

Reference: Phillips, Jennifer Kathleen. "Attitudes to Women Leaders in the Early Church." Canberra: Charles Sturt University, 2010.

This essay will look at the place accorded to women in the life and witness of the early church, by comparing the gospel writings as well as archaeological evidence and other non-canonical writings, especially those that show attitudes to women.¹ Although it can be documented that women were active in many roles in the early church, particular reference will be made to the leadership roles of apostle, prophet and bishop, recognising that most of the surviving written history has been done by men, many of whom diminished the "significance of women's leadership roles."²

Some of the historical evidence I will present, suggests that the liberating effects of Jesus' words, resurrection and Pentecost, and the effects of meeting in private houses, considered the sphere of women, opened the door for gender equality in the life and witness of the early church.³ However with the change in meeting place from house church to public buildings, a loss of liberty, especially for women, whose proper sphere of activity was often considered to be in the home, can be documented.⁴ Some parts of the early church accepted the prevailing cultural, social norms and attitudes and limited or prohibited women's leadership roles and others didn't.⁵ The standardisation of worship, canonization of scripture and creeds, anti-feminist rules made in various councils, and control being given to the bishops, meant that the bishop and tradition became the leader in many churches, rather than apostles, prophets, and possibly even the Holy Spirit.⁶ The fear of heresy and a fight for

¹ The early church "consisted of distinctive, competing groups" and the groups also associated themselves with "different foundational figures and various theologies" (Andern Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, ed. Francis Schussler Fiorenza FranciosBovo, Peter B. Machinist (Cambridge: Harvard Theological Studies, 2003), 15.).

When referring to the early church, I will mean the time period from when women like Mary Magdalene became Jesus' disciples until around 500 AD.

² Women were active in roles other than the three I will cover in this essay. They were especially active in helping the poor, sick and other women, some as "consecrated widows, deaconesses and 'respectable women'", but this is beyond the scope of this essay (Philip Francis Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World.*, vol. 1-2 (London: Routledge, 2000), 429.).

Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, 13.

Women's Bible Commentary. Expanded Edition with Apocrypha, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox press, 1998), 3-4.

Anti-feminist bias in texts show growing dislike of women in leadership roles (Ben Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 183.).

³ Luke tells us about a woman called Mary who "sat at Jesus' feet". Paul uses this same term when speaking about being educated by Gamaliel in Acts 22:3 (Toni Craven and Ross S. Kraemer Carol Meyers, ed. *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 119.). Education was only for "free men" (Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 16.). This is not to say that women did not go to school, as "Roman matrons were well educated", but it was the boys who went on to "sit at the feet" of a philosopher outside the home (———, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 18.). Luke tells us that Jesus supported Mary in this activity, and in front of all those listening declared that she had chosen the best thing.

⁴ The "exclusive sphere of influence" for the women of Rome was in the home (Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 16.).

⁵ Although this is debated by some, who look at the freedom wealthy Greek woman had compared to Roman women.

Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, 13.

⁶ "everything was being done in accordance with tradition" (W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1984), 111.).

"It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptise, or hold a love-feast" (Ignatius, To the Smyrnaeans, V111, in J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, Second Edition Revised by W.H.C. Frend ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1987), 15.).

Male bishops whose gifts may have been in the area of administration and/or teaching took over the leadership role, like a ruling priest, and some were able to buy their way into the position in the Catholic Church (Thomas Whiting, *The Priest in Society* (Bathurst: Anglican Church Diocese of Bathurst, 1988), 204.).

orthodoxy by part of the church contributed to further loss of liberty and equality, especially for women, as anti-feminism was actively encouraged in some parts of the early church.⁷ Some emperors also had a big impact on the church, contributing to religious conformity and hierarchical, monarchical and patriarchal control.⁸ Yet in some communities women were still accorded the place of church leader.⁹

Attitudes to women as bishops or presbyters

The word “*bishop*” is sometimes translated as “*overseer*” in New Testament writings.¹⁰ It was sometimes used interchangeably with “*Presbyteros*” or “*elder*” and initially referred to those who formed the governing body in the Jewish synagogues, which sometimes included women.¹¹ The early Christian elders were leaders, overseeing and caring for the people God entrusted to them.¹² They were chosen because of their ability to manage their own households and teach others, possibly influenced by the synagogue model.¹³ To begin

Leadership models were increasingly influenced by political life and city councils. Karen Jo Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 156-57.

⁷ Lesly F. Massey, *Women and the New Testament. An Analysis of Scripture in Light of New Testament Era Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 1989), 135.

Let the bishops “*be your rulers therefore and let them be accounted of you as kings*” (Didascalia 9 in Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 157.).

⁸ Some believe that the church made a further “*compromise with paganism*” during the reign of Constantine (Katharine Bushnell, *God's Word to Women. One Hundred Bible Stories on Woman's Place in the Church and Home* (Minneapolis: Christians for Biblical Equality, 2003), 344.).

Constantine backed one part of the early church enabling them to possess great wealth and build so many churches that Eusebius' said, “*Who can number the churches in every town*”, which increased their power (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 557. and Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1963), 30.). All the extra buildings meant more administrative staff and contributed to the hierarchical control (Harold W. Turner, ed. *From Temple to Meeting House. The Phenomenology & Theology of Places of Worship* (Netherlands: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 159.).

In the Canons of Constantinople, the bishop of Constantinople was given primacy after the bishop of Rome (J. Stevenson, ed. *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church, Ad 337-461* (Cambridge: University press, 1989), 117.).

The emperor Justinian (527-565) saw himself as the “*earthy director*” of the church and laws against all those considered heretics, including the Montansits, were made to increase orthodoxy (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 829-31.).

⁹ The early church “*consisted of distinctive, competing groups*” and the groups also associated themselves with “*different foundational figures and various theologies*” (Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, 15.).

¹⁰ “*to all the saints in Christ Jesus that are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons*” (Philippians 1:1 (American King James Version)).

“*Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood*” (Acts 20:28 (American Standard Version)).

Stuart G. Hall, ed. *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, Second ed. (London: SPCK, 2005), 31..

¹¹ “*The apostles and elders met to consider this question*” (Acts 15:6 (New International Version)).

There is archaeological evidence from around 27 BC to possibly the 6th century that women were leaders of synagogues (Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1982), 1.).

Women were leaders in the synagogues, sometimes because of their patronage (Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 90-92.).

“*Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task*” (Acts 6:3 (New American Standard Bible)).

¹² “*To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock*” (1 Peter 5:1-3 (New International Version)).

¹³ 1 Timothy 3:1-7 includes other characteristics they need as well.

with, the place the church met included privately owned houses, considered the sphere of women, and so some of the managerial leadership was in the hand of those who ran the household.¹⁴ This made it easier for women, who were accustomed to wielding authority, to be patrons and function as protectors, hosts and house church leaders as some were wealthy, educated and had high social status in their communities.¹⁵

Biblical records mention a church in the home of Nympha, Chloe and probably Phoebe.¹⁶ Phoebe is called a “minister” [*deacon*] of the church, which may have been more of a leadership role in the beginning as no distinction was made between the masculine and feminine form of the word.¹⁷ Later the word “deacon”, changed to mean men and deaconess was used in regard to women with prescribed duties to other women only in many churches.¹⁸ Paul commented on Phoebe’s leadership qualities when he wrote that she was a “*prostatiss*” [ruler] to him.¹⁹ The same word is used in I Timothy 3:4 when referring to a bishop.²⁰

The first Christian churches may have used the Jewish synagogue model, where the three main duties of an elder were allocated to different people. In the Jewish synagogues, there was a president, a treasurer and a teacher who also “exercised the disciplinary powers of the assembly” (Whiting, *The Priest in Society*, 206.).

¹⁴ Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World.*, 429.

Christian corporations or societies were not legal (Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, ed. Slobodan Curcic, Revised ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 24.)

“I had forbidden the existence of clubs” (Pliny, *Ep.* X.96, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 19.).

¹⁵ Not all were wealthy. Two slave women were ministers[deaconesses] (Pliny, *Ep.* X.96, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 19.).

“Early Christian texts name women as supporters and benefactors of churches, just as Jewish inscriptions honour them as supporters and benefactors of synagogues” (Gillian Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society* (New York Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29.).

Lampe thinks that corporate community property centrally administered didn’t happen until the third century (Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, ed. Marshall D. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 370 - 74.).

Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 16.

Mary’s sister Martha boldly invited Jesus to her home, which may imply that she was the head of the house. She showed hospitality. The same Greek word, “*diakonos*”, that is used to refer to table ministries in the church and to servants of the church is used here (Carol Meyers, ed. *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, 115.).

Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 12-13.

Lydia and Mary the mother of John Mark were also women, who owned a house where the church met and were probably leaders, as was Mary the Proselyte: “*When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them*”(Acts 16:15 (New International Version)).

ACTS 12:12-13

Mary the proselyte was head of a church in her house and wrote a letter to Ignatius (Amy-Jill Levine, ed. *“Women Like This” “Women Like This” New Perspective on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 225-26.).

¹⁶ “*to Nympha and the church in her house*” (Colossians 4:15(New International Version)).

“*some from Chloe’s household have informed me . . .*” (Corinthians 1:11(New International Version)).

“*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchræa. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me*” (Romans 16:1-2 (New International Version)).

¹⁷ Romans 16:1

Susanne Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 88.

¹⁸ Jean Laporte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity: Studies in Women and Religion*, vol. 7 (New York: The Edwin mellen press, 1982), 117.

¹⁹ Romans 16.1-2

The word can be translated as “*one standing before*” and is the same word that Timothy uses to tell men to rule their households well (Bushnell, *God’s Word to Women. One Hundred Bible Stories on Woman’s Place in the Church and Home*, 171-72.).

²⁰ “*A bishop must be one that ruleth*” (I Timothy 3:4).

One woman is named an “elder” by the Apostle John, which was a problem for some later copyists and translators who changed the text to “his” or “their” house indicating their negative attitude to the place of women as elders.²¹ By the time the letters to Timothy were being circulated, the position of bishop may have been considered by many to be a man’s place, as the qualifications are listed for men.²²

By 100 AD there is evidence of standardization in many church practices.²³ Rules concerning church activities were sent to the churches and authority was given to bishops in regards to all things “pertaining to the church”. By the third century “bishops, elders (presbyters), and deacons grew into a hierarchy of “professional ordained clergy”, responsible for publicly identifiable church buildings.²⁴ Ordination then became an issue.

In some churches female bishops and presbyters were ordained.²⁵ There is evidence that the Montanists ordained women, which angered many male church leaders, who believed ordination was for men.²⁶ Some of the writings from these men, later called the “church fathers”, used verses like 1 Timothy 3:4 to limit ordination for women.²⁷ Although some women were denied ordination, they had bishop qualities and were very influential in

²¹ “The elder, To the chosen lady and her children” (2 John 1;1(New International Version)) Syriac and Coptic manuscripts and Origen say “her house”, but in later translations it has been changed to “his house” and “their house”(Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission. The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 120.).

²² 1 Timothy 3:1-7

²³ Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 24-25.

²⁴ “The Didache of the Twelve Apostles” sets out the procedure and words for various church activities such as baptism (Didache, V11-XV.2, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 9-12.).

Ignatius, *To the Smyrneans*, V111, in ———, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 15.

Esler suggests that domestic buildings were adapted for religious practice and indicate a shift from private to publicly identifiable church ownership. He backs up this claim with evidence from Syriac court records that report the destruction in 201 AD, of a “temple (or sanctuary) of the church of the Christians” along with other buildings, in a flood (Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World.*, 715-17, Philip Francis Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World*, vol. 11, Perpetua and Felicitus (London: Routledge 2000).).

²⁵ From the second to the fourth century AD there is archaeological evidence that women were ordained as bishops and presbyters in some areas of the church and held in high esteem among the community. They include, Epiktas, Paniskianes, and Kale (Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 10 & 20.). A mummy from Egypt has the inscription “presbyter Artemidora”.

Ammion was remembered as a presbyter and Artemidoros as a bishop by Bishop Diogas in Phrygia, during the first half of the third century. They may have been Montanist women (Lite E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 127.).

The “*Testamentum Domini Jesu Christi*” which was based on Hippolytus’ work mentions female presbyters, who were considered part of the clergy and held in high esteem among the community Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (Minnesota: The Liturgical press, 1980), 66.

²⁶ The Montanists were a branch of the Phrygia church (Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 29.). Tertullian wrote negatively of an unorthodox group of Christian women, probably a Montanist group too, whose ordinations were “carelessly administered, capricious, changeable” (Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 41 in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 170.).

Hippolytus spoke of the Montanists as “victims of error....captivated by wretched women named Priscilla and Maximilla whom they suppose to be priestesses” (Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 197.).

Some women were confessors and had the right to forgive sins (Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 192.).

Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 197.

Hippolytus (c. 336 AD) believed that ordination was for men, because of the “prescriptions of the Apostle”. In “*The canons of Hippolytus*”, the word “Apostles” probably refers to 1 Timothy 5:3-16 (Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 50.).

²⁷ “Men of wealth and rank rose to leadership positions” (Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 25.).

activities that included the oversight, care and management of large numbers of people.²⁸ Macrina (d. 380) for instance, founded monasteries and was as “*well educated as Basil*” her brother, who used the word “*presbyterian*” in his canons when referring to the senior woman, who was head of a monastery.²⁹ During the reign of Valens (364-378), Melania “*the Elder*,” called the “*new Thecla*,” travelled to Palestine where she established monasteries for men and women too.³⁰ Her grand daughter Melania also built monasteries for men and women, and like an apostle went on missionary journeys.³¹ She used her leadership skills to establish a hospital and jointly built a famous “*home for strangers*” at “*Portus Romanus*.”³²

As the church became more organized, synods and councils, such as those at Nicaea (324 AD), were held.³³ At first they allowed women to be ordained.³⁴ However it wasn't long before women's access to positions of power in many of the churches was limited and women were increasingly banned from the clergy and warned against listening to women who taught what they considered heretical doctrines.³⁵ The Archbishop of Constantinople, John

²⁸ The emperor Julian (363) on a visit to Antioch and Constantius was “*pestered by Roman aristocratic women*” demanding Pope Liberius be “*recalled from exile*” (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 562-63.). For instance, Celerina and Monica were called the “*backbone of the fourth century church*” (———, *The Rise of Christianity*, 562).

²⁹ Kari Torjesen Malcolm, *Women at the Crossroads: A Path Beyond Feminism & Traditionalism* (Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1982), 96-97.

Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World.*, 357.

In Basil's canons, the word “*presbyterian*” was used for the senior woman, who was head of a monastery, but did not mean that she was ordained as clergy (Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 52.).

³⁰ Melania, a widow and the granddaughter of a “*high ranking man*”, ministered to many in the church from her wealth. (Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church. Message of the Fathers of the Church*, vol. 13 (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1983), 213-14.). She was instrumental in the conversion of at least one man and led many “*virgins*” as head of her monastery (Clark, *Women in the Early Church. Message of the Fathers of the Church*, 214-15.). Among those inspired by her to build a monastery too, was another wealthy woman called Olympias, who was ordained as a deaconess and was a close friend of John Chrysostom (———, *Women in the Early Church. Message of the Fathers of the Church*, 223-24.).

Jerome praised her by calling her a “*new Thecla*” and benefitted greatly from her knowledge of the scriptures (Malcolm, *Women at the Crossroads: A Path Beyond Feminism & Traditionalism*, 98-99.).

Jerome also praised Fabiola, likening her to Moses' sister, Miriam. He wrote that Fabiola used her material wealth to help many. (Jerome, *Ep. LXXV*11.2-10 in Stevenson, ed. *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church, Ad 337-461*, 196-97.).

³¹ She contributed greatly to church history by emphasising the importance of praising God (Clark, *Women in the Early Church. Message of the Fathers of the Church*, 213.).

She built two monasteries for monks so that they could “*chant perpetual praises*” to God. She was instrumental in the conversion of her uncle who was “*influential at court*” and she inspired the Empress, Eudocia to go on a pilgrimage (Malcolm, *Women at the Crossroads: A Path Beyond Feminism & Traditionalism*, 99.).

³² Jerome, *Ep. LXXV*11.2-10 in Stevenson, ed. *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church, Ad 337-461*, 196-97.

³³ Others were held in Antioch (325 AD), Tyre (335 AD), Niumidia and Elvira (305 AD) (———, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 290-94 & 97-98 & 362.).

³⁴ Evidenced for this can also be seen in the nineteenth canon of the first council of Nicaea in 324 AD, which states that Paulianists, who returned to the Catholic Church had to be rebaptised and if blameless could be re-ordained. The women deaconesses on the other hand, and those who had been enrolled among the clergy were only allowed to be “*numbered among the laity*” Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 48.

³⁵ The Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, 127.

Gnostics were sometimes very similar to orthodox Christians. Irenaeus wrote that it was hard to tell the difference between orthodox Christians and some groups of Christian Gnostics (Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?* , 141.).

The similarity in beliefs can be seen when Origen wrote that the Gnostic heretics who returned to the church were required to give up their asceticism (———, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?* , 143.).

Gnosticism is often called “*Dualism*” and involves two gods. (*Good and Evil. Quaker Perspectives*, ed. Jackie Leach Scully and Pink Dandelion (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 143.). The lesser god or “*demiurge created evil* which included matter, and neither were therefore all powerful *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, ed. Antti Laato and Johannes C. de Moor (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 174.

Chrysostom (c. 347–407), thought things had been turned upside down so that women, who were the “ruled” were now the “rulers” and given more freedom to speak and rebuke in some churches than men did with their “domestics”.³⁶ He did not allow women to be ordained as priests, but nevertheless, spoke of them as priests.³⁷ He wrote that “*the divine law has shut women out from the ministerial office but they use force to get inside.*”³⁸ Some of his writing appears to approach an attitude of equality and yet he still wrote that women were “*assigned the presidency of the household*”, while the public sphere was for men.³⁹ He thought the women in the Apostle Paul’s day were not as preoccupied with trivial activities as they were in his day, and so Paul had allowed them to teach men, but not from the pulpit.⁴⁰ Theodore, the bishop of Mopsuestia (c. 350 - 428), justified 1 Timothy 2:12 by taking into account the freedom women had to prophecy to the world, so women did not need to speak in church as well.⁴¹

The “*Didascalia*”, (possibly third century), from which the late fourth century “*Apostolic Constitutions*” were reworked, dropped everything that suggested the idea of ecclesiastical function for widows, but they did allow the bishop to choose women as deaconesses to attend to women, and deacons to attend to men.⁴² These women had the highest rank among women but were ranked below all the men in the church and their service was limited.⁴³

Epiphanius, the bishop of Salamis (b. c. 315- 403), criticised women “*bishops and presbyters and the rest*” for their leadership roles, basing his theology on 1 Timothy 2:12 and the common notion that women had an inferior nature.⁴⁴ This indicates that not all Christian

Stevenson, ed. *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church, Ad 337-461*, 159.

A “*woman of rank*” named Agape was among those who introduced Priscillian doctrines to Spain via lectures given by women, which may have resulted in the ordination of women (Jerome, *Ep. LXXV*11.2-10 in ———, ed. *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church, Ad 337-461*, 196-97.).

Charismatic prophecy among men and women was encouraged and at a council at Nimes (c. 394), it was written in reference to the Priscillian doctrines, that the “*ecclesiastical rule*” did not permit “*this innovation*” of allowing women into the “*Levitical ministry*”(Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 101. and Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 711.).

Stevenson, ed. *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church, Ad 337-461*, 158-63.

³⁶ Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 84.

He also thought women were “*weak and vain*” (Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World.*, 423.).

³⁷ “*this women baptised and became a priest*” (Clark, *Women in the Early Church. Message of the Fathers of the Church*, 175.).

³⁸ “Possibly referring to Jesus’ words of many “*by force*” entering the kingdom of heaven: “*From the days of John the Baptizer until now, the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force*” (Matthew 11:12 (World English Bible)).

³⁹ “*When one is required to preside over the Church and to be entrusted with the care of so many souls, the whole female sex must retire before the magnitude of the task, and the majority of men also, and we must bring forward those who to a large extent surpass all others and soar as much above them in excellence of spirit as Saul overtopped the whole Hebrew nation in bodily stature*”(Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 84.).

Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 132.

⁴⁰ Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 80-84.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴² The “*Didascalia*” was more favourable to widows than the “*Apostolic Constitutions*” (*Ibid.*, 59-60.).

The “*Apostolic Constitutions*” considered it a “*transgression of the commandment and a great peril*” for women to teach or baptise (———, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 37-38.).

⁴³ They were not allowed to perform “*anything proper to the office of presbyters or deacons*” (Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 62-3.

⁴⁴ Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 44.

Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, 118.

churches abided by Canon 44 from the Council of Laodicea that disallowed women from being presbyters.⁴⁵

Genesis 3:16 which is commonly mistranslated, was another verse used by many in the church to say that even the law said that men were meant to rule over women and women should be silent.⁴⁶ Some believed that because death had entered the world through the woman, she must “remain in submission.”⁴⁷

By the fifth century AD, the Catholic Church possessed great wealth, owning many churches, and church documents from this period make reference to “*presbyteresses*” in regard to community prayer, placing them below the bishop, which may reflect how the position had changed from that of an overseer to one more like a deaconess.⁴⁸ But men like Augustine (354-430 AD), were opposed even to the idea of women being ordained as deaconesses and at the “First council of Orange” (441 AD) a canon was made stating that deaconesses were “*absolutely not to be ordained.*”⁴⁹ However some continued to perform clerical duties as evidenced by a letter written by Pope Gelasius I (494).⁵⁰ Archaeological evidence also indicates that women were still officiating as bishops and presbyters in some places. For instance in the Celtic church, Bishop Ardagh ordained Brigit as a Bishop.⁵¹

In the sixth century some of the emperors, who wanted greater religious conformity, continued the restrictive attitude to the role of women in the church.⁵²

Attitudes to women as apostles

An apostle (ἀπόστολος), some believed, had to have seen the resurrected Jesus, who sent them forth as a messenger.⁵³ Their authority and position in the church varied, but initially they appear to have functioned as travelling leaders, sent out on specific missions.⁵⁴

⁴⁵ At the Council of Laodicea in 352 AD, for instance women were prohibited from accessing the church altars, but senior women “*presbytidas*” sat up the front of the church near the bishop and took their place with the clergy during the Eucharist “*Women should not have access to the altar*”(Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 54.).

⁴⁶ It is more in keeping with the character of God to translate it “*If you turn away [stretch your neck out like a donkey on heat, away from me – [God]] to your husband, then he will rule over you*” (Genesis 3:16). In other words God was making it clear that the woman had a choice in who she wanted to rule her and consequently the type of rule (*Pocket Interlinear Old Testament*, ed. Jay P. Green Sr., trans. Jay P. Green Sr., vol. 1 (Peabody Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 7.) and “Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible Together with Dictionaries of the Hebrew and Greek Words of the Original with References to the English Words.” in *Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary*, ed. James Strong (McLean: Mac Donald Publishing Company, n.a.). Bushnell, *God’s Word to Women. One Hundred Bible Stories on Woman’s Place in the Church and Home*, 89.

⁴⁷ Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 92-93.

⁴⁸ Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 557.

Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, 116 & 25-27.

⁴⁹ Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 96.

canon 25 (———, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 102.).

⁵⁰ It stated that things had come to such a “*low state*” of affairs that women were being “*encouraged to officiate at the sacred alters*” (Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, 129.).

⁵¹ The presbyters Leta from Bruttium, Flavia Vitalia and an unnamed woman from Salona (Ibid., 131-33.).

Brigit was a prominent leader in the Celtic church, which was not as restrictive to women. She built a monastery in 480 AD (*Praying with Celtic Holy Women*, ed. Bridget Mary Meehan and Regina Madonna Oliver (Liguori: Liguori / Trummph, 2003), 29.).

⁵² During the reign of the emperor Justin I (518-527), laws were made to restrict the number of clergy. The highest rank for women was that of deaconess, which was below that of deacon and not as many were allowed (Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 71-72.).

The emperor Justinian (527-565) saw himself as the “*earthy director*” of the church and laws against all those considered heretics, including the Montnists, were made to increase orthodoxy (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 829-31.).

⁵³ Paul justifies his apostleship on the grounds of seeing Jesus and being commissioned by him (Galatians 1:1, Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, 3.

⁵⁴ Whiting, *The Priest in Society*, 203.

Women, according to the four gospel writers, went to the tomb and saw the resurrected Jesus, who tells one or more of them to go and tell the other disciples, which some view as the first apostolic call.⁵⁵ Although it sounds similar to the command in Isaiah 40:9-10, this idea was controversial, especially to Peter and possibly also to Luke.⁵⁶ What Luke believed the place of women to be can be seen in what he omitted to say in his writings, which influenced early church attitudes.⁵⁷ For instance, unlike the other gospel writers, Luke doesn't mention the apostolic type of commissioning of women at the tomb.⁵⁸ He omits the narrative of the women seeing the resurrected Jesus and being told to proclaim the good news, thus giving no justification for women preaching or being apostles.⁵⁹ Luke does not mention the Samaritan woman at the well, whose testimony resulted in many people from her village believing either, but wrote about a Samaritan village that refused to believe.⁶⁰ In some later church writings, women such as the Samaritan and Mary Magdalene, although not given the title "*apostle*" in the gospels, were called apostles.⁶¹

According to Paul they were first in the hierarchy of church leaders as evidenced in 1 Corinthians 12:28: "*And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues*" However they did not maintain this position in some churches.

⁵⁵ John 20:16-20 & Mark 16:9-12 & Matthew 28:1-8

⁵⁶ "*female messenger to Zion, lift up your voice with strength, female messenger to Jerusalem speak up; do not fear say to the cities of Judah 'Behold your God'*" (Isaiah 40:9-10). תרשב is feminine so I have translated it as *female messenger* to emphasise the gender. It has been translated as "bearer of tidings" and "woman that bringeth good tidings" (Bushnell, *God's Word to Women. One Hundred Bible Stories on Woman's Place in the Church and Home*, 344.). Did the women think back to this scripture verse as they ran? Did Luke consider this?

⁵⁷ Luke specifies eleven men as disciples which suggests that he wanted to disbar women from the role of Apostle: "...he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time.....Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles" (1 Corinthians 15:5-8(New International Version)). In referring to "*all the apostles*", Paul seems to be saying, contrary to what Luke suggests that there are more than 12 apostles. Lists of apostles vary in the gospels. Not all are given a prominent place in writings, which suggests that the 12 disciples Luke puts forth may not have all functioned as apostles (Whiting, *The Priest in Society*, 203.).

The concept of twelve apostles was introduced "only after Paul" (Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, 11.).

John on the other hand does not give a list of exclusively male disciples, whom Jesus told to go and preach (———, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, 55.).

⁵⁸ Luke 24:4

⁵⁹ "*It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles*" (Luke 24:10(New International Version)).

"*So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. 10Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*(Matthew 28:8-10(New International Version)).

"*When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping*" (Mark 16:9-10(New International Version)).

"*Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (translated "Teacher"). Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: 'I have seen the Lord!' And she told them that he had said these things to her'* (John 20:16-18(New International Version)).

Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, 34.

⁶⁰ John 4:39-42

⁶¹ Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, 50.

Origen for example said: "*Christ sends the woman as an apostle*" (———, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, 50.).

Hippolytus of Rome (235) wrote that the women who saw the resurrected Jesus at the tomb did in order that "*women too could be Christ's apostles*". Gregory of Nyssa (c. 334-394) also writes of Mary Magdalene in terms of qualifying for the apostolic role: "*Be the first teacher to the teachers. So that Peter who denied me learns that I can choose a woman apostle*" (Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, 15.).

Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, 51.

In writing attributed to the apostle Paul, women are mentioned as co-workers, working alongside men in spreading the gospel, and the same Greek word, "*synergoi*", is used to describe them as is used for male leaders.⁶² Although they are not all called apostles, their missionary work may have been the same as an apostle's. Priscilla was one such travelling co-worker, who taught a highly educated man.⁶³ Along with her husband, Priscilla became a leader of a church in their home at Rome, where she was later honoured.⁶⁴ Attitudes of part of the church towards the place of women can be seen in the changes that were made to subsequent texts that diminish Priscilla's importance.⁶⁵ For example the word "*them*" was changed to "*him*" in one Codex, and Priscilla's name put second in another, and omitted in another.⁶⁶

Phoebe, as mentioned earlier, was another woman who engaged in an apostolic mission, although she was referred to as a minister [*diakonos*] and a "*benefactor*" or patron of the church.⁶⁷ She was sent by Paul as a co-worker to Rome.⁶⁸

Paul does call one woman an outstanding apostle.⁶⁹ This caused a problem for some later church leaders and translators who changed the feminine name "*Junia*" to a male form.⁷⁰ However as there are no records of men called by this name in other literature, the name is unlikely to have belonged to a man.⁷¹ Junia was put forth by John Chrysostom (c. 344-407 AD) as a role model for Constantinople women.⁷² He encouraged women to teach their unbelieving husbands in private, saying that 1 Timothy 2:12 only applied when the husband had the same wisdom as the wife.⁷³ He believed that equality produced strife and

⁶² Paul uses the word "*synergoi*" when referring to two women who "*contended*" at his "*side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers*" (Philippians 4:2-3). The same Greek word is used for men such as Paul himself (1 Cor 3:9), Timothy in (Romans 16:3) and Luke (Philemon 24). Jesus said "*whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother.*" (Matthew 12:48-49). "*Whether any inquire about Titus, he is my partner and my fellow-worker [synergoi] to you-ward, or our brethren, they are the messengers of the churches, they are the glory of Christ*" (2 Corinthians 8:23 (American Standard Version)).

Esler suggests that where there was a "holy man" there was a female supporter, for example, Paula supported Jerome, and Melania the Elder was a "follower" of Rufinus (Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World.*, 444-45.).

⁶³ Apollos was already a "bold" speaker (Acts 18:26).

"*Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers [synergoi] in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house*" (Romans 16:3 (New International Version)).

⁶⁴ The Titulus Priscae traditionally traces the "*title-parish Priscae*", back to the urban Roman House church of the New Testament Priscilla (Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 20.).

⁶⁵ John Chrysostom said that the women like Priscilla, were putting the men to shame, but he justified her position by saying they taught privately, not in public (Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 82-83.).

⁶⁶ Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?*, 44.

⁶⁷ Romans 16.1-2

Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 4.

The function and place of deacon changed over the years becoming a lower position for women than for men.

⁶⁸ She may have taken a letter from Paul and may have been asked to read the letter aloud to the assembled believers, convey verbal greetings from Paul and answer questions about what Paul may have meant by any phrases the audience found confusing (Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 32.).

Carol Meyers, ed. *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, 134-35.

⁶⁹ Junia, he writes is "outstanding among the apostles" (Romans 16:7).

⁷⁰ Ambrosiaster used the feminine form but Aegidius of Rome (1245-1316) asserted that the name was masculine (Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, 47-8.).

⁷¹

⁷² Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 33.

⁷³ Clark, *Women in the Early Church. Message of the Fathers of the Church*, 159.

“women were fairly subjected to the man” so the home was a suitable sphere of influence for women and the public for men.⁷⁴

Non-canonical Gospels show that Christians held strong and differing views on women’s leadership and apostolic authority in the early church.⁷⁵ In some writings and groups, Mary Magdalene was the first apostle and was known as an “apostle to the apostles”.⁷⁶ Some translations of the “*Acts of Philip*” portray Mary Magdalene as an apostle.⁷⁷ They indicate that she took part in exorcisms, healings and baptism of women as well.⁷⁸ Other translations replace Mary Magdalene with Peter or Mary the Mother of Jesus, which highlights the controversy over the place of women as leaders in the early church.⁷⁹

The “*Acts of Paul and Thelca*”, possibly written about 185 AD, was widely read, and accepted as canonized in some churches.⁸⁰ In this book, Thelca a disciple of Paul, becomes a preacher. She was later honoured by some as an apostle.⁸¹ Others like Gregory of Nazianzuz, Basil of Caesarea and Egeria wrote about the monasteries, teaching centre and hospital that were built as a result of Thecla’s work.⁸² However some church leaders such as Tertullian, did not accept the book.⁸³

Another famous woman accorded the title of apostle by some, was Nino.⁸⁴ Rufinus (403), A church historian, with a restricted view of the place of women, added the qualification “*in so far as a woman has the right to do so*” to his description of her leadership activities.⁸⁵ Thus he was able to justify her work with what he believed were the Pauline prohibitions against women teaching.⁸⁶

Even though what became known as the “orthodox church” increasingly restricted the role of women in the church, there were some like Gregory of Antioch (d. 593) who believed that Jesus had made room for women to lead, even as apostles.⁸⁷

Attitudes to women as prophets

A person who prophesied was not necessarily a prophet, and a woman with a prophetic ministry was not always accorded the place of prophet.⁸⁸ There were women who prophesied in the life of the early church but their prophetic words and the position they were

⁷⁴ Ibid., 36 & 42.

⁷⁵ Examples such as the “*Acts of Peter*” and the “*Acts of Paul*” show the controversy. “*The Gospel of Thomas*”, the “*Gospel of Mary*” and “*Pistis Sophia*” contain narratives depicting the controversy over apostolic authority. Some give Peter first place and some give Mary first place. (Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, 102-03 & 05.).

⁷⁶ Brock lists some of the writers who have researched the title of “Apostle to the apostles” that was bestowed upon Mary Magdalene (Ibid., 161.).

⁷⁷ Ibid., 125.

⁷⁸ Jesus encourages her to travel with Philip to help keep him from returning “*evil for evil*” in the “*Acts of Philip*” (Ibid.).

⁷⁹ Ibid., 128-29.

⁸⁰ Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, 51.

⁸¹ Ibid., 52.

⁸² Catherine Kroeger, “The Neglected History of Women in the Early Church,” *Church History* V11, No. 1, no. 17 (1988): 9.

⁸³ Books were written in the name of an Apostle to give them credence. Tertullian wrote that its author was deposed from the church for writing this document in Paul’s name (Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 17 in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 172.).

⁸⁴ Nino, it was written, baptized the princess Rhipsimia and her nurse, Gaiana, during the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian (284–305). Her acts that include, theological study, a commission to preach and missionary activities are written in the “*Life of Nino*”. She is also mentioned by the church historian Rufinus (403) as an effective preacher (Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, 52-53.).

⁸⁵ Ibid., 54.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁸⁷ Jesus is reported as saying “*I can also choose women as apostles*” (Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, 15.).

⁸⁸ Paul encouraged all to prophesy (1 Corinthians 14:1).

accorded varied.⁸⁹ Some of the different attitudes to prophetesses can be seen in the gospel writings. Luke for instance justifies the women who were prophesying with the men, because it fulfilled Joel's prophecy.⁹⁰ However, he diminishes the significance of women's roles in his writings compared to the other Gospel writers.⁹¹ One way he does this is by not giving prophetesses the same word space as men and not including their words.⁹² Another way he does this is by omitting incidences that show women in prophetic ministry that the other gospel writers include.⁹³

In writings attributed to the Apostle Paul, there appears to be contradictory opinions about the role of women. On the one hand he wrote about equality, encouraging everyone to desire the gift of prophecy (which is ranked second to that of Apostle), because of its teaching

⁸⁹ Professional prophets were already recognised in Greco-Roman world (Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 28.). Women in the church at Corinth prophesied and prayed as evidenced by Paul writing about their hair being a covering when they did so (Corinthians 11).

Some prophetesses were well known and named in various documents and others were less known unnamed women. Mary and Phillip's four daughters are mentioned in the Bible. The Montanist prophets, Priscilla and Maximilla, and Quintilla are mentioned in early writings. The "Testament of Job" mentions three women whose prophecy and ecstatic songs are written down by others (Levine, ed. *"Women Like This"* 223.).

The Montanist prophets, Priscilla and Maximilla wrote books of their own prophecies (———, ed. *"Women Like This"* 223.). Quintilla was a prophetess and Nanas was an accepted prophetess in Phrygia (———, ed. *"Women Like This"* 223.). & (Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, 171.).

⁹⁰ Acts 2:16-18 & Joel 2:28

Women were among those who were constantly devoted themselves to prayer in the upper room (Acts 1:14) and we can assume that women were among those who gathered together to pray on the day of Pentecost as they were required by the Mosaic law to attend the Pentecost feasts (Deuteronomy 16:11).

Women must have been filled with the Holy Spirit along with the men thus confirming some of the ancient scriptural prophecies E.g. Joel 2:28. "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy" or Peter would not have needed to explain what was happening by quoting Joel's prophecy and declared that what everyone was seeing was a fulfilment of it. Peter by quoting the prophecy was also declaring the impartiality of God. The Holy Spirit, the ability and ministry He gave was for all. God showed no partiality based on sex but all were baptised with the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues (Acts 2: 4).

Following this fulfilment of prophecy, we are told that three thousand more people "devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers." It is not unreasonable to assume that those women already baptised in the Holy Spirit were among this group along with many others thus continuing the idea from Psalm 68:11: "Jehovah gave the word. Female messengers of it were a great army."

⁹¹ Although Luke includes more references to women than the other gospels, he shows women as followers rather than leaders, "restricting their roles to what is acceptable to the conventions of the imperial world" (Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, 37-38.).

He includes the incident of Mary, Martha's sister, sitting at Jesus feet like a listening disciple (Luke 10:38:40).

⁹² Ibid., 36-37.

"Philip the evangelist..... had four unmarried daughters who prophesied" (Acts 21:8(New International Version)).

In one narrative, he includes the prophetic words of a man called Simeon, but not those of Anna who was known as a prophetess. Instead, Luke lets his readers know that Anna was a widow who worshiped, fasted and prayed, which were more acceptable activities for women in some circles (Luke 1:25-37).

⁹³ Unlike the other gospel writers, Luke does not include the incident of Mary in a prophetic role, anointing Jesus' head, instead he includes an incident of an unnamed woman, whom he emphasises as a sinner, anointing Jesus feet (Luke 7:36-39 and Matthew 26:6-13).

John however wrote that the greatest "should be like one who serves" and included the incident of Jesus washing His disciples feet, thus elevating Mary's position (John 13:12).

"She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." (Mark 14:3-9(New International Version)).

Ibid., 38.

Perhaps the disciples missed Jesus inference to a woman being the greatness among them when He washed their feet like the woman in Luke's gospel had washed his. Washing the feet was of saints was later considered a necessary activity for widows on "the list": "No widow may be put on the list of widows unless..... she has washed the saints' feet" (1 Timothy 5:10(New International Version)).

benefit.⁹⁴ On the other hand (if we believe 1 Timothy 2:12 was his writing, and was correctly translated), he does not allow women to teach or to have authority over men.⁹⁵ Paul's words, whether translated correctly or not, adversely influenced following generations of Christian leaders. Some early church leaders rigorously debated the issue and some enforced their view by not allowing women in leadership roles, apart from in relation to other women.⁹⁶

Clement was among those who appeared to believe in equality, as he justified prophetesses by emphasising Rahab in whom there was "faith as well as prophecy, yet he encouraged women to be silent, and praised the church at Corinth for teaching women to "keep the rule of subjection."⁹⁷

From the second century onwards, a lot can be learned about the place accorded women from various writings. "The statutes of the Apostles" for instance, contain instructions about ordaining three widows, two of whom had prophetic ministries.⁹⁸ Some Gnostic texts, such as "The Gospel of Thomas", encouraged women to make themselves male.⁹⁹ This opened the door for them to take on prophetic activities that men were allowed, such as seeking and interpreting visionary wisdom and preaching.¹⁰⁰ Some of the Gnostic texts give Mary Magdalene a prominent place and show that women held senior roles as prophets.¹⁰¹ A

⁹⁴ Equality: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28), "But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort..... For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged." (1 Corinthians 14:3 & 31)

⁹⁵ Some believed that the biblical text: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent" is incorrectly translated (1 Timothy 2:12). The word translated as "authority" is rarely used in the New Testament. It was used in Greek literature to mean "solicit sexual favours". (Malcolm, *Women at the Crossroads: A Path Beyond Feminism & Traditionalism*, 79.). It may also mean to dominate. (Richard Kroeger and Catherine Calrk Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 91.).

The word translated as silent means to speak without listening (*Malcolm, Women at the Crossroads: A Path Beyond Feminism & Traditionalism.*).

Kroeger suggests the following translation: "I do not permit women to teach nor to proclaim herself as author of man, but she is to be conformity" (Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence*, 103.).

⁹⁶ The tendency was to read the scriptures selectively to legitimize their beliefs (Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 16-17.).

⁹⁷ W. K. Lowther Clarke, ed. *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians: Translations of Early Documents* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1937), 49 & 56 & 62.

⁹⁸ Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 30.

Text in this document was believed to have been handed down from the Apostles to Clement, but may have been written by pseudo-Ignatius in Syria around 350-400 AD. It stated that two of the widows were to continue together in prayer for all who were in trials and to receive revelations, a prophetic function, while the other widow was to attend to the women as a deaconess. (George William Horner, *The Statutes of the Apostles; or, Canones Ecclesiastici; Edited with Translation and Collation from Ethiopic and Arabic Mss.; Also a Translation of the Saidic and Collation of the Bohairic Versions; and Saidic Fragments* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1904), 304.).

⁹⁹ Markus a Gnostic leader, it was believed, initiated "wealthy women into the prophetic role in a Eucharist", telling them to open their mouth and prophecy (Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?*, 132.).

Irenaeus wrote that Marcus "goaded the women on to ecstatic prophecy through the use of the Eucharist (King, ed. *Studies in Antiquity & Christianity: Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, 325.).

David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 203.

David M. Scholer, "In the Know," *Christian History & Biography* 2007, 16.

¹⁰⁰ King, ed. *Studies in Antiquity & Christianity: Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, 320-23.

¹⁰¹ Scholer, "In the Know," 16.

Philumene was a pupil of Marcion and Marcellina was "a representative of the Carpocratians" (Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?*, 132.).

popular document, “*The Kergma of Peter*” contains evidence that the church at that time was not united in its acceptance of females in these kind of roles.¹⁰² It puts the following words in Peter’s mouth: “*female prophecy appears as the opponent of the true prophet.*”¹⁰³

“*The Acts of Paul and Thelca*” are among a number of other writings that mention prophetesses and reveal the freedom and leadership opportunities open to women in some churches of Asia Minor.¹⁰⁴ However, they came under attack from Tertullian.¹⁰⁵ He thought the writings misrepresented Paul by allowing females to baptise, teach and even to learn, when they should be silent.¹⁰⁶ Tertullian did however praise the visionary martyr Perpetua as a role model.¹⁰⁷ He also accepted a women prophet in his own church, probably because she waited until the end of the church service to report to the men.¹⁰⁸

Gnosticism and asceticism offered women opportunities of leadership that were closing to women in some of the churches.¹⁰⁹ Montanism did too.¹¹⁰ This brought opposition from parts of the church.¹¹¹ Opponents of Montanism labelled the movement heretical, excommunicating them from the church and slandering the books the women wrote.¹¹² The

Origen wrote about Celsus who listed Gnostic groups derived from Mary, Salome, Marcellina and Helen (Richard Buckham, *Gospel Women. Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 243.).

¹⁰² Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 195.

This document, that was popular especially in the Egyptian part of the church, was possibly written in response to Gnosticism (———, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 195-96.)

¹⁰³ Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 195.

¹⁰⁴ The Acts of John, Peter, Andrew and Xanthippe came from the same period and area of about 160-225 AD (Ibid., 194-95.).

¹⁰⁵ Tertullian, On Baptism, 17 in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 172.

Tertullian thought women were “*the devils gateway*”, a “*sword that destroys*” (Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World.*, 423.).

¹⁰⁶ He didn’t allow women to teach or baptise (Tertullian, On Baptism, 17 in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337.*).

Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 194.

¹⁰⁷ Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, 184.

Vibia Perptua must have been known for receiving prophetic revelations as her brother sought her out for one (Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World.*).

¹⁰⁸ Tertullian, On the soldier’s crown, 3,4 in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 171.

The Montanist women prophets were slandered by Tertullian as heretics, whom he called, pert, puffed up, careless, capricious and changeable (Tertullian, *De Praescriptone Haereticorum*, 41 in ———, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 170.).

¹⁰⁹ Karen L. King, ed. *Studies in Antiquity & Christianity: Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 329.

¹¹⁰ Montanism was a “long lived...prophetic phenomenon,” self labelled the “New Prophecy”, where women were prominent in leadership roles (Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, 1-3 & 151.). The movement probably began with renewal in the Catholic church in Phrygian Mysia, with Pricilla, although the movement was later named after Montanus, possibly because a man’s name would give it more credence (Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World*, 932 & 35 & 37.). The date of its beginning may have been around 157 AD (———, ed. *The Early Christian World*, 933.).

¹¹¹ Evidence of the movement can be found a few decades later in Galatia, where the church was “deeply divided by it” (Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World*, 936.).

¹¹² Hippolytus the bishop of Rome (c. 170 – c. 236 AD), wrote against the two female Montanists prophets, Priscilla and Quintilla, because their words were being given more authority than the words of the male apostles (Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 29.).

Epiphanius criticized the Montanist prophetess Maximilla, in his writing too, saying that she spoke truth, but against her will (From Epiphanius, *Haer.*, 48, 49 in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 107.)

Many now believe that the early Montanists were not heretics (Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, 1-3 & 151.).

slander stuck and generations of church leaders since have burn their books as heretical.¹¹³ Some parts of the Orthodox Church even believed the Montanist prophetesses were demon rather than Holy Spirit filled and they were subsequently exorcised.¹¹⁴ Others like Tertullian defended the Montanists and wrote that those who didn't were introducing heresy.¹¹⁵ Origen didn't object to the idea of women being given the gift of prophecy, but he rejected the prophetic claims of Prisca and Maximilla.¹¹⁶ He selectively interpreted sacred writings to back his opinion that women prophets should only speak in private and not in the assemblies.¹¹⁷

By the fourth and fifth century, verses favoured by the Montanists, like Galatians 3:28, were being rejected by men like Epiphanius who used other verses as the authority to insist on woman's subordination.¹¹⁸ In some circles orthodox Christians prohibited women even from writing in their own name in order to discourage prophetic writings, and deaconesses became little more than door keepers, even though one of the ordination prayers for deaconesses suggested prophetesses from the Scriptures as role models.¹¹⁹ Jerome (345-420) was not averse to all women speaking in public, as he praised Marcella for throwing "*herself into the breach*" and refuting Origenism, which could be viewed as a prophet's ministry.¹²⁰ He

¹¹³ All Montanist books were ordered to be burned by imperial decree in 298 AD, which limits the availability of positive sources (Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 198.).

Most women with leadership qualities in the early church were considered heretics or executed as martyrs (Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World*, 443.).

¹¹⁴ Firmilian, Bishop of Caesarea (d. 268 AD), wrote about a women prophetess, possibly a Montanist, whom he believed was not filled with the Holy Spirit but a demon and deluded believers in a variety of ways. Apparently she was a threat to the Christian men and "*succumbed to exorcism*" (Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, 171.).

Eusebius (c. 260- c. 339 AD) mentions the true prophetess, Ammia of Philadelphia in arguing that the "*New Prophecy*" was false (Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 313.) and Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, 71.

Ammia was associated with the church in Philadelphia and "prefigured the Montanists" (Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World*, 936.). He criticized the Montanists and wrote among other things that the "*faithful throughout Aisa*" had excommunicated them. He also wrote that there were signatures from many like Serapion, the Bishop of Antioch, who "*loathed*" the "*New Prophecy*" (Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, 51.). One of his criticisms was because they could not back up their ecstatic method of prophesying from other true prophets who waited until they were in their right mind before sharing what they received (The 'Anonymous' in Eusebius, *HE*, v.17.2-3 in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 106.). He wrote of some who were "puffed up", inspired by the devil, blasphemers of the whole church The 'Anonymous' in Eusebius, *HE*, v.16.6ff in ———, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 103.

¹¹⁵ He wrote that the Bishop of Rome was on the verge of accepting the prophecies of Montanus, and the two women, Prisca and Maximilla and offering peace to their churches, but changed his mind because of the false accusations of Praxeas thus driving out prophecy and introducing heresy (Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 1 in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to Ad 337*, 168.).

¹¹⁶ Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, 71.

¹¹⁷ Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, 197.

He argued that none of the female prophets like Deborah, had addressed the people publicly, like Isaiah or Jeremiah, and he used texts like 2 Timothy 2:12 and Titus 2:3-4. (Deborah was a judge, a prophetess and a leader called "the mother of Israel" in the book of Judges) (Carol Meyers, ed. *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, 66-67.).

Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, 174.

¹¹⁸ Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 44.

¹¹⁹ Levine, ed. "*Women Like This*" 239.

The "*Apostolic Constitutions*" referred to prophetesses from the Scriptures, suggesting them as role models for the prospectus deaconess. However, their function was to "keep the doors" and baptise women (Laporte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity: Studies in Women and Religion*, 117-18.).

¹²⁰ Clark, *Women in the Early Church. Message of the Fathers of the Church*, 162-63.

woman Jerome praised Marcella, who was "serving the Lord" in a monastery, for her leadership. He said she "*threw herself into the breach*" when everything was in confusion because of a "*tornado of heresy*". She

allowed women to co-labour with him and acknowledged gifted women such as Paula and her daughter.¹²¹ However, he continued the slander against the Montanist women.¹²²

Conclusion

From the beginning of the Christian church, women have been active in many ways, including the leadership roles of Apostle, Prophet and Bishop. Yet from the beginning, there has also been controversy over the place women should have in the church, which became more evident with the change in meeting place from house church to public buildings, when communities became less open to women leaders as evidenced in sacred and other writings, and in the lack of writings by and about women, compared to those written by and about men. Increasingly the female voice was lost in the Church, which may be attributed to the influence of prevailing anti-feminist attitudes, cultural and social norms, council rules, and the canonization of some sacred writings and the destruction or prohibition of others written by women.¹²³ Without functioning apostles and prophets leading, and with the loss of the female voice in the church, the “dark ages” is an apt term for what followed at the end of the period labelled the early Church.¹²⁴

originated the condemnation of some heretics and produced witnesses who had seen the error in the teachings (Jerome, *Ep. CXXV* 11.5,7,8-10, 12-14 in Stevenson, ed. *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church*, Ad 337-461, 197-200.).

Old Testament prophets stood in the gap when they interceded for others. Ezekiel reported that God said, “I searched for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, so that I would not destroy it” (Ezekiel 22:30 (New American Standard Bible)).

¹²¹ He used them to help him translate, edit and copy texts, such as the Hebrew Scriptures into Latin, for circulation (Elizabeth Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible a Classical Feminist Perspective* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002), 137.).

¹²² Paula who used her wealth in the founding and endowing of monasteries and instigated the copying of manuscripts (Ibid.).

Jerome wrote that they were “noble and rich” but used to “seduce communities” by receiving money from them before “polluting them with heresy” (Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, 153).

He wrote that the Catholics gave first place to the bishops but the Montanists gave that place to the “patriarchs of Pepuza” (———, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, 186 & 210.).

Pepuza was a desert town in Phrygia, Asia Minor, where the Montanists went to await the second coming (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 254.).

¹²³ Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, 13.

Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 198.

(Esler, ed. *The Early Christian World.*, 429.).

¹²⁴ Men such as the 8th century, Pope Zachary forbade women even from public reading of the Bible and any alter service. He labelled these practices “sin” for nuns as well as for women in other congregations (Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, 133-34.).

A “long regression in social, economic and political life” is how Frend refers to the Middle Ages (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 828.).

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