁹⁷ Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, 140-141.
- ⁹⁸ Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, 140-141.
- ⁹⁹ Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, 140-141.
- ¹⁰⁰ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 190-191.
- ¹⁰¹ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 190-191.
- ¹⁰² “The Life of Genovefa, a Virgin of Paris in Gaul,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, ed. Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 20-21.
- ¹⁰³ “The Life of Genovefa,” 21-22.
- ¹⁰⁴ “The Life of Genovefa,” 23-28.
- ¹⁰⁵ “The Life of Saint Chrothildis,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, ed. Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 41-44.
- ¹⁰⁶ “The Life of Saint Chrothildis,” 45.
- ¹⁰⁷ “The Life of Saint Chrothildis,” 45.
- ¹⁰⁸ “The Life of Saint Chrothildis,” 45-50.
- ¹⁰⁹ “The Life of Saint Chrothildis,” 47-48.
- ¹¹⁰ Caesaria of Arles, “Caesaria to Radegund and Richild,” in *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., trans. Marcelle Thiébaux (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994) 101-102.
- ¹¹¹ Caesaria of Arles, “Caesaria to Radegund and Richild,” 102.
- ¹¹² Caesaria of Arles, “Caesaria to Radegund and Richild,” 102.
- ¹¹³ Caesaria of Arles, “Caesaria to Radegund and Richild,” 104.
- ¹¹⁴ Caesaria of Arles, “Caesaria to Radegund and Richild,” 103.
- ¹¹⁵ Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 55.
- ¹¹⁶ Baudonivia of Poitiers, “The Life of St. Radegund by Baudonivia of Poitiers,” in *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., trans. Marcelle Thiébaux, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), 109.
- ¹¹⁷ Baudonivia of Poitiers, “The Life of St. Radegund by Baudonivia of Poitiers,” 109 and 111.
- ¹¹⁸ Baudonivia of Poitiers, “The Life of St. Radegund by Baudonivia of Poitiers,” 113.
- ¹¹⁹ Baudonivia of Poitiers, “The Life of St. Radegund by Baudonivia of Poitiers,” 114.

¹²⁰ Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley, eds., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 61.

¹²¹ “The Life of the Holy Radegund by Venantius Fortunatus,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, ed. Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 70.

¹²² “The Life of the Holy Radegund,” 72-85.

¹²³ McNamara, Halborg, and Whatley, eds., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 107.

¹²⁴ “Saint Eustadiola, Widow of Bourges,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, ed. Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and E. Gordon Whatley (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 107.

¹²⁵ “Saint Eustadiola,” 108.

¹²⁶ “Saint Eustadiola,” 109.

¹²⁷ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 190.

Conclusion

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."¹

As this analysis of women's religious roles during the first through eighth centuries has shown, the position of women in the church was never static, but it changed over time to accommodate the desires and ambitions of the men who were in power. In the earliest church, women were respected as apostles, prophets, and teachers. They performed liturgical duties alongside men as deaconess, widows, and occasionally as presbyters and bishops. But, when it became profitable to be a bishop or priest, traditional Roman and Germanic misogyny enabled Biblical passages to be easily taken out of context and used to subjugate women. Suzanne Wemple succinctly described the transformation of women's position in the early church:

In the early Christian communities, men and women were subject to the same moral precepts, and women served as auxiliaries to men in the propagation of the faith, pastoral care, and the administration of the sacraments. Only in the fourth century, when Christianity became first a favored and then an exclusive state religion, did the male hierarchy begin to disqualify women from auxiliary ecclesiastical functions. Particularly in the West, where the active participation of women in religion came to be associated with heresy, Eve's role in the Fall and the ritual impurity of women were used as excuses not only for excluding women from the diaconate, but also for enforcing celibacy on the ministers of the altar.²

Women first found their place in the church based on their direct interactions with Christ. As Wemple asserted, “Christ himself had laid the foundation for this psychological revolution. Discountenancing contemporary social and sexual taboos and double standards, he responded with unreserved warmth to women’s demands for religious instruction.”³ He repeatedly demonstrated “his belief that women had the same mental and spiritual capacity as men.”⁴ Christ also emphasized the importance of submission, both to the governing authorities⁵ and to each other.⁶ Therefore, women’s first roles in the church were based upon the combined Christian notions of spiritual equality, such as that found at Galatians 3:28, and submission, taught first by Christ and then by Peter and Paul.

This submission was not directly solely toward women; it was a Christian principle to which everyone, male and female, was expected to adhere. Besides the obvious requirement of submission to God, men were also required to submit to each other, to other Christians, to their secular authorities, and to their elders. For example, Paul advised the Romans to “be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody” and to submit themselves to the governing authorities.⁷ He also wrote to the Hebrews, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.”⁸ To the Galatians, he wrote, “Serve one another in love.”⁹ Again, he wrote to the church at Ephesus, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”¹⁰ Paul also ended his first epistle to the Corinthians by demanding them to submit to a particular household (which presumably included women), and also to those who served the church.¹¹ Peter also preached submission to Christian men when he wrote, “Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older.”¹²

Peter and Paul were striving to create Christian communities characterized not only by their humility and submission, but also by their orderliness. Paul stressed this in his first letter to the church at Corinth, instructing that “everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”¹³ Because of the Christian value of submission, the desire not to unnecessarily offend secular society, and the need to regulate the church gatherings, Paul found it necessary to write to Timothy that women were not to teach in church nor have authority over a man. In addition, he wrote that women were to “learn in quietness and full submission.”¹⁴ To the Corinthians, Paul again wrote that women were prohibited from speaking in church.¹⁵ This was due to the fact that Roman women were generally uneducated and also because the men of Rome’s patriarchal society would have found such a practice offensive. Based on the context of the letter, it also appears that Paul was addressing a specific group of women who spoke excessively during church. However, earlier in the same letter, Paul acknowledged women who apparently prayed and prophesied in public worship.¹⁶ As chapter one has argued, it was acceptable in these early churches for women to perform powerful roles, so it is quite plausible that Paul’s prohibitions of women from teaching and speaking in church were responses to local issues. We find further support of this hypothesis in one of the letters of the fifth century theologian, St. Jerome, in which he defended his female associates who taught men by arguing that the only reason Paul prohibited women from teaching was to avoid offending the patriarchal proclivities of Roman men.¹⁷

Despite the Biblical passages that seemed to restrict the roles of women in the church, others encouraged their participation. Peter and Paul both wrote to their churches about the importance of each person using the gifts he or she has received from God.

Peter, for example, wrote, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.”¹⁸ Paul also acknowledged that “each man has his own gift from God”¹⁹ and encouraged each person to use what gift he or she has been given, whether it was prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, governing, or showing mercy.²⁰

Still, how do we reconcile Peter’s command that wives be submissive to their husbands in order that “they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives,”²¹ or Paul’s requirement that wives “submit to their husbands in everything,”²² with the spiritual equality and praise of women religious by both Christ and Paul? As Wemple argued and as this thesis has demonstrated, women’s religious roles flourished during periods of religious and political decentralization, but were stifled during “periods of political or ecclesiastical advances.”²³ In other words, it was the local communities or families who determined the religious authority which women could wield. We have also seen that the developing ecclesiastical hierarchy’s attempts to restrict women from the church was often met with opposition from these communities, and specifically, by the husbands of the powerful religious women.

It can only be assumed, then, that women could, and frequently did, submit to their husbands while holding influential roles within the early church, because their husbands and communities encouraged such active participation. It was the ambitious, and often single, members of the male church hierarchy who sought to secure their control over the church by interfering with the independent communities and families, telling husbands how they should run their families, and attempting to remove women from the clergy by advocating clerical celibacy and the inferiority of womankind.

In today's society, it is important to remember that the church was not free of societal influence and corruption, and that the decline of women in the church was based on a combination of social and political elements, fueled and enabled by a low regard for women that still permeates church and society today. Also, we must realize that in the twenty-first century, it is much more common for a woman to have a high education than it would have been in the Roman Empire. In addition, our changing society has allowed women to provide for their families outside the home. Given what we know about Paul's and Peter's motivation to bar women from teaching roles in the church, and also the fact that they nevertheless approved of women serving prominent ministerial roles within the early church, we are led inevitably to the conclusion that in today's society, women should be even more free to perform such functions in the church. If we acknowledge the powerful positions that women held in the earliest church, then women today will be liberated, once again, to earn respect instead of criticism by daring to choose the same roles that they performed nearly two thousand years ago.

¹ Luke 10.38-42 New International Version.

² Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500-900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 191.

³ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 19.

⁴ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 19.

⁵ Matthew 17.24-27 NIV.

⁶ John 13.14, Matthew 20.26, Luke 22.26-27 NIV.

⁷ Romans 12.17; 13.1-7 NIV.

⁸ Hebrews 13.17 NIV.

⁹ Galatians 5.13 NIV.

¹⁰ Ephesians 5.21 NIV.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 16.16 NIV.

¹² 1 Peter 5.5 NIV.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 14.40 NIV.

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 2.11 NIV.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 14.34 NIV.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 11.5 NIV.

¹⁷ Jerome, "Letter CXXVII: To Principia," in *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, translated by F.A. Wright, (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1963), 455.

¹⁸ 1 Peter 4.10 NIV.

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 7.7 NIV.

²⁰ Romans 12.6-8 NIV.

²¹ 1 Peter 3.1 NIV.

²² Ephesians 5.24 NIV.

²³ Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 195.

Appendix*



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

*Images borrowed from http://studentwebs.coloradocollege.edu/~e_larson/Mosaics_of_Santa_Maria_Maggiore.html

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