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## The Forgotten Disciples: The Faithful Witness of Women in Early Christianity

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## The Forgotten Disciples: The Faithful Witness of Women in Early Christianity

### Abstract

At its earliest, Christianity is a religion of respect and dignity for women. This paper examines the experience and contributions of women to Christianity, beginning at the time of Christ and continuing to through to approximately 300 A.D., or shortly before the Nicene Creed was developed. This paper demonstrates the way the church, from the outset, has largely relied on the contributions and gifts of women in order to fulfill its mission. This paper then applies this historic context to the American church in issues of life and gender, concluding that it is the recognition and partnership with women, not the segmentation of gender roles, that will bring clarity to issues of great interest to American Christians: pro-life ethic, gender confusion, and feminism.

### Keywords

women in Christianity, church history, early church, gender roles, gender and Christianity, women and Christianity, women in antiquity, first century church

### Cover Page Footnote

B.S. Law and Policy: Pre-Law Concentration Minor: Theology Graduated in December, 2020, summa cum laude For the sisters who have gone before us: may we honor you as we worship Christ. "They risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well."

## Introduction

With the advent of Third Wave Feminism in the United States, Christianity is increasingly regarded as a religion of inherent sexism. After all, 89% of churches in the United States do not recognize women as pastors;<sup>1</sup> the traditional church teaching on abortion, stretching back as far as the beginning of Christianity, is often viewed as oppressive and deeply sexist. Submission in marriage, head-coverings, skirts, and a number of other incomplete stereotypes create the perception of a religion unhealthily concerned with women's roles and proper place. Despite this, Christianity continues- in the same fashion it has since the first century, as this paper will show- to flourish among women and rely on their spiritual gifts, talents, ministries, and evangelism to fulfill its mission.<sup>2</sup> This paper will analyze first and second-century sources, as well as various commentaries and studies surrounding the socioeconomic and religious intricacies of women between A.D. 0 and the late second century A.D. In addition, this paper will utilize a literal hermeneutic approach in its analysis of Scripture to determine the role women played in the earliest days of Christianity. This method of interpretation was chosen for the historic significance that the grammar, structure, and plain meaning of the text provide. Other hermeneutic approaches are not inherently poor; however, research of this nature is benefited most strongly by historic context than an allegorical meaning. Essentially, the canonized Scripture will serve as a primary document in understanding the early days of Christianity and its influence and popularity among women.

This paper will examine women in early Christianity in three distinct time periods, starting with the birth of Christ into a Middle Eastern Jewish community and a contextualization of the ministry of Jesus among women. Second, the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ moved the Church into the Apostolic Age, where women served alongside men in their evangelism and ministry, hosting home churches, discipling, and participating in the development of the Canon. The deaths of Peter, Paul, and the persecution of Christians under Nero ushered the church into the era of second-generation believers, and of course, the continued spread of Christianity by and among women in Mediterranean societies, concluding prior to the Council of Nicaea in an effort to concentrate on the witness of faithful women in the earliest days of Christianity. The whole of this

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, "The divide over ordaining women" last modified September 9, 2014, accessed September, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/09/the-divide-over-ordaining-women/>

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, "The Gender Gap in Religion Around the World" last modified March 22, 2016, accessed September, 2020, <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/>

paper will show that from its earliest days, Christianity has historically been a religion of respect and dignity for women, as evidenced by the critical places faithful women have served out of their devotion to Christ and His Church. This paper will cultivate a greater understanding of Christendom's often untold stories to reshape the conversation of women's places among all Christians today. In addition to strengthening the faith of fellow believers, this paper aims to provide a historic context to the American church's engagement in the polarizing world of women's rights. Beyond complementarianism or egalitarianism, this paper will demonstrate not what roles women should fill but offer a historic perspective on the crucial obedience that so many women have offered as their worship to God.

### **Women in First Century Judaism and the Gospels**

The perceived sexism in Jewish and Christian faiths has been a prominent apologetic obstacle. This understanding of Judeo-Christian history demands answers if any claim of equality in dignity and worth is to be made by Christians. If the laws, codes, and practices of Judaism were instituted by God and resulted in a patriarchal society, it would follow that God chose to institute a patriarchal society, effectively permitting sexism. However, reading ancient literature with modern, Western eyes blinds the comparisons between ancient society and today, rather than illuminating them.<sup>3</sup>

Scholarship in this area has been influenced heavily by varying waves of feminism in the United States.<sup>4</sup> The method of historical study is of paramount importance in how the results may be applied to the evidence before a researcher. Ancient society, particularly Jewish society, is thought to be steeped in patriarchal sexism. Meyers explains, "The patriarchy model appropriated by these feminist biblical scholars is the expanded version—a system of pervasive male privilege and dominance in both the family and society."<sup>5</sup> This has been the classical understanding of the first century's relationship with gender. Yet, as scholarship has developed, the patriarchal structure of Ancient Israel was challenged by archeological discovery and new textual analysis. So much so that Meyers further explains, "Adherence to the patriarchal model did abate somewhat in the late twentieth century, perhaps because studies of women's roles in ancient Israel had begun to contest aspects of the patriarchal paradigm."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Meyers, "Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 1 (2014): 10-14, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbibllite.133.1.8>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

The Jewish people have a long history of valuing women. The Old Testament is steeped in stories of Jewish women and girls, who were both honored for their service and held accountable for their sins, indicative of their personhood and agency. Shiprah and Puah (Exod. 1:17-21) defended male Jewish infants against the evil hand of Pharaoh; Miriam led God's covenant people in worship, and is held accountable for her wrongdoing and idolatry (Exod. 15:20; Num. 12:4-15); Deborah's wisdom in Judges 4-5 was of such weight that people traveled from throughout the land in order to hear her judgments; Queen Esther has an entire festival, celebrated still in late February or early March, to honor how God used her to save His people, and ultimately preserve the bloodline from which Christ would eventually come.<sup>7</sup> Women in Jewish biblical history retained a great deal of significance.<sup>8</sup>

### First Century Judaism

In practice, affluent Jewish women in late B.C. and the time of Jesus maintained traditionally feminine spheres of influence, such as raising children.<sup>9</sup> In poorer families and communities, however, the labor was divided into much more egalitarian portions; women worked in fields, bought and sold property, and maintained businesses.<sup>10</sup> Meyers states, "Economic activities were an integral part of household life in ancient Israel as in all traditional agrarian societies. It can be shown that women were largely responsible for food processing, textile production, and the fashioning of various household implements and containers (grinding tools, stone and ceramic vessels, baskets, weaving implements, and sewing tools)."<sup>11</sup> Especially in lower and impoverished classes where extended families were vast and necessary, women in these agrarian societies were not segregated by gender.<sup>12</sup> Due to the necessity of their labor, lower-class women

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<sup>7</sup> The defense of the Jewish Torah and the way it addresses the roles of women, slaves, and other classes of people historically viewed as subservient is well documented elsewhere. The purpose in including these examples here is to provide a historical and spiritual background out of which the ministry of Jesus was born. The examples provided intentionally direct the attention to formidable moments in Jewish history that have been guided, more or less, by Jewish women.

<sup>8</sup> All citations in the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>9</sup> Kathleen E. Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2002), 20-26.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-53.

<sup>11</sup> Meyers, "Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?" 19-20.

<sup>12</sup> Christine Schenk, *Women and Early Christianity: Sociocultural Context in Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2017), 7-9.

retained great freedom in moving about in public.<sup>13</sup> These women exercised parental rights, and while they lacked equal property rights compared to their male counterparts, they could inherit and use land.<sup>14</sup> Notably, women often exercised great parental authority under Jewish law and social norms, playing a primary role in matchmaking for arranged marriages.<sup>15</sup>

The underlying assumptions regarding the work that Jewish women completed, bring a modern historian to a patriarchal view of ancient Judaism are based primarily on a post-Victorian, Westernized, andronormative reading of history. The anthropological evidence challenges the interpretation that women's roles as a homemaker are equivalent to the role of homemaker today: homemaking in the first century involved business, trading, accounting, craftsmanship, agricultural understanding, authority over children's spouses, and public mobility, far different than the Americanized understanding of the term. When examining the society as a whole, the visibility of women diminishes as do their rights, legal standing, and political ability to influence culture at large. Denying the mistreatment of women during this time and the inequalities that existed would be intellectually dishonest: the ancient world was not egalitarian (and even if it were, all societies are capable of mistreatment).<sup>16</sup> However, when examining individual lives and relationships of women, families, and smaller communities like the community that raised Jesus, a greater level of functional equality is achieved.

In addition to traditional Jewish culture, the late B.C. to the first century A.D. saw Jews in a period of Diaspora throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean. First-century Mediterranean societies were blended, a conglomerate of Hellenistic, Roman, and Jewish peoples colliding throughout the region. The Jews had been scattered with the conquest of Rome, and neighboring nations and Jews intermingled in coastal cities, throughout Greece, and in some parts of Palestine.<sup>17</sup> This brought an intersection of cultures which made many Jewish families, according to Corley, "indistinguishable from other Greco-Roman

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> The purpose of this paper is not to make the case for an egalitarian ancient society, but to challenge the paradigms and misconceptions which inhibit a correct understanding of Jesus' ministry. As per usual, the proper understanding is not as simple as an egalitarian or patriarchal society. Rather, a correct view involves the nuances of spheres of authority, recognizing that women's spheres were smaller but present.

<sup>17</sup> Edith Ashley, "Women in Luke's Gospel" (M.Phil diss., University of Sydney, 2000) 30-32.

counterparts, insofar as basic relationships were concerned.”<sup>18</sup> This influx of new cultures gave way to changing life patterns, and the blending of ancient and “modern” societies brought distinction to Jewish feminine life.<sup>19</sup> While many Jewish women throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean blended elements of Greco-Roman culture, these changes were typically observable in higher socioeconomic classes where the distinction between men and women was more pronounced.<sup>20</sup> Families in these cultures may not have followed the Jewish diet and would be more influential in the Greek and Roman worlds, involving themselves with their non-Jewish neighbors far more than Jews of the past.<sup>21</sup> However, in the small town of Nazareth, in a poor region called Galilee, the ministry of Jesus both included and was shaped by women.

### Women in the Gospels

Throughout the Gospel writings, the place of women cannot be ignored. The advent of Christ did not radically improve or diminish the role women played in first-century Judaism, as Judaism, as has been expressed elsewhere, did not advocate for the mistreatment of women. However, this does not indicate that women were unilaterally treated with fairness, equality, and as image-bearers. The significance of the life and ministry of Jesus is the exemplification, rather than the establishment, of godly treatment of women, highlighting their worth and giftings to be used in the Body of Christ. This affirms that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law but fulfill the Law.

Take, for example, the depth of character given to prominent women in the gospels. While the Bible undeniably mentions fewer women than men, at a ratio of 3:20, a multitude of women do appear throughout Scripture, some in unlikely places.<sup>22</sup>

One such place is a parable told by Jesus. This parable is found in Luke 15:8-10, nestled between the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and is often titled “The Parable of the Lost Coin.” Understanding the structure of the other two parables is paramount in understanding the

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<sup>18</sup> Kathleen Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2002), 20.

<sup>19</sup> Ashley, “Women in Luke’s Gospel,” 53-55.

<sup>20</sup> As has been discussed, women in poorer communities already bore a variety of day-to-day responsibilities which allowed them considerable freedom.

<sup>21</sup> James Jeffers, S. *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 14-17, ProQuest Ebrary.

<sup>22</sup> Erin Kane, “Women less than 15% of Bible characters” accessed October 18, 2020, <https://gcsr.org/MonitoringHistory/WomenByTheNumbers/tabid/891/post/women-less-than-15-of-bible-characters/Default.aspx>

significance of Jesus, including this illustration. In the two other parables told in this same occurrence, Jesus relates himself to two male characters, a shepherd and a father, who rejoice in finding the lost. These two characters portray a kind of “Christ” in their stories, thereby showing the listener the character of God. In the Parable of the Lost Coin, Jesus relates himself to a woman, searching for a lost day’s wages in her home, rejoicing when it is found. This comparison is meaningful for the “tax collectors” and “sinners,” the latter of which undoubtedly included women.<sup>23</sup> The former, exclusively male, watched Jesus compare himself- someone claiming to be God- to a woman! Both may find this impactful in how it echoes the Imago Dei, and God’s likeness pronounced in Genesis 1:27. Women, too, are made in the image of God, and this woman bears the image of God because of, not despite of, her womanhood. Adam’s pronouncement over Eve in Genesis 2:23 says, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” In other words, “This one is like me.” Jesus’ portrayal in the Parable of the Lost Coin conveys a similar message. In this way, Jesus requires respect and dignity be shown to women out of godliness, for they too are made in His likeness. This parable, still overlooked today in the midst of the lost sheep and prodigal son, shows the bystanders the pursuant heart of God by displaying it in a *woman*. There is nothing about womanhood that is embarrassing, shameful, or irredeemable to God incarnate.

This example is one of many. The widow’s mite (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4), the woman with the issue of blood (Matt. 9:20-22, Mark 5:25-34, Luke 8:43-48),<sup>24</sup> the woman with the alabaster jar (Matt. 26:6-13; Mark. 14:3-9; John 12:1-8) are all examples in which the ministry of Jesus sees, reaches, and serves women, honoring them, finding no issue in telling his disciples to emulate women in certain mannerisms as the women emulate him.

These examples challenge the idea shared often in conservative circles that women are excellent role models for other women and children, but men must find exemplars in other men. Paul says to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1), taken to be an encouragement to look at other Christians to find mentors and role models in the course of Christian living. Jesus does not teach that men are not to admire women. The epistles demonstrate a glaring lack of this

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<sup>23</sup> “Hamartōlos” is translated “sinners,” which the Blue Letter Bible defines as “especially wicked.” It is masculine plural, neither confirming nor denying the presence of women in the audience. However, there were often crowds of mixed genders who sat at the feet of Jesus (Mk. 5:24-34; Matt. 14:13).

<sup>24</sup> Likely a version of endometriosis, a reproductive health issue which causes heavy bleeding and an irregular menstrual cycle, congruent with the description given in the Gospel accounts.



doctrine as well.<sup>25</sup> While practical considerations should be made (life experience relevancy or appropriateness in discussing sexual purity), role models can be found *for* both genders *in* both genders. Jesus went so far as to say in Luke 7:44, “Do you see this woman?” and continues to show how this woman modeled the response to the gospel. These female disciples of Christ are profound characters of the Christian faith and should be given the honor of them in sermons, Sunday School lessons, youth groups, and more.

Unfortunately, the message surrounding these women is often directed at women rather than at the congregational whole. Lessons on Mary and Martha or Mary the mother of Jesus are reserved for women’s ministry, or when included for the entire congregation, a heavier emphasis on gender distinction is made than when the primary objects in the lesson are male. Interestingly enough, this puts men in the church at a greater disadvantage than women. Women are able to learn and grow from saints of both genders, while men miss these stories due to a lack of visibility. As this paper will further show, women are not an anomaly, and their stories are the stories of Christianity: present at the start and preserved until the end.

Named only twice, Joanna is one of these women. She is venerated in the Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant church traditions, and most notably, she was present at the most significant moment in world history: the discovery of the empty tomb. Her first appearance occurs in Luke 8:1-3, “Soon afterward he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.”

The people Luke mentions in this passage were alongside Jesus. This includes the Twelve, as well as “the women.” Women were welcome around Christ; Jesus healed women, finding them valuable to restore in both body and soul.

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<sup>25</sup> The admonishments in Titus 2:3-8 are not to be construed as older women *only* discipling young women, only that that they *should* disciple younger women. Otherwise, an inconsistency would appear, as Titus addresses men to teach other men as well, but men teach women regularly in a variety of ministerial capacities without contest. The statement, “be kind to your sister” does not indicate that kindness is not required to the brother. This is easily defended by looking at the teachings of Jesus, where women evangelize and set examples for all Christians, as well as 1 Timothy 5:1-2, which says to treat all men as brothers and fathers, and to treat all women as sisters and mothers. Additionally, even if this interpretation is rejected, honor, inspiration, admiration, and praise to God for His goodness upon an individual need not be the equivalent of discipleship and involves little authority on the part of the woman.

Not only were women welcome, but they were also needed. In v. 3 of the above passage, Joanna, the wife of Chuza, is included in the list of female disciples who followed Jesus. It is unclear whether Jesus had healed from the physical infirmity of all of the women listed. Whether she had been physically healed from some illness or it was her soul alone that needed restoration, Jesus had done so. Joanna's ability to follow Christ, undoubtedly learning alongside the Twelve, is particularly interesting after examining her husband's profession, and subsequently, the responsibility born by Joanna.

A lengthier history of Herod Antipas, also known as Herod the Tetrarch, is offered below, but a succinct answer will suffice: Herod Antipas was no friend of Jesus.<sup>26</sup> After Herod executed John the Baptist, Pharisees approached Jesus in Luke 13:31-33, warning Jesus that Herod of Antipas wanted Jesus dead. Ultimately, it is Herod Antipas who returned Jesus to Pontius Pilate for questioning before the crucifixion. Despite this animosity born from Herod towards Jesus and John the Baptist, Joanna's husband, Chuza, remained a "steward" or "servant" in Herod's home.<sup>27</sup> Joanna is described, along with other women, as ministering to Jesus "out of their substance." The women, particularly Joanna and her husband, were funding the ministry of Jesus, likely obtained through the household of Herod. Joanna's faithfulness to follow Christ and her obedience to bear witness to His healing and the divine person could have innumerable practical and political benefits, such as supplying a loaf of bread where previously none had been found, or perhaps prison mercy bestowed to a disciple as a personal favor. The connection of Joanna to the work of Christ is paramount, and Christians today are indebted to her willingness to follow her Lord out of her comfortable home, risk her husband's high-profile job, and respond to the grace of God in generosity.

Joanna was present at the empty tomb (Luke 23:55-24:1, 10-11), and her voice heralded the resurrection to generations to come, despite the Twelves' initial disbelief of her and the other women's testimony. Trusting the news of the resurrection to women is another way that God bestows agency and responsibility onto women in a world where women's testimony was not admissible to a court or valid in public declarations.<sup>28</sup> The fact that Jesus first appeared to women after the resurrection implies no special relationship that Jesus had with women, nor does it imply that women are somehow elevated above their male counterparts (even the women found the resurrection impossible to believe). However, it

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<sup>26</sup> F.F. Bruce, "Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea," *Annual of Leeds University Oriental Society* 5, no. 1, (1963). [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ffb/herod\\_bruce.pdf](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ffb/herod_bruce.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> The text does not indicate the specific duties that Chuza would have had, only that he was in a position of some prominence. Perhaps he was a tutor or a household manager.

<sup>28</sup> Claudia Setzer, "Excellent Women: Female Witness to the Resurrection." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116, no. 2 (1997): 259-272. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3266223>.

indicates that he cared about women as his friends, mother, and students. During the womanly chore of caring for the deceased body of Christ and as Mary Magdalene wept in the garden, the restoration of fellowship between God and mankind was announced.

One additional idea worth exploring relates to the eyewitness accounts of the trial of Jesus. While it is likely that much of the source material for Luke's writings on the trial came from "Q" or the Gospel of Mark (dictated by Peter, known to be in the vicinity of Pilate on Maundy Thursday), there is a possibility that Joanna provided access to court records, access to other individuals in the courtroom, or perhaps witnessed the trial herself.<sup>29</sup> While the material on this theory is extremely limited, Joanna would have known Peter. It is possible that she, at the very least, contributed source material in some way to the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. If this theory is true, then once again, God entrusted valuable, crucial information to a woman that would shape the Christian faith.

### **The Apostolic Age**

After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, followers of Christ were thrust onto a new mission. For this paper, "first generation" includes those Christians who were discipled by people who walked with Jesus, or the people who comprised the churches of Ephesus, Corinth, Rome when the apostles wrote.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he gave what is known as the Great Commission. "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20a). This became the primary mission of those called to follow Christ. On the day of Pentecost, the eleven disciples and Matthias, the women, and other followers were together and received the Holy Spirit.<sup>30</sup> This is the start of the Apostolic Age and the start of the New Testament canon, written between the day of Pentecost and the death of the apostle John, AD 30-33 – A.D. 95-96.<sup>31</sup>

The New Testament epistles are incredibly useful in determining the demographic make-up of the early church. The epistles of the New Testament, written by Paul, Peter, James, John, and Jude, are historical letters. In any other context, these would be considered primary sources and authoritative in

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<sup>29</sup> Carl Patton, *Sources of the Synoptic Gospels* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 220-221, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/39967/39967-h/39967-h.htm#Page\\_221](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/39967/39967-h/39967-h.htm#Page_221)

<sup>30</sup> The day of Pentecost is celebrated as the start of the Christian church, empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry out the mission of making disciples who make disciples.

<sup>31</sup> ESV.org, "Timeline of the New Testament." <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/chart-40-00-nt-timeline/>. Unless otherwise noted, dates of the New Testament will be correlated with this timeline of events and writings.

understanding the demographic of a comprised body in the first century. While they are divinely inspired with the words interpreted today as determinative to Christian faith and doctrine, to the authors, they were also modes of communication to distinct groups of people. This is why Paul sends greetings to specific individuals, includes specific requests for his coat and parchment (2 Tim. 4:13), and includes medical advice from his companion, physician, and documentarian, Luke (1 Tim. 5:23).

The book of Acts, written in what can be described as a historic narrative of the early church as well as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, was intended to record the history of the early church and life of Christ.<sup>32</sup> Luke opens the Luke-Acts series in Luke 1:3 with an address to “Most excellent Theophilus,” who was likely a Roman governor or other ranking official.<sup>33</sup> This “orderly account” should be taken to be an accurate documentary of the life and times of the early church, given the stated purpose and vast collaborating research.<sup>34</sup> An accurate understanding of the demographic build and daily life can be constructed using this reading of the New Testament writings.

### The First Generation of Believers

To properly contextualize the role women played in the first generation of believers, the early days of the church as a whole must be discussed. Acts 2-7 is filled with phrases such as, “the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand” (Acts 4:4; note, does not include women) and “the disciples were increasing in number” (Acts 6:1).

Although the “people of the Way” (Acts 9:2) believed in the gospel of Christ, the understanding of the gospel was far more Jewish in nature than it would be today.<sup>35</sup> Christianity was not yet distinct from Judaism, and the strict adherence to the law that was demanded in the Jewish faith was challenged by those who believed the law had been fulfilled in Christ.<sup>36</sup> Christianity was considered a sect of Judaism, as the first Gentiles were not brought to salvation in Christ until Acts 10:45 and 11:1. The people of the Way were viewed as Jewish

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<sup>32</sup> Drew W. Billings, "Acts and Monumental Historiography." In *Acts of the Apostles and the Rhetoric of Roman Imperialism*. (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017). 17-52, 18.

<sup>33</sup> Jennifer M. Creamer, Aida B. Spencer, and Francois P. Viljoen. "Who is Theophilus? Discovering the Original Reader of Luke-Acts" In *Die Skriflig : Tydskrif Van Die Gereformeerde Teologiese Vereniging* 48, no. 1 (2014): 1-7, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Arland J. Hultgren, “Paul’s Pre-Christian Persecutions of the Church: Their Purpose, Locale, and Nature” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95, no.1 (1976) 97-111, 97. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3265475>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

dissenters, not as Gentiles or outsiders to be ignored. In other words, Christians were still viewed to be under Jewish law in daily violation. This was the cause for the persecution that occurred at the hands of the Pharisees, including Saul (later Paul).

Another social dynamic navigated in the earliest days of the church was the Hellenistic and Hebrew Jews. Hellenists were Diaspora Jews whose primary language was Greek. They had moved nearer to Jerusalem after spending most of their lives in Greek-speaking communities.<sup>37</sup> The early church was not free from prejudice: Hellenistic widows did not receive a fair portion from the daily distribution. Acts 6:1 shows an early version of a congregational vote in which the Hellenists chose seven people to serve and ensure the widows were receiving a fair portion as the church provided for their needs. The most prominent member of this population was the martyr, Stephen, whose murder was approved by Saul on the basis of blasphemy (Acts 6:8-11; 7:54-60). It is evident from Acts 6 that regular preaching was occurring, and James 2:1-13 (an early epistle) forbids partiality with church ministry. An order of service and purpose existed in the early church, even at the outset, including the teaching of the Word (Acts 2:42), communion (Acts 2:42), spiritual songs and hymns (Acts 2:42), church leadership (James 5:13), and prayer (James 5:13).

While the early church was known for the disruption it caused in Jerusalem, and nearby areas, perhaps the most striking difference between Christians and others was the generosity displayed by even its most prominent members. As Christianity spread rapidly, so grew the need for Christian charity and giving to support the ministries of the church. Acts 2:42 and Acts 3:32-47 emphasize the generosity for which the earliest Christians were known.

Saul/Paul's conversion (which occurred in approximately A.D. 34 and no more than five years after the resurrection) saw the establishment of churches throughout Palestine and the Mediterranean. As Gentiles began converting in Acts 10, eight years after the resurrection, the church had a solid footing in the non-Jewish world. Two epistles, Galatians and James, were written in the earliest days of Christianity, within fifteen years after the resurrection. By A.D. 53, when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, there were five known house churches in Corinth, Greece.<sup>38</sup> By A.D. 57, Paul wrote Romans. Even given conservative date estimates, within 30 years after the resurrection, the gospel was shared and churches established on

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<sup>37</sup> Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1983), 1-29.

<sup>38</sup> Bruce Button and Fika Van Rensberg, "The House Churches in Corinth" *Neotestamentica* 37, no. 1 (2003), 1-28, 2.  
<http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://www.jstor.org/stable/43048456>

every known continent. In short, Christianity spread like wildfire in the ancient world.

### First Generation Women

The perspective that Christianity was manufactured by men for the benefit of men is countered by a close reading of the New Testament. There are thirteen women named in the book of Acts and innumerable unnamed women. The book of Romans concludes with a list of twenty-nine named individuals, ten of which are female. From these women, one may understand how women as a group contributed in those early days of Christianity. Women were not relegated to only the home but retained considerable freedom in how they served the Lord. “Barefoot and pregnant” is the common trope of those describing a housewife who lacks agency, personality, public mobility or presence, and is often revered by fundamentalist Christianity in the United States.<sup>39</sup> But as the book of Acts and the epistles show, this is not the teaching of early Christianity, nor can it be an orthodox teaching today.

### Married and Single

Between the day of Pentecost and the conversion of Saul to Paul, one woman is discussed by name in Acts 5. Sapphira committed great evil and is struck dead shortly after her husband (Acts 5:10). Sapphira is not admirable in any way, yet her story provides insight to the agency and responsibility given to women. Like her husband, she was held fully responsible for lying to the Holy Spirit. In fact, the language of Acts 5:2, “with his wife’s full knowledge...” demonstrates a responsibility on the part of Sapphira to intervene or at minimum speak honestly about the price of the field. When she does not, God takes her life as an equal punishment as her husband. This responsibility and agency, an assumed characteristic in Christian women at this time, challenges the interpretation of Ephesians 5:25-27 that husbands are solely responsible for their wife’s purity, that wives should not challenge their husbands’ actions, or that wives do not bear a Christian responsibility within their marriage to direct their husbands towards holiness (some fundamentalist traditions may call this exercising authority over their husbands and therefore unbiblical). Interpreting the “household codes” in this manner is difficult to reconcile with the way women like Sapphira are held accountable for their actions as independent actors, choosing to obey or disobey on their own accord and by their own conscience.

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<sup>39</sup> Erica Appelros, “Gender within Christian fundamentalism – a philosophical analysis of conceptual oppression” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 75, no. 5 (2014): 460-473. DOI: 10.1080/21692327.2015.1036906

Luke contrasts Ananias and Sapphira with another couple, Priscilla (or Prisca) and Aquila.<sup>40</sup> Out of the six times, this couple is mentioned in the New Testament, Priscilla is named first in four.<sup>41</sup> Prisca, a nickname for Priscilla, is used when Priscilla is addressed by Paul, demonstrating closeness and familiarity with one another (similar to the name Abigail being known as Abby).<sup>42</sup> When Paul meets with this couple in Corinth, they had recently been forced to move from Rome by the edict of Claudius (Acts 18:2-3).<sup>43</sup> This couple hosted a church in their home, were both tentmakers like Paul (hosting him for extended periods of time), and corrected the great apologist/evangelist Apollos by “explaining the Way of the Lord more accurately” (Acts 18:25-26).<sup>44</sup> Their professions as tentmakers provided them with a higher than average degree of mobility and affluence.<sup>45</sup> By the time Paul wrote the book of Romans, Priscilla and Aquila had moved back to Rome with the death of Claudius.<sup>46</sup> Paul greets the couple in Romans 16:3-4 as “fellow workers in Christ” who *both* “risked their necks,” and for whom all the churches of the Gentiles are thankful. Safety was not the goal of either individual in this couple, but whole-hearted obedience to God was seemingly the driving decision-making factor.

Additionally, a named husband was not necessary for women who were called by the Lord into His service. Historians and theologians do not know Phoebe’s marital status, but this is the important point: if she had a husband, she was not so absorbed into his person that she lost her own, and she was found traveling without him.<sup>47</sup> If she was not married, today’s American evangelicalism/fundamentalism must re-examine their message of marriage to young people, particularly young women, in being the primary unit of life in the church.

Phoebe carried the letter to the Romans and was commended to the brothers and sisters in Rome by Paul. The relational treatment of Phoebe- Paul’s commendation, calling her sister, asking for hospitality and generosity be shown

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<sup>40</sup> Mary-Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 121-122.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> James Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 62.

<sup>46</sup> Mary-Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament*, 124.

<sup>47</sup> Paul requests the Roman church to receive Phoebe, but no other companions. This point does not prove the negative as it is an argument from silence, but Paul’s other writings address companions of travelers, and it would have been courteous to inform the Romans about another individual traveling with Phoebe. While she may have had companions that Paul was unaware of, the point in no way weakens the argument made.

as she brings the letter across the Mediterranean, and entrusting such an important document to a woman- indicates no disrespect. In fact, the opposite is true. Phoebe is spoken of quite highly, and Paul uses his authority as an apostle to ensure the good treatment of one he considered his sister.<sup>48</sup> Paul describes Phoebe as a *diakonos* which is the same term used for the office of deacon in 1 Timothy 3:8, and in most English versions of the Bible, is translated to “servant” or “deacon.”

However, the Orthodox Jewish Bible calls her the “*shammash* of the congregation at Cenchreae.”<sup>49</sup> The *shammash* is the one who directs the public order of worship. If Phoebe is understood to be a patron of the church as well, she likely directed the worship in her home. Notably, this is the same word Paul uses to describe himself, and enthusiastically bestowed his blessing and favor upon Phoebe while asking the Romans do the same. Origen and Pelagius acknowledged that Phoebe played a larger role in the Cenchrean church than philanthropy and general good deeds, citing Phoebe as the first induction into the office of deacon in the Christian church.<sup>50</sup> Modern authors and theologians, such as N.T. Wright and Arichea believe the same.<sup>51</sup> There is one point of scholarship that disputes this fact: the office of deacon had yet to be established in other Pauline scholarship.<sup>52</sup> This is not dispositive, however- if Paul designated Phoebe as a deacon at this point in time, this would be an establishment of the office. Yet the acknowledgment that the offices of the church were not formally established in Paul’s writing until much later does invite higher criticism into whether or not Phoebe held church office. Whether *diakonos* is considered an office or simply an adjective, Phoebe was tasked with carrying the longest epistle across the Mediterranean and to the church at Rome, searching for Priscilla and Aquila upon arrival.

Phoebe’s importance in delivering the letter to the Romans cannot be overstated. Paul required the support of the Romans in prayer, financial support, and potentially companions on his missionary journey to Spain. There was likely only one copy to begin, meaning Phoebe’s care and attention to its safety as she crossed the Mediterranean was of utmost importance.<sup>53</sup> Once she arrived in Rome, the need to make copies to circulate to the numerous congregations was

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<sup>48</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William E. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 438, Proquest.

<sup>49</sup> Robin Branch, “Female Leadership as demonstrated by Phoebe” *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 53, no. 2 (2019): 7. [indieskriflig.org.za](http://indieskriflig.org.za)

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 439

<sup>53</sup> Allan Chapple, “Getting Romans to the Right Romans: Phoebe and the Delivery of Paul’s Letter” *Tyndale Bulletin* 62, no.2 (2011): 211. <http://www.tyndale.cam.ac.uk/index.php>.



expensive, requiring the financial support of Phoebe alone or with the help of Priscilla and Aquila.<sup>54</sup> As these churches would have either received a copy individually or gathered as one congregation to hear the letter read, someone was tasked with reading and explaining the contents to indicate the author's intent and meaning.<sup>55</sup> Chapple explains, "With so much riding on the positive reception of Romans, there is thus little doubt that Paul would have gone through it carefully with Phoebe so that she was able to communicate its contents as he wanted. Her reading of the letter can thus be seen as an authorized interpretation of its contents."<sup>56</sup> Phoebe was the first scholar in the book of Romans. Of course, this influences the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12, which was written after Phoebe's time in Rome. Unless Paul is rescinding an earlier practice, a literal and universally applicable interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12 and Phoebe's role are incompatible. Phoebe read the letter aloud to the assembled church, which would have included men and women, and explained any nuance that Paul did not dictate.

Some may propose the lector was Tertius (a male), but this argument is weakened by two points. First, Tertius is not commended to the church in addition to Phoebe. Paul requests that only Phoebe be housed, granted generosity, and respected as a sister. There is nothing to suggest that Phoebe had a commendable companion. Second, in Romans 16:22, Tertius records that he is the scribe of Romans and offers a greeting alongside the other individuals who are not present.

Phoebe, Priscilla, and Aquila were all significant companions and contributors to the missionary work of Paul. Paul's trust, high opinion, and the care he took to ensure Phoebe was housed in Rome demonstrated his deep love and respect for his partner for the gospel. The use of Priscilla's nickname, Prisca, indicates the familiarity of close friends who have become family throughout the course of ministry and in the new family of believers. She was not held at arm's length because she was a woman or married but spoken of warmly and with deep admiration for her and her husband. Priscilla and Aquila, Phoebe, and any number of others provided payment for copies of Scripture to be made, carried and read letters, hosted Paul and his companions and arranged for churches to gather in their homes. Women were vital to the formation of Scripture, the assembly of churches, and the missionary journeys of their co-laborers in ministry.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

## Sexual Ethic

One would be remiss to discuss marriage and singleness without mentioning Christian sexual ethic. Christianity's sexual ethic differs significantly from a secular sexual ethic, which dominates today, and the pagan sexual ethic, which dominated the First Century. Monogamous relationships (1 Tim. 3:2; Matt. 5:27-28), the marriage covenant (Eph. 5:22-33), equality in sexual expectations (1 Cor. 7:4), and unequivocal condemnation of divorce (Matt. 19:4-6) was the New Testament standard. While the first Christians were not perfect in this regard, leading to direct pastoral discipline from Paul throughout 1 Corinthians, the expectation was present and enforced on all people, men and women alike. In the first century, men could and would often divorce their wives without reason.<sup>57</sup> Women's marital faithfulness was expected while men were permitted to engage in sexual relationships outside of marriage with other men, women, and sometimes children.<sup>58</sup> Women's sexual pleasure or desire were considered non-existent, existing solely to gratify their husbands.<sup>59</sup> Yet, the biblical sexual ethic taught the sexual integrity, safety, and enjoyment of both spouses.

Another way that Christianity encouraged women is by dignifying singleness for both men and women. Singleness is regarded as an honor, a high calling, and a gift. Women are not required to be married to glorify God, and in fact, are given a family beyond biology. The early church did not see marriage as the goal of all believers, but only believers who burned with passion for one another. As has been discussed, the most commendable aspect of Phoebe's being was not her marital status or her function as a wife or mother, but her devotion to the Lord and her service to His people.

## Structures

The New Testament has very little to say about the actual structure and day-to-day operations of a church body compared to the other topics addressed.<sup>60</sup> The topic of church leaders is discussed, as are some ministries, but the daily functions and organization of local church bodies were built upon the societal structures discussed in the Greco-Roman world in the first century. Particularly, the relationship of patron and client permeated Greco-Roman life and was an

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<sup>57</sup> Michael Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2018), 37-38.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> James Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 72.

established social norm in the time of the first generation Christians.<sup>61</sup> Patrons offered legal help, protection from enemies, and financial and material assistance to their clients, who were often freed slaves who returned to work for their former masters.<sup>62</sup>

Patronage and free associations became the models for churches. Free associations, particularly in the latter decades of the first century, were the model of gatherings, often obtaining legal legitimacy in Greco-Roman society by forming under these auspices. Patrons of the early church were vital to the health and life of Christians in the first century by providing places to meet and funding ministries, including Paul's missionary journeys. One aspect of this function that stood out among first-century Christians is the commands by Paul, Peter, and James to remember those in prison, to show no partiality for the poor, and to provide each person with whatever they needed. These commands were contrary to the typical function of patrons and free associations, whose primary goal was attaining something of value from those they oversaw. Instead, Christianity required patrons to give in seasons of abundance and in need, to give cheerfully and without expectation of return (2 Cor. 9:6-7). Generosity and stewardship defined the Christian culture of patronage.

Lydia (Acts 16), Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2), Nympha (Colossians 4:15), Priscilla (and her husband, discussed at length above), and Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11) are all known patrons of early Christianity, and each contributed to the early church financially. Chloe and Nympha hosted a church in their homes. Lydia sold purple dye and invited Paul and his companions into her home, becoming the first known believer in Europe. She also went on to host church in her home. Priscilla and Phoebe supported Paul's missionary journeys and other ministries, as has been discussed at length above. The early church relied on the generosity and hospitality of these patrons, indicating once again the importance and value God endowed to these women by allowing them to care for, shepherd, and provide for His people. These women were necessary to the growth of the Body of Christ, and elements of the models they sustained are still in use in churches today 2000 years later (donations of church buildings, generous congregants, the home church model, and its prevalence in countries outside the United States).

### **Second Generation Christians**

The deaths of the apostles ushered in a new age of Christianity. The Christians alive in the second century and beyond had not met, walked with, or seen Jesus. Christianity began to take on a new identity, separate and distinct from

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 192-193.

Judaism, as it was put to the test of time.<sup>63</sup> In particular, the Bar Kokhba revolt in AD 132-135 drove a sharp wedge between Christians and Jews, forcing adherents to choose whether they would retain their Jewish religious identity or forsake it for the new family in the church.<sup>64</sup> As Christianity continued to grow, the Roman Empire began to notice the differences between Christianity and other religions at the time. Christianity was monotheistic, demanded complete and total worship, and was disconnected from the ethnic and geographic boundaries associated with other religious groups, which was a critical factor in spreading across the ancient world.<sup>65</sup> The second-century saw the rise of heresies take a sharp uptick as the apostolic authority to correct such heresies had ceased with the death of John in A.D. 95-96 (as an indicator for how widespread these problems became, Irenaeus wrote “Against Heresies” in AD 180 prior to the First Ecumenical Council). The Christians also had a peculiar draw to women, which will be discussed in further detail below.

#### Demographics of the Second Generation Christians

The gender make-up of the early church is important for two reasons in discussing the claims that Christianity is sexist. First, it shows that Christianity honors women’s agency in conversion with ownership over their own spiritual decision-making. Second, it shows who and how the evangelism process occurred in the pivotal moments of the early church. The presence of women in the early church was so prevalent that Celsus noted, “Christians show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, only slaves, women, and little children.”<sup>66</sup> The pagan world took notice.

Rodney Stark, a notable scholar on the sociology of early Christianity, distinguishes between two types of conversion, primary and secondary. A primary conversion occurs when an individual evaluates the merits of faith and becomes a faithful adherent, while the secondary conversion takes place when an individual “goes along” with the choice of a spouse or cultural pressure.<sup>67</sup> The primary conversion was far more prevalent among women, especially in the upper classes of Roman society, which brought many husbands to a secondary conversion.<sup>68</sup> Despite an estimate by J.C. Russell that there were 131 males per 100 females in

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads*, 5.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>66</sup> Celsus 3.44, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/04163.htm>

<sup>67</sup> Rodney Stark, “Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women” *Sociology of Religion*, 56, No. 3 (1995): 233. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711820>

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

Rome, Christianity grew exponentially among women.<sup>69</sup> With a conversion rate of 30 percent, which is congruent with other examinations of religious growth, it took less than a century for the church to be 62 percent female.<sup>70</sup> Women in the second-century church were given considerably more freedom regarding marriage, rejecting child marriage, and encouraging a mature decision-making process.<sup>71</sup> Certainly, an attractive quality when compared to a pagan world.

In addition, widows were mildly discouraged from remarriage, supported, cared for in their need within Christianity. A letter, written from Cornelius, Bishop of Rome, to Fabius of Antioch in AD 251, suggested that more than 1,500 widows were under the care of the 30,000 member local congregation.<sup>72</sup> Regardless of their societal position, Christians desired that women be permitted liberty to make decisions regarding their marriage. For some widows, this would mean remarriage. For others, it would mean singleness. On either front, even more than caring for women, Christianity provided the freedom to make the decision without coercion, if choosing marriage, and without fear of destitution, if remaining single. Married or not, the Christian faith requires respect and honor to be shown to each member of the Body.

As early Christianity moved past the development of the creeds and became the dominant religion of the Roman empire, the roles available to women within the church became more limited. This was only after the sex ratios within the church, and the Roman empire at large was brought into closer balance (still favoring women).<sup>73</sup> From the outset, women have flocked to Christianity, and the primary conversions of women (leading to the secondary conversions of their high-ranking husbands) was how the gospel became known throughout the world. Prison mercies, favorable court decisions, and any number of impactful government activities occurred when women chose to face the deadly threat of divorce or abuse for following Christ.

### Montanism

Montanism, developed near Phrygia in the mid to late second century, serves a unique role in discussing women in the second-century church. This particular heresy not only allowed women to speak, but two women in particular (Priscilla and Maximilla) are well-known members and foremothers of this entire

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<sup>69</sup> J.C. Russell (1958) cited in Rodney Stark, "Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women" *Sociology of Religion*, 56, No. 3 (1995): 231. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711820>

<sup>70</sup> Rodney Stark, "Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women" 236.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

sect.<sup>74 75</sup> According to Christine Trevett, it is possible and even likely that Montanus was the advocate for their speech, an organizer, rather than the leader, of these women.<sup>76</sup> Priscilla and Maximilla were far more ostracized by the catholic church for their heretical beliefs and teachings than Montanus was.<sup>77</sup> Unique to Montanism, the *content* of the prophecies being uttered was not as unorthodox as the way in which the prophecies were taking place- loudly, erratically, and out of the character described by the apostles. There is difficulty in examining the exact beliefs of this sect, as the only surviving writings describing their beliefs were written by staunch opponents. Eusebius described the prophetic experiences as such:

“Thus by artifice, or rather by such a system of wicked craft, the devil, devising destruction for the disobedient, and being unworthily honored by them, secretly excited and inflamed their understandings which had already become estranged from the true faith. And he stirred up besides two women, and filled them with the false spirit, so that they talked wildly and unreasonably and strangely, like the person already mentioned. And the spirit pronounced them blessed as they rejoiced and gloried in him, and puffed them up by the magnitude of his promises. But sometimes he rebuked them openly in a wise and faithful manner, that he might seem to be a reprover. But those of the Phrygians that were deceived were few in number.”<sup>78</sup>

Montanist beliefs centered heavily centered on prophecy, but the manner in which prophecies were taking place was the primary issue which brought the catholic church to disavow Montanist beliefs.

Outside of improper prophetic behavior, Montanists taught asceticism, discouraged marriage, advocated for a new direct revelation that contradicts the later New Testament canon, and foretold the imminent return of Christ.<sup>79</sup> These beliefs were not unique to Montanism, but nevertheless, were not within orthodoxy. Apostolic authority in Scripture, as well as earlier church leaders,

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<sup>74</sup> Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 153-154.

<sup>75</sup> This is not the same Priscilla who was a friend of Paul's; Priscilla of Montanism did not rise to prominence until the end of the second century and into the third.

<sup>76</sup> Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*. 159.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 153-155.

<sup>78</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.16.7

<sup>79</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, “Montanism”

affirm that marriage is good, pleasure is a gift, and only the Father knows the day, time, and age of Christ's return.

On the one hand, Maximilla and Priscilla had their womanhood attacked for participating in such a sect; on the other hand, they were improperly prophesying and requiring a particular lifestyle of pain and denial that was unbiblical.<sup>80</sup> It is also unique that the Montanists were not immediately nor totally disbanded as with other heresies, as the core tenets of the Christian faith were affirmed, namely the deity of the Son.<sup>81</sup> Eventually, widespread condemnation of these teachings was eventually reached with the help of Justinian I legislating Montanism out of organized existence.<sup>82</sup>

Most heretics have maintained that their particular belief system is the true and real Christian faith, and the Montanist sects were no different. In many circles of Christianity, when orthodoxy and orthopraxy are not considered the top priority among churches, forgiveness of many theological, exegetical, and historical misgivings are common. The Bauer thesis, a commonly used argument, contends that orthodoxy in the Christian faith was determined after heresies became undesirable rather than heresies distorting the original truth.<sup>83</sup> Bauer contends that orthodoxy was achieved for and by merely political means and is not to be trusted as the true form of Christianity. While there are aspects of the thesis that are correct (as the ecumenical councils were highly contentious and political in nature), it fails to account for the apostolic reach and authority, as well as the ministry of Jesus, that was a reality in the first century. This inadequacy is far too glaring to justify a thesis like Bauer's. Similarly, a feminist centric reading of Montanism may purport that these women were the victims of vengeful ecumenical politics when in fact, this was a distortion of the orthodoxy that was taught by the apostles.

Many of the Montanist habits remain popular among women today. Egalitarian conversations and denominations tend to be far more pneumatic in nature by elevating the spiritual gift of prophecy and in heavily charismatic churches, may advocate for extra-biblical or even heretical work with spirits. These beliefs are not within orthodoxy. While some points of charismatic beliefs are to be admired, dabbling into Montanism should be condemned today.

One tendency in examining women and Montanism is to assert that women are more susceptible to heresy, being led astray, or deception because this particular heresy used women in leadership positions, a proof to a flawed

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<sup>80</sup> The former is directly addressed in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; the latter is a multifaceted issue which can be addressed by numerous passages of varying topics. Several are listed for further study: Col. 2:20-23; 1 Tim. 4:2-4; 1 Cor. 6; Rom. 12:1 in the New Testament alone.

<sup>81</sup> Michael Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads*, 131.

<sup>82</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, "Montanism"

<sup>83</sup> Michael Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads*, 109-111.

interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12-14. Using Montanism as proof that women are of inherently weaker composure or lack the capacity to critically think in examining the Scriptures ignores the fact that virtually every other known heretical sect, and the most prominent heresies, were propagated by men. This does not excuse the improper orthopraxy or orthodoxy of Montanism but attributes it to the fallen human nature rather than the womanhood of these individuals.

### Two Witnesses of Women in the Second Generation Christians

As has been stated numerous times, women were not only accepted among Christians but needed. Apocryphal literature, while not to be construed as historically accurate, displays patterns of women serving in a variety of ministries.<sup>84</sup> Prison ministry, baptisms, providing for the poor, teaching, and even studying theology were all marks of the second generation Christian women.<sup>85</sup> In this section, two witnesses are examined. First, infant exposure and the Christian response through adoption bears witness to the great compassion and strength God bestowed upon these women and their partners. This is also examined as a field in which one would expect to see a strong female presence. Second, martyrdom is examined through the lens of Christian women. This area of Christian witness is thought to be dominated by men, given the physical nature and bravery required of the act. History shows that women, too, were courageous participants in this witness of faith.

### Infant Exposure

The cultural distaste for women among the Romans is evidenced in earlier days but persisted through the early Christian years.<sup>86</sup> Hilarion wrote the following in 1 B.C. regarding his pregnant wife:

“I ask and beg you to take good care of our baby son, and as soon as I receive payment I shall send it up to you. If you are delivered of a child [before I come home], if it is a boy keep it, *if a girl discard it.*”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Michael Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads*, 31-33.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Rodney Stark, “Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women” *Sociology of Religion*, 56, No. 3 (1995): 232. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711820>

<sup>87</sup> Lewis (1985) cited in Rodney Stark, “Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women” *Sociology of Religion*, 56, No. 3 (1995): 232. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711820>. Emphasis added.



This disposable view of babies, especially baby girls, was widespread and persistent. A study of inscriptions at Delphi reconstructed 600 families from the first four centuries. Of these, fewer than ten had raised more than one daughter.<sup>88</sup> This disproportionality occurs only with some “tampering of human life.”<sup>89</sup>

This tampering primarily occurred through infant exposure, a horrific practice which involved leaving an unwanted infant out-of-doors, left to the mercy of passersby, animals, and the elements (this practice and disdain for baby girls was preceded by abortions, including rudimentary surgical abortions as well as early chemical/herbal abortions.<sup>90</sup>).<sup>91</sup> In one discovery, the bones of day old infants dating back to the sixth century (indistinguishably male or female) were found in sewers, supporting the theory that children born and discovered to be the “wrong” gender were cast out of the home.<sup>92</sup> The date range of these practices vary considerably.

Christians unequivocally condemned infant exposure and abortion, as they continue to do today. Justin Martyr wrote that Christians believe the fetus, even in the womb, is a created being and under the care of God.<sup>93</sup> When Christian emperors were brought to positions of power, the practice was legislated to a slow and then a halt. For instance, the first Christian emperor, Constantine, authorized the sale of infants.<sup>94</sup> While certainly not ideal, at the very least, this incentivized a more humane treatment of newborns until they were passed along to their new homes.

As has been established, conservative estimates show that 60% of early Christians were women. As these infant girls were abandoned, it was Christians who adopted them. Callistus of Rome provided refuge for these infants by placing them in Christian homes towards the end of the second century.<sup>95</sup> Afra of Augsburg, a pagan convert, began a ministry to care for the abandoned children of common criminals.<sup>96</sup> These are the well-known examples only. It is not so

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<sup>88</sup> Lindsay (1968) cited in Rodney Stark, “Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women” *Sociology of Religion*, 56, No. 3 (1995): 231. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711820>

<sup>89</sup> J.C. Russell (1958) cited in Rodney Stark, “Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women” 231.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>91</sup> Rodney Stark, “The Role of Women in Christian Growth.” In *The Rise of Christianity*, 95-128. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996). 118.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>94</sup> Harris, W.V., “Child-Exposure in the Roman Empire” *The Journal of Roman Studies*. (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994). 1-22.

<sup>95</sup> Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 56.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

difficult to conclude, after examining adoption in antiquity and the care for orphans and widows practiced by Christians, that informal adoption occurred when happening upon an abandoned baby, the majority of which were baby girls.<sup>97</sup>

This practice contributed to the growth of Christianity among women. As infants cast aside were largely girls, these were the children adopted and raised by Christians in the household of faith, contributing to the disproportionately female make-up of Christianity. The significance of this topic in women in Christian history is immense. First, this practice reaffirmed that all people- men, women, girls, boys, Romans, Greeks, Jews, Gentiles- are made in the image of God and are therefore precious to Him. Second, it was Christian women as the majority of the church who provided for these small ones in service to the Lord. Women were undoubtedly on the front lines of caring for these infants, as was culturally acceptable for women and biblically mandated for all believers. Third, the compassion of these women for the smallest members of the church family saved the lives of many and mimicked God's heart for outcasts and orphans. Fourth, Christian women as primary converts wielded influence over their unbelieving husbands in enacting pro-life legislation in the upper echelons of Roman and Greek society.<sup>98</sup>

## Martyrdom

Many American evangelicals and fundamentalists paint an image of masculinity wrapped in adventure, self-sacrifice, and battle; womanhood, conversely, is intricately linked to motherhood, submission, and seeking protection.<sup>99</sup> Christian doctrine, as well as church history, call into question whether these are appropriate portrayals of biblical manhood and womanhood.<sup>100</sup> Women of the second century and beyond endured great hardship as a witness to the great power of Christ.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Walker, Andrew T. "Southern Baptists, Gender Ideology, and Female Combatants" *ProvidenceMag.com*, October 5, 2016, <https://407u4flpk751yvorj2prtwt-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Southern-Baptists-Gender-Ideology-Female-Combatants-Andrew-T.-Walker.pdf>. Accessed January 11, 2021.

<sup>100</sup> A multitude of studies affirm that men and women are different in both physiology and psychology. Men and women have different bodies; boys and girls show different brain patterns at early stages of development. The author is not challenging the differences between men and women, but how far Christians allow those differences to form our assumptions of godliness in the sexes.

Martyrs play a special role in church history and particularly in Catholic and Orthodox contexts, venerated as saints in both traditions. Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, found the lifestyle of the Christians vexing.<sup>101</sup> In Book Ten, Letter 96, in a letter to Emperor Trajan, Pliny contextualizes the persecution he propagated against the Christians in Rome. Christians were provided with the opportunity to deny Christ and were then required to make multiple confessions of faith prior to enduring capital punishment.<sup>102</sup> Pliny confirms that there were Christians who denied faith in Christ, saying it had been years since they had attended church due to an order to cease political societies. The following portion of the letter provides secular insight into the early church and martyrdom:

“They affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt, or their error, was, that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your orders, I had forbidden political associations. *I judged it so much the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were styled deaconesses: but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition.*”<sup>103</sup>

The inclusion of these two women in this account portrays not only the accessibility of Christian women to Pliny but their strength under pressure. These women were slaves, yet they were called deacons by the church. While it is unclear whether or not the torture of these women resulted in their death, the inclusion of this account demonstrates the courage of these early women.

Two other women, whose names and stories are far better recognized, were faithful witnesses to Jesus under persecution. Felicity and Perpetua are recognized as saints in the Catholic Church. The Passion of St. Perpetua was the diary Perpetua kept in the days prior to her execution in Carthage, around AD

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<sup>101</sup> Pliny the Younger, Book 10 Letter 96.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., Letter 93.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, emphasis added.

203.<sup>104</sup> Perpetua and Felicity were both mothers and 22 years of age who were imprisoned for their declaration of Christian faith.<sup>105</sup> Perpetua, a noblewoman, was nursing her infant son at the time of her imprisonment. Felicity, a servant of Perpetua, was eight months pregnant. Both women faced hardship in prison that was born out of their motherhood as well as their womanhood. When Felicity was giving birth, she cried out in pain. A guard asked, “‘If you are suffering so much now, what will you do when you are thrown to the beasts which you scorned when you refused to sacrifice?’ And she replied: ‘Now I alone suffer what I am suffering, but then there will be another inside me, who will suffer for me, because I am going to suffer for him.’”<sup>106</sup> In the arena, when St. Perpetua’s hair came loose after being trampled by a beast, she requested a pin that she may tie her hair back so that she did not appear to be in mourning.<sup>107</sup>

These women were offered an easier route due to their motherhood. In fact, they were offered release, allowing their children to grow up with mothers. Instead, their devotion was first and foremost, in the fullest portion to Jesus Christ. These women strengthened the resolve of the saints, as all martyrs do even today. The witness that these women bore, as victims of violent rape and public humiliation, flogging, and eventual death was met with kindness, intensity, and joy above all else. The Passion of St. Perpetua finishes:

“O bravest and most blessed martyrs! O truly called and chosen for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ! Anyone who praises, honors, and adores his glory surely should read these deeds, which are no less worthy than the old ones for building up the church. For these new deeds of courage too may witness that one and the same Holy Spirit is always working among us even now, along with God, the Father almighty, and his Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, to whom is glory and end- less power for ever and ever. Amen.”<sup>108</sup>

Courage, it seems, was a prevailing ethic of Christian women. Motherhood, while a glorious calling, was not the highest calling for these women: faithfulness, devotion to Jesus regardless of circumstances was. Over the past several years, evangelicalism has moved away from the teaching that motherhood is the highest calling for women- at least explicitly- and has returned

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<sup>104</sup> Thomas Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 135.

to the position that women are called, as men are, to obedience first and foremost. However, there is still work that must be done to reframe the discussion surrounding biblical and historic gender roles. Courage, surrender, submission, and sacrifice are traits required of all believers. The fruit of the Spirit is often admired or delegated to women, while the full armor of God is dedicated to men. Church history and hermeneutic study determine that this is simply an inaccurate gender assignment of Christian traits.

### **Application and Conclusion**

Christians have a unique qualification to speak to the value and worth of women. Christian faith, as has been shown throughout this paper, has been shaped by the work of the Lord and His people. In the early days, almost 66% of God's people were women, and the average Christian today is a woman of color.<sup>109</sup> Women are edified in Scripture in both testaments; women were some of the most faithful disciples of Christ while He walked the earth; women were first to share in His resurrection; women carried the gospel across the sea; women hosted church in their homes; Paul is grateful for his female partners in ministry; women helped end the horrific infanticide in the first and second century; women were slaughtered for their devotion to Jesus. Women have contributed in other ways that have gone unrecorded and unnoticed by anyone but God. Women have built the Christian faith alongside and at times, ahead of their brothers.

It is not difficult to understand why so many believe that Christianity is a sexist or misogynistic religion. Many sexists are Christians, and many have used the authority of Scripture to limit the function and giftings of women, not only in church settings but within the larger cultural context as well. John MacArthur believes that in no context may a woman speak on Sunday morning, whether leading congregational worship or prayer throughout the course of the morning.<sup>110</sup> To give credit where it is due, John MacArthur is at least consistent in his flawed exegesis of biblical texts.

Statistically, women perform more unpaid labor than men in every measurable area of society.<sup>111</sup> In an oddly analogous relationship, women throughout church history have supported the church, served in building the

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<sup>109</sup> Pew Research Center, "Sub-Saharan Africa" accessed November 17, 2020. Last updated April 2, 2015. <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/sub-saharan-africa/>

<sup>110</sup> John MacArthur, *Divine Design: God's Complimentary Roles for Men and Women* (Colorado Springs, CO: David Cook, 2011).

<sup>111</sup> Clare Coffey, et al. *Time to Care: Unpaid and underpaid care work and the global inequality crisis*. Oxford, UK: Oxfam International, 2020. Accessed April 2, 2021. <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/time-care/>

church, and comprised the majority of the church throughout history, yet tend to be underrepresented when discussing theologians or church founders.

While Montanism heresies are to be rejected at all costs as the church clings to orthodoxy and began with women, this should not be a reason to discredit the work of women acting in pastoral and shepherding positions. Men, too, have started and believed heretical nonsense, and in historically greater numbers than women. While 1 Timothy 2:14 certainly deserves strict textual criticism and scholarship, interpretations which imply that women believe more heresies than men are demonstrably false and therefore untenable as the correct interpretation of the Word.<sup>112</sup>

The problems the church faces today in communicating the importance of women's service are not new. Since its earliest days, women's place in the church has been bewilderment to outsiders and misused by those within church settings. Women who have given up everything for the sake of the gospel are questioned by non-Christians, ironically betraying worldly prejudices that women are not independent agents who are capable of rational and critical thought. Women who have obeyed the call that God has placed on their lives by pursuing justice in legal careers, advocacy within non-profits, leaving behind families as they abandoned their most cherished relationships to bring the gospel to the nations (and countless other examples) have been marginalized and despised by their own brothers and sisters in Christ.

American fundamentalism and evangelicalism are particularly poor communicators on this front, primarily because evangelicalism and fundamentalism were politically motivated responses to radically pro-choice feminism.<sup>113</sup> Evangelicalism and fundamentalism omitted the crucial link between women's witness and success on matters of life-related issues. Honoring women, respecting women, understanding and acknowledging women as equals and as partners is what brought the genocide of baby girls in Ancient Rome to a gradual stop. Ironically, this was the opposite conversation had among fundamentalists or evangelicals, who advocate (if accidentally) for stricter divides between men and women as the answer to gender, sexuality, and related issues. Leaders like John MacArthur, Owen Strachan, and members of the Southern Baptist Convention advocate for greater clarity on what is fitting for men and women, but this supposed clarity only brings more confusion because it is not biblical; it is American traditionalism parading as Christian ethic, permitted because the layperson in the American church lacks the biblical and historical literacy to hold

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<sup>112</sup> For an accurate reading of this passage, along with others pertaining to women in church leadership, see "Recovering Biblical Ministry by Women" by George and Dora Winston.

<sup>113</sup> Shaw, Susan M. "Gracious Submission: Southern Baptist Fundamentalists and Women." *NWSA Journal* 20, no. 1 (2008): 51-77. Accessed November 20, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40071252>.

these leaders accountable for their tunnel vision of proof-texts. The tunnel vision of these leaders perpetuates the cycle of violence against the pre-born, which is the primary political battle of today's evangelicalism. The inability or lack of desire to partner with women perpetuates greater disrespect and marginalization of women while damaging the great witness believers have the opportunity to display in life, gender, and sexuality-related issues.

Nevertheless, women have flocked to Christianity. Christian women participate in missionary work around the globe. Christian women have evangelized households. Christian women are drawn to non-profit, kingdom-oriented work. Christian women are called to advance goodness through political activism and commerce. Christian women study science, become educators, and join the military. Christian women are athletes, attorneys, and authors. Christian women raise children and manage households in the faith. Just like in the second century, Christian women are found all over the world, in every arena and in every capacity, faithfully stewarding their lives in service to the Lord and His church.

Women understand, acutely, the effects of sin and the fall due to historic oppression worldwide. As with other groups which have experienced widespread mistreatment based on an immutable characteristic, the nature of their historic and current oppression has caused women to search for hope, purpose, and comfort in a justice-oriented God. This witness of obedience, which is better than sacrifice but often walks hand in hand, has been the vehicle by which the world comes to know the saving grace of Jesus. Women, and men, have found all these things in the God of the Bible, the God-man Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. Jesus, who was raised to life on the third day, has provided all those who are downtrodden and in darkness with great light, witnessed first by women who faithfully followed and served Christ. The Holy Spirit has empowered and emboldened women to abandon their own and societally conceived notions of safety and protection, obeying God no matter the cost to their life, limb, or family. God the Father has, in His sovereignty, drawn millions of women to Himself over the ages, offering the greatest reward of Jesus through salvation. There is no greater honor.

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