

WOMEN'S STATUS AND ORDINATION AS ELDERS OR BISHOPS
IN THE EARLY CHURCH, REFORMATION,
AND POST-REFORMATION ERAS

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Introduction

This paper will investigate the views of the status of women in the church and whether women were ordained as elders, bishops, or priests in certain periods of the history of the Christian Church.¹ The main focus of this paper will be on the Early Church, the Reformation, and Post-Reformation eras. The sources for the early church are limited to the early church fathers, and for the Reformers to their commentaries on the Bible. Martin Luther and John Calvin have been chosen because of their emphasis on the Bible as the rule for doctrine and practice, which was adopted by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. John Wesley was selected as representing Methodism, the practices of which strongly impacted Adventist pioneers. The ordination of deaconesses will not be discussed in this paper.²

This paper deals only with passages which clearly affirm women priests or presbyters. One should be aware that the word “presbytera” describing a woman can refer to an older/elder

¹ My graduate assistant, Dojcin Zivadinovic, has been very helpful in locating many of the sources in this paper.

² It is a known fact that women served as deaconesses in churches from early centuries onwards until today. The position of a diaconate—the nature of which is not always clear—is quite different from an attempted ordination of women as priests. The office of a “deacon” can include various branches of Christian “help” (*diaconia*) and does not necessarily imply the position of headship and church governance. Women deacons were considered as helpers and not church leaders in the early Church. The apostle Paul recommend one of them to the church in Rome as “Phoebe, our sister, who is a servant (*diakonos*) of the Church at Cenchræ, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you, for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also” (Romans 16:1). Centuries later the *Apostolic Constitutions* 3.26.1-2 (ca. AD 375) stated: “Choose as a deaconess a faithful and holy woman for the ministry of women. . . . For we need a female deaconess for many things, first, when women are baptized, the deacons only anoint their forehead with holy oil, and after the deaconess spreads it [all over] on them. For it is not proper that women be seen by men.” *Ibid.*, 8.28.6: “A deaconess does not bless or do any of the things priests and deacons do. She just takes care of the doors and ministers when women are baptized, for the sake of propriety.” The Council of Nicea, Canon 19 (AD 325) stated: “We have mentioned the deaconesses, who are enrolled in this position, but since they have not received any imposition of hands at all, they are surely to be numbered among the laity.” For more data on the abundant practice of women deaconesses, see Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 25-162.

woman or an older/elder widow as in 1 Tim 5:2, or it can refer to a wife of a church elder, as “*episcopa*” was used for the wife of a bishop, and in the case of “*deaconissa*” for the wife of a deacon.³

Status of Women Ordination in Early Church Era Before Nicea (AD 325)

This chapter focuses on writers who mentioned women who had some function in the early Christian congregations from the time of John the Revelator until the Council of Nicea in AD 325. It is possible that more women were involved in the leadership of the church, but due to the scarcity of materials, the evidence is limited to the writers whose works have survived the many centuries of Christian history.

John the Revelator (ca. 95)

The Book of Revelation mentioned a self-proclaimed prophetess, \who was like the Old Testament “Jezebel,” who exercised leadership and authoritative “teaching” (*didasko*) in the church of Thyatira, a city 100 miles away from Ephesus (Rev 2:14). The impact of her teachings resulted in immoral behavior and eating of food sacrificed to idols. The Scripture sharply rebuked this church for allowing the leadership of this woman.

Later in Revelation the church is warned about a great controversy between a pure woman, representing the true church, and an immoral woman, representing the false church. The immoral woman leads the governments of the world in a final battle against God’s people for world dominance (Rev. 12, 17). These examples show that the Bible does not tolerate this kind of leadership in the church.

Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 180)

The first mention of women as performing the duty of a presbyter (elder)⁴ in the post-Apostolic time is found among the gnostic Christians. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, told of a certain gnostic magician, Marcus, who allowed women to consecrate the wine during the Eucharist.

³ Gregory the Great in his *Dialogues* (written ca. AD 590) told of a priest, Nursinus, who from the time of his ordination, loved his “*presbytera*” as a sister, but avoided sharing a bed with her. (Gregory, *Dialogues* 4:11, ed. Edmund Gardner, London: 1911, p. 190). The Council of Tours in 567 ruled: “If a presbyter be found with his ‘*presbytera*’ or a deacon with his ‘*deaconissa*’ or a subdeacon with his ‘*subdeaconissa*,’ he must be considered excommunicated for a full year and removed from every clerical office.” Canon 13 of Tours said: “If an ‘*episcopus*’ does not have an ‘*episcopa*,’ let no throng of women follow him.”

But there is another among these heretics, Marcus by name, who ... is a perfect adept in magical impostures, and by this means drawing away a great number of men, and not a few women, he has induced them to join themselves to him, as to one who is possessed of the greatest knowledge and perfection, and who has received the highest power from the invisible and ineffable regions above.... Pretending to consecrate cups mixed with wine, and protracting to great length the word of invocation, he contrives to give them a purple and reddish colour.... [H]anding mixed cups to the women, he bids them consecrate these in his presence. When this has been done, he himself produces another cup of much larger size than that which the deluded woman has consecrated, and pouring from the smaller one consecrated by the woman into that which has been brought forward by himself ... he then appears a worker of wonders when the large cup is seen to have been filled out of the small one, so as even to overflow by what has been obtained from it. By accomplishing several other similar things, he has completely deceived many, and drawn them away after him.

It appears probable enough that this man possesses a demon as his familiar spirit.... He devotes himself especially to women, and those such as are well-bred, and elegantly attired, and of great wealth, whom he frequently seeks to draw after him, by addressing them in such seductive words.... "Receive from me a spouse, and become receptive of him, while thou art received by him. Behold Charis has descended upon thee; open thy mouth and prophesy." On the woman replying, "I have never at any time prophesied, nor do I know how to prophesy;" then engaging, for the second time, in certain invocations, so as to astound his deluded victim, he says to her, "Open thy mouth, speak whatsoever occurs to thee, and thou shalt prophesy." She then, vainly puffed up and elated by these words, and greatly excited in soul by the expectation that it is herself who is to prophesy, her heart beating violently [from emotion], reaches the requisite pitch of audacity, and idly as well as impudently utters some nonsense as it happens to occur to her, such as might be expected from one heated by an empty spirit.... Henceforth she reckons herself a prophetess, and expresses her thanks to Marcus for having imparted to her of his own Charis. She then makes the effort to reward him, not only by the gift of her possessions (in which way he has collected a very large fortune), but also by yielding up to him her person, desiring in every way to be united to him, that she may become altogether one with him.⁵

This account shows that the women of the Gnostic teacher Marcus are not called priests or church leaders. However, they are described as participating in functions usually associated with deacons (passing around cups) or elders (pronouncing the blessing on cups). They also exercise glossolalia and count themselves as prophetesses.

⁴ Elder (*presbyteros*) was a main leadership position in the early Christian church (see Titus 1:5-9; 1 Tim 5:17-22, 1 Pet 5:1-5). It is synonymous with the title "bishop" (*episcopos*), which means "overseer" (see 1 Tim 3:1-5). Any difference in rank between *presbyteros* and *episcopos* is of later date.

⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.13.1-4, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) 1:334-5. Emphases mine. From now on cited as ANF.

Tertullian (ca. 200)

In his *The Prescription of Heretics*, 41, written around AD 200, Tertullian talked against the Gnostic Christians⁶ and mentioned the involvement of women in church worship and management.

I must not omit an account of the conduct also of the heretics—how frivolous it is, how worldly, how merely human, without seriousness, without authority, without discipline, as suits their creed. . . . All are puffed up, all offer you knowledge. Their catechumens are perfect before they are full taught. The very women of these heretics, how wanton they are! For they are bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures—it may be even to baptize. Their ordinations are carelessly administered, capricious, changeable. At one time they put *novices* in office; at another time, men who are bound to some secular employment; at another, persons who have apostatized from us, to bind them by vainglory, since they cannot by the truth. Nowhere is promotion easier than in the camp of rebels, where the mere fact of being there is a foremost service. And so it comes to pass that to-day one man is their bishop, to-morrow another; to-day he is a deacon who to-morrow is a reader; to-day he is a presbyter who tomorrow is a layman. For even on laymen do they impose the functions of priesthood.”⁷

It should be noted that Tertullian is not saying that women were ordained for church office in Gnostic circles, but in fact that “men who are bound to some secular employment” (*saeculo obstrictos*) or “novices” (*neophitos* – not *neophitas*) were so ordained. Although women seem to have had more opportunity to interact among Gnostics than in catholic churches, being able to “teach” (*docere*), “dispute” (*contendere*), enact exorcisms, and undertake cures (healing), Tertullian does not mention the official ordination of women for leadership of church presbytery, not even among the Gnostics. His statement that they were allowed “perhaps even to baptize (*fortasse an et tingere*)” shows that he cannot be sure that women were actually engaging in this practice.⁸

In his work *On Veiling Virgins* (ca. AD 202), Tertullian reveals his position concerning women’s involvement in church affairs in general. “It is not permissible for a woman to speak in

⁶ In chapter 40 Tertullian explained the major doctrinal error of these heretics and in ch. 42 he mentioned Gnostic teachers Valentinus and Marcion by name: “They either pretend that there is another god in opposition to the Creator, or, even if they acknowledge that the Creator is the one only God, they treat of Him as a different being from what He is in truth.... Only deprive them of the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the divinity of the Creator, and they have not another objection to talk about.... I am greatly in error if they do not amongst themselves swerve even from their own regulations, forasmuch as every man, just as it suits his own temper, modifies the traditions he has received after the same fashion as the man who handed them down did, when he moulded them according to his own will” (Tertullian, *The Prescription of Heretics* 40, 42, in ANF 3:263-4).

⁷ Tertullian, *The Prescription of Heretics* 41, in ANF 3:263.

⁸ See also Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 174.

church, nor may she teach, baptize, offer, or claim for herself any function proper to a man, and least of all the office of priest.”⁹

In AD 206 Tertullian became a sympathizer of Montanism, a charismatic Christian sect, which arose out of dissatisfaction with the monarchical Episcopalian structure Christianity was developing. The Montanists believed that the true church is characterized not so much by the succession of elders and bishops but by the continuation of the gift of prophecy in the church. This movement arose as early as AD 150 through the preaching and prophesying of Montanus. After Montanus’s death around AD 170, he was succeeded by two women prophetesses, Prisca and Maximilliana. About Prisca, Tertullian wrote, “Again through the holy prophetess Prisca is the gospel preached in this way, that the holy minister knows to minister sanctity. ‘Purity’ she says, ‘brings harmony, and they see visions and, turning their face to the ground, they also hear distinct voices, as salutary as they are mysterious.’”¹⁰

Besides being a prophet, Montanus was a chief organizer of the local church structures in Phrygia.¹¹ He was accompanied by Theodotus, who is called “the first administrator” (*epitropos*), and some other men who were involved in overseeing and organizing Montanist gatherings.¹² Tertullian reports that the bishop of Rome [probably Victor I] for a while acknowledged the prophetic gift of Montanus.¹³

By AD 207 Tertullian became completely convinced of the authenticity of the prophetic ministry of Montanist prophets and prophetesses. In spite of many comments he made on Montanists, their prophecies, and their practices, including the activities of their women, he never mentions their ordination for an elder or pastoral position. In fact, Montanists are never recorded as even having bishops or elders. Douglas Powell argues that Montanists would have open air meetings to talk about spiritual things and prophetic revelations, but they were technically not schismatic from the main church.¹⁴ Their attitude toward women elders and

⁹ Tertullian, *On Veiling Virgins* 9, in ANF 4:33.

¹⁰ Tertullian, *On Exhortation to Chastity* 10, in ANF 4:56.

¹¹ See Anne Jensen, “Prisca – Maximilla – Montanus: Who Was the Founder of Montanism?” *Studia Patristica* 26 (1993): 147-150.

¹² According to the testimony of Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* V: 3.4 and 16.14; see Jensen in *Studia Patristica* 26 (1993): 148.

¹³ “...the Bishop of Rome had acknowledged the prophetic gifts of Montanus, Prisca, and Maximilla, and, in consequence of the acknowledgment, had bestowed his peace on the churches of Asia and Phrygia.” (Tertullian, *On Exhortation to Chastity* 10, in ANF 4:56).

¹⁴ Douglas Powell, “Tertullianists and Cataphrygians” in *Vigiliae Christianae* 29 (1975): 37-8.

women bishops would be similar to that of the Catholics. After his conversion to Montanism, Tertullian continued affirming that women ought not to lead in the church but can only prophesy and relate visions from God. Commenting on Paul's instructions about women, he wrote:

“In precisely the same manner, when enjoining on women silence in the church, that they speak not for the mere sake of learning [1 Cor 14:34-5] (although that even they have the right of prophesying, he has already shown when he covers the woman that prophesies with a veil [1 Cor 11:5-6]), he goes to the law for his sanction that woman should be under obedience.”¹⁵

Tertullian believed that the prophetic gift in the church is an indication of the true religion and that the true Christian church should never be without prophets.¹⁶ It is estimated that Prisca and Maximilla died before AD 207. However, other prophets and prophetesses succeeded them. Here is Tertullian's description of the prophetic gift of one of the Montanist prophetesses who succeeded Prisca and Maximilliana.

We have now amongst us a sister whose lot it has been to be favoured with sundry gifts of revelation, which she experiences in the Spirit by ecstatic vision amidst the sacred rites of the Lord's day in the church: she converses with angels, and sometimes even with the Lord; she both sees and hears mysterious communications; some men's hearts she understands, and to them who are in need she distributes remedies. Whether it be in the reading of Scriptures, or in the chanting of psalms, or in the preaching of sermons, or in the offering up of prayers, in all these religious services matter and opportunity are afforded to her of seeing visions. It may possibly have happened to us, whilst this sister of ours was rapt in the Spirit, that we had discoursed in some ineffable way about the soul. After the people are dismissed at the conclusion of the sacred services, she is in the regular habit of reporting to us whatever things she may have seen in vision (for all her communications are examined with the most scrupulous care, in order that their truth may be probed). “Amongst other things,” says she, “there has been shown to me a soul in bodily shape, and a spirit has been in the habit of appearing to me; not, however, a void and empty illusion, but such as would offer itself to be even grasped by the hand, soft and transparent and of an ethereal colour, and in form resembling that of a human being in every respect.” This was her vision, and for her witness there was God; and the apostle most assuredly foretold that there were to be “spiritual gifts” in the church.¹⁷

Two things are striking in this account. First, from a purely biblical perspective this would be considered a false prophecy.¹⁸ It is also possible that a.) this vision was wrongly interpreted or incorrectly reported by Tertullian, b.) she might have had the prophetic gift before

¹⁵ Tertullian, *Against Marcion* Book 5:8.11, in ANF 3:446-7 (written around AD 211).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 447.

¹⁷ Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul* 9, in ANF 3:188.

¹⁸ The vision presented an unbiblical view of human soul.

but fabricated this particular vision, or c.) this Montanist visionary was a false prophet altogether.

Whatever might be the case, the visions of a Montanist prophetess seem to be examined by the elders *after* the worship service, after the congregation was dismissed.¹⁹

All the reports by Tertullian do not reveal that the Montanist prophetesses exercised a role of pastoral headship or elder/presbyter in the second and early third century.²⁰ Madigan and Osiek note: “While Tertullian generally, and often vehemently, opposes women exercising a teaching role, he does recognize ... that some women (like Prisca), under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, do utter authoritative prophecies. Tertullian places Prisca’s oracle as an authority alongside the Hebrew Scriptures and the Apostle [Paul]. All are affected by the action of the Holy Spirit.”²¹

Origen of Alexandria (ca. 180-254)

In a fragment of Origen’s commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:34, he tried to harmonize the fact that women were prophetesses in the early church but yet forbidden to speak in the assembly. He argues that women in the New Testament would prophesy after the church service or outside of the church building.

If the daughters of Philip prophesied, at least they did not speak in the assemblies; for we do not find this fact in evidence in the Acts of the Apostles. Much less in the Old Testament. It is said that Deborah was a prophetess.... There is no evidence that Deborah delivered speeches to the people, as did Jeremiah and Isaiah. Huldah, who was a prophetess, did not speak to the people, but only to a man, who consulted her at home. The gospel itself mentions a prophetess Anna ... but she did not speak publicly. Even if it is granted to a woman to show the sign of prophecy, she is nevertheless not permitted to speak in an assembly. When Miriam the prophetess spoke, she was leading a choir of women.... For [as Paul declares] “I do not permit a woman to teach,” and even less “to tell a man what to do.”²²

¹⁹ Because of its insistence on strictly charismatic leadership and because of very loose organizational structure, the Montanist movement virtually disappeared by the early fifth century.

²⁰ Later charismatic movements that developed in the fourth century out of Montanism, such as the Cataphrygians and Pepuzians, went further in their permissiveness to female leadership and even appointed women as elders and bishops.

²¹ Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 179.

²² Origen, *Fragmenta ex commentariis in epistulam I ad Corinthios*, Greek text published in Claude Jenkins, “Documents: Origen on I Corinthians. Part 4,” in *Journal of Theological Studies* 10 (1909): 41-42. English translation from Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 1976), 82.

Interpreting the passages in 1 Cor 14:34 and 1 Cor 11:5, Tertullian and Origen disagree. Origen reasons that women who had the gift of prophesy in the New Testament church prophesied outside or *after* the assemblies, in private homes. Tertullian, on the other hand, does not have a problem with women prophesying in the church, as long as they have a veil on their head, as a sign of submission. They both affirmed that women can be useful in the church ministry of charity and assistance as deaconesses, just like Phoebe, mentioned in Rom 16:1.²³

Firmilian (ca. 255)

Firmilian, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, wrote a letter to Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, around 255 criticizing the Bishop of Rome, Stephan (254-257), who affirmed that a baptism given by certain unorthodox groups was valid.²⁴ Firmilian tries to prove that the Holy Ghost cannot come through the ministry of heretical believers, separated from the Catholic Church. Finally, he attempts to prove his point by describing an event involving an ecstatic female visionary possessed by a demon, who allegedly attempted to perform the Eucharist and baptism in her congregation. Here is the full account:

But I wish to relate to you *some facts* concerning a circumstance, which occurred among us, pertaining to this very matter. About two-and-twenty years ago, in the times after the Emperor Alexander [AD 223] ... throughout Cappadocia and Pontus... [not in Phrygia where the Montanists lived]—there arose among us [the orthodox churches] on a sudden a certain woman, who in a state of ecstasy announced herself as a prophetess, and acted as if filled with the Holy Ghost. And she was so moved by the impetus of the principal demons, that for a long time she made anxious and deceived the brotherhood, accomplishing certain wonderful and portentous things, and promised that she would cause the earth to be shaken.

Here also she deceived one of the presbyters, a countryman, and another, a deacon, so that they had intercourse with that same woman, which was shortly afterwards detected. For on a sudden there appeared unto her one of the exorcists, a man approved and always of good conversation in respect of religious discipline; who, stimulated by the exhortation also of very many brethren who were themselves strong and praiseworthy in the faith, raised himself up against that wicked spirit to overcome it.... [T]hat exorcist, inspired by God's grace, bravely resisted, and showed that that which was before thought holy, was

²³ Origen, *Commentary on Romans* 10. 17, in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation; Origen*, ed. Thomas Schaek, 2 vols. (Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 2:290-1. Origen's commentary on Romans is only preserved in a Latin version of the monk Rufinus (AD 350-410). The Latin word used to describe Phoebe's service is *ministra*—helper, assistant.

²⁴ It is not known whether pope Stephan acknowledged the baptism of Gnostics or only Montanists, like pope Victor did before him (see Tertullian, *On Exhortation to Chastity* 10, in ANF 4:56). Firmilian seems to claim that Bishop Stephan accepted the baptism of the Gnostics as well as of the Montanists. Firmilian attempts to discredit the Montanists by associating them with Gnostics and accusing them of denying Christ and the Holy Spirit.

indeed a most wicked spirit.

But that woman, who previously by wiles and deceitfulness of the demon was attempting many things for the deceiving of the faithful, among other things by which she had deceived many, also had frequently dared this: to pretend that with an invocation not to be contemned she sanctified bread and celebrated the Eucharist, and to offer sacrifice to the Lord, not without the sacrament of the accustomed utterance; and also to baptize many, making use of the usual and lawful words of interrogation, that nothing might seem to be different from the ecclesiastical rule.²⁵

The visionary that Firmilian had in mind was probably not a Montanist, for he “labels her not as a member of a deviant group but as a deviant within a church itself.”²⁶

Didascalia Apostolorum (ca. 200-250)

Didascalia Apostolorum (Teaching of the Apostles) is one of the more developed texts of church order from the early church written in Greek in Syria during the first half of the third century. Only a complete Syriac and a partial Latin translation survive. Order 15 of the *Didascalia* prohibits women to perform baptism.

We do not advise a woman to baptize or to be baptized by a woman, for that is transgression of the commandments, and there is great danger to her who baptizeth and also to him who is baptized. For it were lawful to be baptized by a woman, our Lord Jesus would have been baptized by Mary His mother; but he was baptized by John... [T]herefore do not bring danger on yourselves, brothers and sisters, acting beyond the law of the Gospel.²⁷

Status of Women and Ordination in the Early Church Era after 325

In this section we are continuing to trace known cases of women ordained as, or exercising the function of, a priest, elder/presbyter or bishop. This part of the study will be more topical than chronological, although we will try to follow chronology of events as much as possible. There were three major groups of Christians who appointed women as leaders in post-Nicene Christianity. These are Pepuzians, Priscillians and some Celtic Christians, followers of St. Brigit. “Presbyteresses” and “Presidentesses” were mentioned among some Greek Churches, although their role differed from the male presbyters and bishops.

²⁵ Firmilian, *Epistle 74*: 10 (AD 255) to Cyprian, in ANF 5:392-3.

²⁶ Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 182.

²⁷ *Didascalia Apostolorum* 15, translated into English by Margaret Gibson and Dunlop Smith (London: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 75.

Women Presbyters among Heretical Movements

The most notorious examples of woman elders in the mainstream Christian churches were in several heretical movements that arose in the fourth century, favoring equality among men and women in ecclesial ministries. Most famous of these movements was a sect of Pepuzians from Phrygia in central Asia Minor.

Pepuzians

Pepuzians were members of a Phrygian religious movement that arose in the early fourth century in the small town of Pepuza in Asia Minor. Although they differed in many things from their predecessors, Pepuzians are thought to be the direct spiritual descendent of the Montanists. Placing a strong emphasis on ecstatic visions and prophecies, Pepuzians claimed that one of their prophetesses (probably Quintilla) had seen Christ dressed like a woman visiting her in a dream in the town of Pepuza. According to the Pepuzian prophetess, Jesus took the appearance of a woman and shared her bed with her. Based on this vision and because their prophetess was a woman, Pepuzians freely ordained women as their bishops and priests. Although they and the Cataphrygians both claimed Montanists as their predecessors, Pepuzians seem to differ from Cataphrygians and from early Montanism in general.²⁸

In his principal work, *Adversus Haeresis* or *Panarion* (Medicine Box), Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis on Cyprus (ca. 380), described Cataphrygians and Pepuzians as two heretical sects related to the Montanists.²⁹ Epiphanius describes the sect of the Pepuzians as follows:

Their founder is Quintilla along with Priscilla, the same as Cataphrygians. They bring with them many useless testimonies, attributing special grace to Eve because she first ate of the tree of knowledge. They acknowledge the sister of Moses as a prophetess as support for their practice of appointing women to the clergy. Also, they say, Philip had four daughters who prophesied. Often in their assembly seven virgins dressed in white enter carrying lamps, having come in to prophesy to ecstasy; they pretend to weep as if showing the grief of repentance by shedding tears and by their appearance lamenting human life. Women among them are bishops, presbyters and the rest, they say that none of this makes any difference because “in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female.”³⁰

²⁸ See John Chapman, “Montanists” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10, New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10521a.htm>> (accessed May 23, 2013).

²⁹ *Adversus Haeresis* is very polemical and, according to several scholars (Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 164), sometimes careless and inaccurate.

³⁰ Translation from PG 41:879-82. See also Epiphanius, *Against Heresies* 49.2.1-3, in Frank Williams, ed., *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, 2 vols., 2nd edition (Boston: Brill, 2009), 2:22, 23.

Quintilla or Priscilla—I cannot say for certain but one of them, as I said, slept in Pepuza, and as the deluded woman said, Christ came to her and slept beside her, thus “Christ came in the form of a woman”, she said, “dressed in a white robe, imbued me wisdom, and revealed to me that this place is holy, and that Jerusalem will descend from heaven here.”³¹

... and so they resort there, celebrate certain mysteries on the site ... [but] this breed is also to be found in Cappadocia and Galatia—and ... for the most part, in Constantinople.³²

Augustine in his collection of heresies written for Quodvultdeum, bishop of Carthage, also speaks of the Pepuzians mentioned by Epiphanius. Drawing largely from Epiphanius’s account, Augustine equally distinguishes between Cataphrygians and Pepuzians. These two groups (both descending from Montanism) diverged in some practices and beliefs from one another and from the original teaching and practices of Montanus. Cataphrygians, who seem to be closer to the original Montanism, are not mentioned as having ordained their women, while Pepuzians are. Pepuzians were engaged in some other eccentric beliefs and practices, further diverging from Cataphrygians. Here is Augustine’s description of both movements.

The originators of Cataphrygians were Montanus the Paraclete, and two prophetesses *Prisca and Maximilla*. They were given this name by the province of Phrygia, in which they used to exist and live; however, now they have spread and have their people in all places. They believe they received the advent of the Holy Spirit promised from the Lord which was also in the Apostles. Second marriage they esteem to be fornication, not permitted by the Apostle Paul.³³

The Pepuzians or Quntillians are named from a certain place, which Epiphanius says was a deserted city. They think it is a divine thing, and call it Jerusalem. They give such principality to women that they even honor them with priesthood. They say that *Quintilla* and *Priscilla* in this city of *Pepuza* saw Christ revealed to them in the form of a woman. That’s why they are also called Quintillians. They believe this was the city of Montanus and of their prophetesses *Prisca and Maximilla*.³⁴

Almost identical descriptions of Pepuzians and Cataphrygians are also found in the sixth-century document *Praedestinatus sive Praedestinatorum Haeresis*.³⁵ This work repeats almost verbatim Augustine’s description of Pepuzians. The anonymous writer makes a clear

³¹ Ibid., 49.1, in Williams, 2:22.

³² Ibid., 48.14.1, in Williams, 2:20.

³³ Augustine, *De Haeresibus* in PL 42:39 (ca. 428) <http://www.augustinus.it/latino/eresie/eresie.htm>

³⁴ Ibid., 39, 40.

³⁵ Pseudo-Augustine, *Praedestinatus sive Praedestinatorum Haeresis* 27, in PL 53: 578; some argue that the anonymous author of this work was Arnobius the Younger (see e.g. F. Gori, *Il Praedestinatus di Arnobio il Giovane* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1999).

distinction between Cataphrygians and Pepuzians and argues that Cataphrygians are the original descendants of Montanism, while Pepuzians seem to be an offshoot from them and believe themselves better than Cataphrygians.³⁶ Finally, in the book against heresies written by John of Damascus (676-749), we read:

The Pepuzians, who are also called Quintillians — are two different heresies. Although counted among the Cataphrygians, the Pepuzians believe several diverse things they do not. They hold in divine honor Pepuza, an uninhabited town between Galatia and Cappadocia, and Phrygia they say to be Jerusalem.... [T]hey allow women to be teachers and priests.”³⁷

From all these various sources we can summarize that Pepuzians were an ascetic and charismatic offshoot of Montanists. They believed in the importance of Pepuza and the prophecy of their female prophet Quintilla. On the account of a vision of a female-like Christ, they assumed that women could be elders and bishops in their congregations. Most of the early Christian writers consider their beliefs and practices unorthodox.

Priscillianism

Priscillianism was a movement begun by bishop Priscillius in Spain around AD 370 and spread rapidly throughout the entire country and from there to southern Gaul. Priscillians were Manicheans in doctrine. Their attitude toward matter and the body made gender a matter of indifference in many respects. Manicheans, like some Gnostics, taught that the material world, material body, and thus male and female genders are unimportant. This led some Manicheans like Priscillian to appoint women as leaders in their groups, equal to men.³⁸ The Synod of Saragossa (AD 380) and the Synod of Nimes (AD 394) were called to counter the abuses of Priscillian and his associates. Here is the text of the first synod of Saragossa: “Let all believing women who belong to the Catholic Church absent themselves from lectures and conventicles of foreign men, and from women giving lectures, either out of zeal for teaching or learning, since

³⁶ Both sects are accused of drawing child’s blood and mixing it with bread as a part of a Eucharistic ceremony. Jerome believed such reports were untrue. Jerome, Epistle 41.

³⁷ John of Damascus, *On Heresies*, in PG 94: 707-9.

³⁸ See Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 183-185.

this is what the Apostle commands. [1 Cor 14:34 and 1 Tim 2:12: ‘I permit no woman to teach’]³⁹

Priscillianism also spread into Southern France. One passage from the synod of Nîmes reads:

The following was suggested by certain individuals, that contrary to apostolic teaching, unbeknownst, women seemed to have been assumed into Levitical service (*in ministerium ... leviticam videantur adsumptae*) in some place or another. Ecclesiastical discipline does not permit this because it is inappropriate and such ordination should be undone when it is effected contrary to reason. It should be seen that no one so presume in the future.⁴⁰

Collyridians

Collyridianism was an obscure early Christian heretical movement whose adherents apparently worshiped the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, as a goddess. The main source of information about them comes from Epiphanius of Salamis, who wrote about them in his *Panarion* of about AD 375. According to Epiphanius, certain women in then-largely-pagan Arabia syncretized indigenous beliefs with the worship of Mary, and offered little cakes or bread-rolls to her. Epiphanius states that Collyridianism originated in Thrace and Scythia, although it may have first traveled to those regions from Syria or Asia Minor. Little else is known. Here is the passage by Epiphanius:

Others hold this nonsense about the holy ever-Virgin: acting thunderstruck and crazy, they have been and still are eager to put her in the place of God. For it is related that some women in Arabia, who came from the region of Thrace, put forward this silly idea: they prepare a kind of cake in the name of the ever-Virgin, assemble together, and in the name of the holy Virgin they attempt to undertake a deed that is irreverent and blasphemous beyond measure—in her name they function as priests for women.⁴¹

It was a common practice among Mesopotamian pagans to worship the goddess Ishtar by baking a cake for her.⁴² Such practice is even described in the Bible (Jer 7:18, 44:19). It

³⁹ Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum* 3. 633-4, translated in Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 184.

⁴⁰ *Concilia Galliae in Corpus Christianorum* (Latin) 148A (1964): 50, translated in Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 185.

⁴¹ Epiphanius, *Against Heresies* 78. 23. 2-4 and 79. 1. 6 in Williams, 2: 635 and 637.

⁴² William A. Dever, *Did God have a wife? Archeology and folk religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 234.

seems that some pagans newly converted to Christianity replaced Ishtar or another female goddess with Mary and extended the female priesthood into the Christian churches.

Women Presbyters in the Mainline Churches

The Council of Laodicea

The Council of Laodicea was a regional synod of approximately thirty clerics from Asia Minor that assembled about AD 360–364 in Laodicea, Phrygia Pacatiana. It discussed church policies and departures from church practice. Various synods met in Laodicea between 360 and 400, and the finalized version of the text we have today probably took from sometime in the late fourth century.

Canons 11 and 45 of the Council of Laodicea prohibit women to be ordained or to approach the altar during the Eucharist celebration. Canon 11 stated “those who are called presbyteresses or presidentesses should not be ordained in the church.” Canon 45 ruled “*women should not approach the altar.*”⁴³

This text has been a source of polemic among certain historians as to the nature and role of the female presbyters and female presidents referred to in these canons. The issue is best resolved if one is reminded of an early Christian practice in the Eastern churches of having women in the congregation that were called presbyteresses (*presbytidas*) and presidentesses (*prokathemenas*—literally “sitting in front”). This name was usually given to mature elderly women, usually widows, responsible for mentorship, counseling, and teaching of younger women.⁴⁴ In fact, the older version of the Canon 11 states: “*Widows called presidents shall not be appointed in churches.*”⁴⁵

⁴³ *Canons of the Council of Laodicea* in Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum* (Paris: H. Welter, 1902), 2: 565-6; English translation in NPNF II, 14: 130-1

⁴⁴ The word “presbytera” or “presbytida” can also refer to an elder woman or a widow, as in Titus 3:2 and 1 Tim 5: 2, or a wife of the church elder, as “episcopa” was used for the wife of a bishop, and “deaconissa” for the wife of a deacon. Gregory the Great in his *Dialogues* (ca. 590) wrote of a priest, Nursinus, who from the time of his ordination loved his “presbytera” as a sister, but avoided sharing a bed with her (Gregory, *Dialogues* 4:11, ed. Edmund Gardner, London: 1911, p. 190). The Council of Tours in 567 declared, “If a presbyter be found with his ‘presbytera’ or a deacon with his ‘deaconissa’ or a subdeacon with his ‘subdeaconissa,’ he must be considered excommunicated for a full year and removed from every clerical office.” Canon 13 of Tours read: “If an ‘episcopus’ does not have an ‘episcopa,’ let no throng of women follow him.” In this case it is more likely that we are dealing with the widows.

⁴⁵ *Canons of the Council of Laodicea* in NPNF II, 14: 130.

Presbytidas were the head deaconesses and leaders of the orders of widows. It is important to notice that the Laodicean canons do not prohibit women from being called *presbytidas* or “presidentesses” but only forbid these women from being officially ordained.⁴⁶ Drawing from an early Church Father, Epiphanius of Salamis, the editors of the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* offer an instructive comment on the identity of these female “presidents”:

...this canon has received very different interpretations. In the first place, what is the meaning of the words *πρεσβύτιδες* and *προκαθήμεναι* (“presbytides” and female presidents)? I think the first light is thrown on the subject by Epiphanius, who in his treatise against the Collyridians (*Hær.*, lxxix. 4) says that “women had never been allowed to offer sacrifice, as the Collyridians presumed to do, but were only allowed to minister. Therefore there were only deaconesses in the Church, and even if the oldest among them were called ‘presbytides,’ this term must be clearly distinguished from presbyteresses. The latter would mean priestesses (*ιερίσσαι*), but ‘presbytides’ only designated their age, as seniors.” According to this, the canon appears to treat of the superior deaconesses who were the overseers (*προκαθήμεναι*) of the other deaconesses; and the further words of the text may then probably mean that in future no more such superior deaconesses or eldresses were to be appointed, probably because they had often outstepped their authority.⁴⁷

It seems clear from Epiphanius’s account that the *presbytidas* was the oldest deaconess and the overseer of other deaconesses. These women are not to be officially ordained, according to the Council of Laodicea.

Other Women Leaders in the Early Churches

Other mentions of women presbyters confirm this understanding of the role of *presbytidas* in the early church. An early fifth century Christian document of Eastern provenance entitled *Testamentum Domini* (ca. 410) offers further instruction on the nature of “elder women” (*presbytdas*) and “presidentesses” in the early Church. Here is an informative paragraph: “Let the position of the bishop be near the place that is called the front stage (atrium). Likewise, let the

⁴⁶ The word *πρεσβύτιδας* appears in Titus 2:3 describing aged and mature women who were commanded by Paul to be “teachers of good things ... teaching young women how to love their husbands and children.” Due to their age, maturity, and experience, these women had a special role in the congregation as mentors and counselors. The word *προκαθήμενας* has a meaning of “presiding” or “taking care” of someone or something.

⁴⁷ “Notes on Canon 11 of the Council of Laodicea,” in NPNF II, 14: 130.

place of the widows, who are said to have precedence in sitting (*praecedentiam sessionis*) be in the same place.”⁴⁸

In the early Churches the widows were especially esteemed as leaders of women, so that they even had a seat next to the bishops in the front rows. However, councils such as Laodicea prohibited them from being officially ordained and from handling Eucharistic sacraments.

Canon of Fulgentius Ferrandus (ca. 540), deacon of Carthage, clarifies even further the relationship between female presbyters and widows in the early churches: “it is not fitting for women who among the Greeks are called presbyteresses (*presbyterae*), and who among us are called widows ... to be appointed as if ordained (*tanquam ordinare*) in the church.”⁴⁹

From these examples, it seems that in the East, widows constituted a special order in the church, taking care of the affairs of the women, and especially instructing young women in charity, love, and obedience to husbands as Paul directs in 1 Tim 5. These church “widows” were often called “presbyteras” or “presbytidas” because of their mentoring influence upon younger women in the church. They were also known as female presidents because of their leadership and mentoring function among other women.

It seems that sometimes these female leaders would overstep their boundaries and canons, such as canon 11 and canon 45 of the Council of Laodicea, which would make sure that the elderly widows do not attempt to perform duties of a male presbyter, such as handling Eucharistic celebration. Also the Council of Laodicea forbade *presbytidas* to be officially ordained, because the New Testament only mentions ordination of the deacons, elders, and bishops, and not of widows.

Celtic Churches

Another example of women’s headship occurred in late fifth century Ireland. St. Brigit (also called Brigid, Bridget, Bride) was abbess of a double abbey, for monks and nuns, in Kildare, County Kildare, Ireland. Born around 453, she died ca. 524-528. She figures in many Irish legends, myths, and stories. Here is the tale of her ordination to the office of bishop:

⁴⁸ *Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, ed. and trans. Ignatius E. Rahmani (Mainz: F. Kirchheim, 1899), 27, quoted in Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 150.

⁴⁹ *Brevatio Canonum*, ed. C. Munier, *Corpus Christianorum* (Latin), 149 (1974): 305.

Brigit went, with some other young women, to Bishop Mél, in Telcha Mide, to take the veil [= to become a religious sister]. The Bishop was happy to oblige and Brigit stayed behind out of humility, so that she might be the last to whom the veil should be given. A beam of fire rose from her head to the ridgepole of the church's ceiling. Bishop Mél asked: "Who is that woman?" MacCaille answered: "She is Brigit." "Come, O holy Brigit," said Bishop Mél, "that the veil may be imposed on your head *before* the other women." Then it happened, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, that the prayer that was read over Brigit was the form of ordination for a bishop. MacCaille said: "The order of a bishop should not be [conferred] on a woman." But Bishop Mél declared: "This lies outside my power because it was through God's doing that this honour that transcends every woman was given her." That is why the men of Ireland give the honour of bishop to Brigit's successor.⁵⁰

From then on Brigit appointed her own bishops in Kildare and bishops in adjacent lands. The Book of Lismore describes Brigit as a "prophetess of Christ" and a woman of action. The Book of Lismore, however, contains a lot of grotesque stories about Brigit, so it is hard to discern fact from fiction in this account. Just prior to her "ordination" by bishop Mél, she plucked her eye out and put it back in the socket of her head as a sign of her prophetic powers. We don't have any other instance of women elders or bishops among Celtic Christians in Ireland.

There is, however, a report of three Roman bishops sending a letter to Lovocat and Cathern, two Breton priests, calling for a ban on women celebrating Mass. This occurred in Northern Gaul in the early sixth century. Here is the text of the letter sent to the Breton priests:

We have learned through the report of that venerable man the priest Speratus that you do not stop carrying portable altars around the dwellings in the territories of different cities, and that you presume to celebrate masses there with women, whom you call *conhospitae* [joint hostesses] and whom you admit to the divine sacrifice to such an extent that while you distribute the Eucharist they hold the chalices in your presence and presume to administer the Blood of Christ to the people of God. This novelty and unheard-of superstition saddens us not a little, as such a horrendous sect, which by no means has ever existed in Gaul, seems to be emerging in our times. This sect the Eastern Fathers called the Pepodian [Pepuzians].... [B]ecause this sect presumed to have women associates in the divine sacrifice, the fathers ordered that anyone who wished to be involved in this error be put outside ecclesiastical communion.⁵¹

The letter presumes the context of house churches: the priests carry portable altars, probably on carts, from home to home. The bishops accuse the two priests of allowing women to

⁵⁰ *Leabhar Breac – On the Life of Brigit*, translated from the Gaelic by Whitley Stokes, in *Lives of the Saints; From the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), 188. <http://www.ministryforwomen.org/latin/brigit.asp> (accessed July 19, 2013).

⁵¹ Text and French translation in Pierre de Labriolle, *Les sources de l'histoire du montanisme* (Paris: Leroux, 1913), 226-8, English translation in Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 188.

help them by holding the chalice with the consecrated blood for people to drink from during the Eucharist. The letter mentions the title given to such a ministering woman: *'conhospita,'* Latin for 'co-hostess.'

It is unclear where this practice comes from. Is this the influence of Celtic Churches, which migrated from Asia Minor to Gaul? Is this really an influence of Pepuzians, as the bishops who wrote the letter presumed? We have seen that many Christians in Asia Minor gave certain prominence to female *presbytidias* and that sometimes this custom would be carried too far as to have these women participate in the rite of Eucharist. This might be connected with the Celtic Churches coming from the East, for there was a strong connection between churches in Gaul and churches in Asia Minor.

The Council of Orange in Gaul and Council of Epaone in Burgundy (AD 517), with strong presence of Eastern Arian and Celtic Christians, both took positions against the ordination or consecration of women: The Council of Orange ruled: "Female Deacons (Diaconae) are by no means to be ordained. If there are any who have already been ordained, let them submit their heads to the benediction that is granted to laity."⁵² The Council of Epaone declared: "We wholly abolish throughout our region the consecration of widows, who are called deacon[esse]s (*diaconas*)."⁵³

The influence of Greek Christianity and the tendency to over-involve women during the church service was spread even in Southern Italy, where Greek colonies were numerous. Roman Bishops tried to discipline such practices. Occasional overstepping of the boundaries by the female presbyters is mentioned on several instances. Epistle 14 of Pope Gelasius, dated March 11, 494, addressed "to all episcopates established in Lucania, Bruttium, and Sicilia" (vs.1), says the following in verse 26: "Nevertheless we have heard to our annoyance that divine affairs have come to such a low state that women are encouraged to officiate at the sacred altars, and to take part in all matters imputed to the offices of the male sex, to which they do not belong."⁵⁴

⁵² Concillia Galliae 314 -506, in *Corpus Christianorum* (Latin) 148 (1963): 84 translated in Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 145.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 148a (1963): 163-165, translated in Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 146.

⁵⁴ Gelasius, Epistle 14: 1, 26 in *Epistulae Romanorum Pontificum Genuinae* (Braunsburg: E. Peter, 1874), 360-74, translated by Mary Ann Rossi, "Priesthood, Precedent, and Prejudice. On Recovering the Women Priests of Early Christianity," in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Spring 1991, 81.

It seems that this practice of having women deaconesses hold the chalice did not die among Christians in Gaul until the ninth century. The Sixth Council of Paris, ca. 829, says it has learned “that in certain of our provinces, contrary to divine law and canon law, women of their own accord go to the holy altars, and boldly touch the sacred vessels, and give the sacred vestments to priests, and what is even more improper and unsuitable, they give to the people the body and blood of the Lord.... That women should not go to the altar is fully found in Canon 44 of the Council of Laodicea, and in the decrees of Pope Gelasius XXVI.”⁵⁵

Some felt that this custom was a consequence of Brigit’s having being ordained as a bishop, which perhaps encouraged Celtic Christians to include women in the church ceremonies. This is, however, inconclusive, because the account of Brigit is semi-legendary, and there is no evidence that Brigit ordained women for ministry.

Atto, the bishop of Vercelli in Piedmont in the early 900s, wrote to a priest named Ambrose about the meaning of the terms *presbytera* and *diaconal* in the ancient canons. Atto first mentioned that the term could refer to women who had married priests and deacons, but then he also comments that, according to his knowledge, some women used to be caretakers in the churches, baptizing and teaching other women so that men did not need to enter into a scandal of improper relationship with women, especially during baptism [usually performed naked]. When Atto talks about women “presiding” in the churches, he is talking about their usefulness in the work of ministries, baptism, teaching, and conversion of other women. This becomes clear as he proceeds with his letter. Atto admitted that some women began presiding in the churches because of their pagan background. In paganism women were allowed to be engaged in leadership, teaching, and philosophy. However, Atto asserted that the Council of Laodicea prohibited over-stepping of female boundaries. He explained

Because your prudence has moved you to inquire how we should understand “female priest” (*presbyteram*) or “female deacon” (*diaconam*) in the canons: it seems to me that in the primitive church, according to the word of the Lord ‘the harvest was great and laborers few’; religious women used also to be ordained as caretakers (*cultrices ordinabantur*) in the holy church, as Blessed Paul shows in the letter to Romans when he says, “I commend to you my sister Phoebe, who is in ministry of the church at

⁵⁵ See Gary Macy, *The hidden history of women's ordination: female clergy in the medieval West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 62, n. 68.

Cenchrea.” Here it is understood that not only men but also women presided over the churches (*sed etiam feminae praeerint ecclesiis*) because of their great usefulness. For women, long accustomed to the rites of the pagans and instructed also in philosophical teachings, were, for these reasons, converted more easily and taught more liberally in the worship of religion. This the eleventh canon of the Council of Laodicea prohibits when it says it is not fitting for those women who are called female presbyters (*presbyterae*) or presiders (*praesidentes*) to be ordained in the churches. We believe female deacons truly to have been ministers of such things. For we say that a minister is a deacon (*diaconum*), from which we perceive female deacon (*diaconam*) to have been derived.... We believe women were enjoined to the office of baptizing so that the bodies of other women might be handled by them without any deeply felt sense of shame ... just as those who were called female presbyters assumed the office of preaching, leading and teaching [of women], so female deacons had taken up the office of ministry and of baptizing [of women], a custom that no longer is expedient.⁵⁶

Wall and Tomb Inscriptions

There are at least half a dozen frescoes, wall and tomb inscriptions, containing the feminine form of the noun *presbyteros*. It is not easy to determine whether the women in question occupied the position of a widow, a wife of a presbyter, or an actual female church official. The inscription of *Episcopa Q*⁵⁷, *Flavia Vitalia Presbyteria*⁵⁸, *Guilia Runa Presbyterissa*⁵⁹ all can refer to a wife of a bishop or a wife of an elder. One controversial Inscription is associated with *Leta Presbyteria*. This tomb inscription of probably mid-fifth century was found in the city of Tropea, South Italy, where Pope Gelasius complained of violations in the former episcopate of Bruttium. It said: “Sacred to her memory. Leta the ‘presbyteria’ lived 40 years, 8 months, 9 days, for whom her husband set up this tomb. She preceded him in peace on the day before the Ides of May.”⁶⁰ Otranto argues that the husband may not have been a presbyter himself, for he does not call himself that, so the term “presbyteria” here might not mean, as it often does, merely the wife of a presbyter or a widow.⁶¹ Leita might have been a head deaconesses and the leader of other

⁵⁶ Letter of Atto, Bishop of Vercelli to Ambrose the Priest, in PL 134: 114-15, translated in Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 192.

⁵⁷ “Here lies the venerable woman, episcopa Q, buried in peace for five years.” F. Buecheler and A. Riese, eds., *Anthologia Latina, sive Poesis Latinae supplementum* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1964), 64.

⁵⁸ F. Bulic, “Iscrizioni Inediti. Salona (Solin),” *Bollettino di Archeologia e Storia Dalmata* 21 (1989): 147.

⁵⁹ *Guilia Runa presbyterissa quiebit in pace vixit annos L* – “Presbyteress, Guilia Runa here lays in peace, she lived 50 years.” See *L’Annee Epigraphique* 107 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris, 1953), 36.

⁶⁰ Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 193-4.

⁶¹ Giorgio Otranto, “Note sul sacerdozio femminile nell’antichità in margine a una testimonianza di Gelasio I,” in *Vetera Christianorum* 19 (1982): 348, quoted in Mary Ann Rossi, “Priesthood, Precedent, and Prejudice. On

women and was called *presbytera* for that reason. It is also possible that she was a true church elder and was thus one of the examples of head deaconesses overstepping their authority, mentioned in the Church Councils of Laodicea and Epaon. Tropea, where the inscription concerning *Leta Presbytera* was found, is in the area where Pope Gelasius mentioned the existence of women officiating at the altars. However, even in Gelasius' letter there is no indication that there was any woman who was officially ordained as presbyter. Since there is no indication of the Priscillian or Pepuzian influence in this geographic area, it seems most plausible that Leta the "presbytera" was in fact a head deaconess, who perhaps performed some duties outside of her boundaries as a female deacon.

Proponents of women's ordination also point to several frescos from the catacombs dating to the early fourth century, which portray women sitting around a table with bread and a cup on the table or a bishop blessing or supposedly ordaining a woman. However, these frescoes are less than conclusive, and they are subject to various interpretations. So far, there is no evidence that women were ordained as elders or bishops anywhere among the Ante-Nicene Christians.

Position of the Post-Nicene Fathers Towards Women in Ministry

In spite of various accounts of women assisting in Eucharistic rituals or women leading the churches in heretical sects, the mainstream Christian fathers never gave any affirmative voice to such practices. We have already seen how Ante-Nicene fathers saw involvement of women in ministry. This attitude remains the same in the fourth and fifth centuries. Multiple synods and councils of the official church condemn ordination of women. Here are some statements from two major writers of the fourth century, expressing their views on women in ministry.

Epiphanius described his personal take on women elders and bishops:

If women were ordained to be priests for God or to do anything canonical in the church, it should rather have been given to Mary.... She was not even entrusted with baptizing.... It is clear that there is an order of deaconesses in the church, but this is not for the function of the priesthood (*hierateuein*), or anything such to be entrusted to them, but for the sake of female appropriateness either at baptism or for the examination of some illness or trouble and when a woman's body must be unclothed, that it might not be

Recovering the Women Priests of Early Christianity" in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7, no. 1 (spring 1991): 86-7.

seen by the male priest [at nude baptisms] but by the female minister who is appointed by the priest.... Thus regularity and order are carefully provided according to custom. This is also why the Word of God does not permit a woman to speak in the church or to rule over a man.... Whence comes the recent myth? Whence comes the pride of women or rather, the woman's insanity?"⁶²

Epiphanius asserted that the custom of women intruding in the church leadership was of a rather recent origin. Our study showed that no such practice existed among mainstream Christian churches prior to Nicea. Epiphanius also offers additional description of the office of deaconesses who assisted women in baptism. It is quite easy to see how some believers might take the practice of women assisting with baptism one step further to permit women assisting in all the church rituals performed by the male clergy.

Chrysostom, in his *Treatise Concerning the Christian Priesthood* (ca. 385), argued against women being in charge of churches. He mentioned that women can perform many spiritual activities, but when it comes to leadership of the congregations, this task was assigned to the best among the males. Here are his words:

For His [Christ's] words were, "Peter, lovest thou me more than these?" Yet He might have said to him, "If thou lovest me practise fasting, sleeping on the ground, and prolonged vigils, defend the wronged, be as a father to orphans, and supply the place of a husband to their mother.... For those things ... might easily be performed by many even of those who are under authority, women as well as men; but 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."⁶³

In the same treatise Chrysostom indicated that although not officially in charge, some dominant women are often tempted to order elders and deacons around. Although, due to Biblical injunctions, they cannot officially lead congregations, some women have a tendency to exert their influence upon the church leaders in a way Chrysostom did not see as fit. Here are his own words:

The divine law indeed has excluded women from the ministry, but they endeavor to thrust themselves into it; and since they can effect nothing of themselves, they do all through the agency of others; and they have become invested with so much power that they can appoint or eject priests at their will: things in fact are turned upside down, and

⁶² Epiphanius, *Panarion* 79. 3.6 – 4.1, translated in Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 166.

⁶³ John Chrysostom, *Treatise Concerning the Christian Priesthood*, book 2, ch. 2, in NPNF I, 9:43.

the proverbial saying may be seen realized—“The ruled lead the rulers:” and would that it were men who do this instead of women, who have not received a commission to teach. Why do I say teach? for the blessed Paul did not suffer them even to speak in the Church. But I have heard some one say that they have obtained such a large privilege of free speech, as even to rebuke the prelates of the Churches, and censure them more severely than masters do their own domestics.⁶⁴

It is important to notice that Chrysostom did not state that women were elders. Nonetheless, he did feel that in his days some church leaders were in danger of being swayed by the wealth, influence, and dominant personality of women in position.

Status of Women and Ordination in the Reformation and Post-Reformatin Eras

In this section we will briefly look at the views of Luther, Calvin, and John Wesley about the place of women in ministry. As the Reformers held that the Bible was the foundation of every doctrine and practice, it is important to investigate how they interpreted the gender-related texts and how it influenced their views on the role of women in the church. Which activities were allowed to women in the church, and which were closed? I have included Wesley in this section because some of the roots of Adventism go back to the Methodist movement. No attention has been given to the movements of the Anabaptists and Zinzendorf, which had a much stronger involvement of women in leadership. At that time their impact on Protestantism was very limited.

Women’s status and ordination in Martin Luther

In an early treatise in 1521, Luther presented the view that all Christians, not only priests or pastors, ought to preach the gospel. His opponents criticized him, claiming that he makes every layman an official priest, including women and children. Luther’s response revealed his idea of women in ministry. He mentioned that Roman Catholics quote 1 Cor 14:34, which states

⁶⁴ Ibid., 49.

that women needed to be silent in the church, and argued “from this that preaching cannot be common to all Christians because women are excluded.”⁶⁵ Luther responded,

Although everyone has the right to preach, one should not use any person for this task, nor should anyone undertake it, unless he is better fitted than the others. . . . Thus Paul charges Timothy to entrust the preaching of the Word of God to those who are fitted for it and who will be able to teach and instruct others [II Tim. 2:2]. The person who wishes to preach needs to have a good voice, good eloquence, a good memory and other natural gifts; whoever does not have these should properly keep still and let somebody else speak. Thus Paul forbids women to preach in the congregation where men are present who are skilled in speaking, so that respect and discipline may be maintained. . . .

Paul did not forbid this out of his own devices, but appealed to the law, which says that women are to be subject [Gen. 3:16]. . . . Therefore order, discipline, and respect demand that women keep silent when men speak; but if no man were to preach, then it would be necessary for the women to preach.⁶⁶

Luther’s view on the nature of the priesthood of believers is seen in his explanation of 1 Pet 2:5 and Gal 3:28. On 1 Pet 2:5, where Peter mentioned that believers are “a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ,” Luther commented that the Old Testament physical sacrifices and this priesthood have all ceased, and a new spiritual priesthood has taken its place.

Today everything is new and spiritual. Christ is the Priest, and we are all priests. Just as He sacrificed His body, so we, too, must sacrifice ourselves. Here everything foreshadowed by the external sacrifices as they took place in the Old Testament is now fulfilled. Briefly stated, all this means that the Gospel is preached. He who preaches the Gospel practices and does all this. He slaughters the calf, namely, the carnal mind; he strangles the old Adam. For one must slay with the Gospel what is irrational in the flesh and blood. Then we let ourselves be sacrificed and put to death on the cross. The true priestly office is practiced when we sacrifice that villainous rogue, the lazy old ass, to God. If the world does not do this, we must do it ourselves; for in the end we must put aside every vestige of the old Adam. . . . This is the only sacrifice that is acceptable and pleasing to God.⁶⁷

With this explanation Luther anticipates the following questions: “What kind of situation will arise if it is true that we are all priests and should all preach? Should no distinction be made

⁶⁵ Martin Luther, “The Misuse of the Mass,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 36: 151.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 36: 151-152.

⁶⁷ Luther, “Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter,” *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1967) 30: 54.

among the people, and should the women, too, be priests?”⁶⁸ Luther answered that in the New Testament there is no longer a difference in the nature or ontology between clergy and laity.

Faith cannot tolerate this. Thus those who are now called priests would all be laymen like the others, and only a few officiants would be elected by the congregation to do the preaching. Thus there is only an external difference because of the office to which one is called by the congregation. Before God, however there is no distinction, and only a few are selected from the whole group to administer the office in the stead of the congregation. They all have this office, but nobody has any more authority than the other person has. Therefore nobody should come forward of his own accord and preach in the congregation. No, one person must be chosen from the whole group and appointed. If desired, he may be deposed.⁶⁹

Luther has no place for the sharp distinctions in Christendom between clergy and the common Christian. Referring to Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” he stated,

You must pay no attention to distinctions when you want to look at Christians. You must not say: “This is a man or a woman; this is a servant or a master; this person is old or young.” They are all alike and only a spiritual people. Therefore they are all priests. All may proclaim God’s Word, except that, as St. Paul teaches in 1 Cor. 14:34, women should not speak in the congregation. They should let the men preach, because God commands them to be obedient to their husbands. God does not interfere with the arrangement. But He makes no distinction in the matter of authority. If, however, only women were present and no men, as in nunneries, then one of the women might be authorized to preach.⁷⁰

For Luther the office of preaching was closely associated with the office of bishop or elder, an office associated with church governance which, in his mind, does not allow women to govern in the presence of men. His view of leadership is not sacramental. It is the people, the believers, who elect the leadership of the church. He never opposed the involvement of members in church affairs. Instead, the door is wide open for church members because of his insistence on the priesthood of believers. Thus Luther’s view on women in ministry does not stem from a sacramental view of ordination but from his reading of biblical passages such as 1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2. Women, in Luther’s view, can be leaders as long as they are not interfering with men’s role of leaders in the family and in the extended family of faith, the church.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 54, 55.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Luther mentioned that the apostle Paul was aware that the prophet Joel had proclaimed that God would pour out His Spirit on female servants (Joel 2:28f), and that the four daughters of Philip prophesied (Acts 21:9). But Luther sees no problem with Paul's statement on women not speaking in church. He said, "But in the congregations or churches where there is a ministry women are to be silent and not preach [1 Tim. 2:12]. Otherwise they may pray, sing, praise, and say 'Amen,' and read at home, teach each other, exhort, comfort, and interpret the Scriptures as best they can."⁷¹

Luther discussed extensively 1 Tim 2:11-15 in the light of women teaching in church. Commenting on verse 11, "Let a woman learn in silence with all submission," Luther wrote,

I believe that Paul is still speaking about public matters. I also want it to refer to the public ministry, which occurs in the public assembly of the church. There a woman must be completely quiet, because she should remain a hearer and not become a teacher. She is not to be the spokesman among the people. She should refrain from teaching, from praying in public. She has the command to speak at home. This passage makes a woman subject.⁷²

Commenting on 1 Tim 2:12, about a woman not "to have authority over a man," Luther wrote, "That is, she ought not take over for herself the heritage which belongs to a man so that a man says to her: 'My lord.' She wants her own wisdom to have priority, that whatever she has said should prevail and whatever the man says should not."⁷³

Paul based his argument about the role of woman on the issues of creation, deception, and transgression (1 Tim 2:13, 14). Luther discussed these texts extensively and summarized his remarks:

There are three arguments here: (1) that Adam was formed [first]; (2) that he was not deceived; (3) it was not he but the woman who brought on transgression. Paul uses the argument which we have in Genesis (3:16): "Because you have done this, you will be under the man. In punishment for your sin and transgression, you must be subject to the man and suffer the pains of childbirth." Thus that ordinance of God continues to stand as a memorial of that transgression which by her fault entered into the world.⁷⁴

The woman will be saved if she continues faithfully to fulfill the role for which God has created her to take care of her family (1 Tim 2:15). Luther commented that the penalty in

⁷¹ Luther, "Infiltrators and Clandestine Preachers," in *Luther's Works*, 40: 391.

⁷² Luther, "Lectures on 1 Timothy," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, 28: 276.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 279.

Genesis 3 remains. “The pain and tribulation of childbearing continue. Those penalties will continue until judgment. So also the dominion of men and the subjection of women continue.” If she carries out her role in faith, she will be saved in the end.⁷⁵

Women’s status and ordination in John Calvin

Calvin’s perspective on the status of women in the church is similar to that of Luther. In this section Calvin’s views on 1 Cor 11, 14, Eph 5, and 1 Tim 2 and 3 will be presented. These views guided his understanding of the role of women in ministry.

1 Corinthians 11. In 1 Cor 11 Calvin described the status of the sexes as they relate to the Godhead in the context of headship. In 1 Cor 11:3, he stated, Paul revealed “that *as Christ is subject to God as his head, so is the man subject to Christ, and the woman to the man.*”⁷⁶ Here the apostle pointed out that God “occupies the *first* place: Christ holds the *second* place.” The reason for this order is that Christ has “in our flesh made himself subject to the Father, for, apart from this, being of one essence with the Father, he is his equal. Let us, therefore, bear it in mind, that this is spoken of Christ as mediator. He is, I say, inferior to the Father, inasmuch as he assumed our nature, *that he might be the first-born among many brethren.*”⁷⁷ In this comparison “the man is placed in an intermediate position between Christ and the woman, so that Christ is not the head of the woman.”⁷⁸

How does this argument from 1 Cor 11 harmonize with Gal 3:28, “that *in Christ there is neither male nor female?* Why then does he make a distinction here, which in that passage he does away with?”⁷⁹ Calvin found the solution in the contexts of these texts. In Gal 3:28 “there is no difference between the man and the woman, he is treating of Christ’s spiritual kingdom, in which individual distinctions are not regarded, or made any account of; for it has nothing to do with the body, and has nothing to do with the outward relationships of mankind, but has to do solely with the mind—on which account he *declares* that there is no difference, even between *bond* and *free.*”⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle, in Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI, 2 vols. [1848], 1:296 <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39> (accessed July 17, 2013).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

However, at the same time, Paul “does not disturb civil order or honorary distinctions, which cannot be dispensed with in ordinary life.”⁸¹

In 1 Cor 11:3, Paul “reasons respecting outward propriety and decorum—which is a part of ecclesiastical polity.”⁸² This means that since Galatians focuses on the “spiritual connection in the sight of God, and inwardly in the conscience, Christ is the head of the man and of the woman without any distinction, because, as to that, there is no regard paid to male or female.”⁸³ However, in regard to “external arrangement and political decorum, the man follows Christ and the woman the man, so that they are not upon the same footing, but, on the contrary, this inequality exists.”⁸⁴ The distinction in 1 Cor 11 Paul saw in the behavior in the church or assembly that needs to reflect the headship of the man.

Next the Bible illustrates this hierarchical relationship with the way men and women behave in church. If the man does not behave properly in the assembly, he “commits an offense against Christ his head.”⁸⁵ The reason for this, Calvin said, is “because he is subject to Christ, with this understanding, that he is to hold the first place in the government of the house—for the father of the family is like a king in his own house. Hence the glory of God shines forth in him, in consequence of the authority with which he is invested.”⁸⁶ Without proper conduct the man “lets himself down from that preeminence which God had assigned to him, so as to be in subjection. Thus the honor of Christ is infringed upon.”⁸⁷ This means “if the *man* does not keep his own station—if he is not subject to Christ in such a way as to preside over his own family with authority, he obscures, to that extent, the glory of Christ, which shines forth in the well regulated order of marriage.”⁸⁸ The “distinction of rank which God has established” between men and women should not be broken.⁸⁹

When Paul addresses the woman, he uses similar reasoning to warn her not to bring dishonor upon the man by improper behavior contrary to her rank. “For as the *man* honors his head [Christ] by showing his liberty, so the *woman*, by showing her subjection [to the man].”⁹⁰ If the conduct of the woman is not proper, “she shakes off subjection—involving contempt of her

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 296, 297.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 297.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 298.

husband.”⁹¹ Calvin remarked that “the Apostle requires women to show their modesty—not merely in a place in which the whole Church is assembled, but also in any more dignified assembly, either of matrons or of men, such as are sometimes convened in private houses.”⁹²

Next Calvin commented that man is created in the image and glory of God and the woman in the glory of man. Calvin agreed that both sexes are created in the image of God and are to be renewed in His image, but in 1 Cor 11:7 Paul is speaking in regard to the order and status of male and female in marriage. Here man in the image and glory of God deals with “the distinction, which God has conferred upon the man,” of the headship over the woman.⁹³ “In this superior order of dignity the glory of God is seen.”⁹⁴ Regarding the woman being the glory of the man, Calvin explained,

There is no doubt that the woman is a distinguished ornament of the man; for it is a great honor that God has appointed her to the man as the partner of his life, and a helper to him, and has made her subject to him as the body is to the head. For what Solomon affirms as to a careful wife—that *she is a crown to her husband* (Proverbs 12:4), is true of the whole sex, if we look to the appointment of God, which Paul here commends, showing that the woman was created for this purpose—that she might be a distinguished ornament of the man.⁹⁵

Calvin summarized this section by emphasizing the headship of man in the family and the church. However, in his concluding remarks he pointed out that both sexes need to recognize their mutual dependence upon each other. “They ought to be connected together by mutual benevolence, for the one cannot do without the other. If they be separated, they are like the mutilated members of a mangled body. Let them, therefore, be connected with each other by the bond of mutual duty.”⁹⁶ “Thus the man has no standing without the woman, for that would be the head severed from the body; nor has the woman without the man, for that were a body without a head.”⁹⁷

1 Corinthians 14. Now Calvin continued in 1 Cor 14 to describe the challenges facing the church in Corinth as follows: “It appears that the Church of the Corinthians was infected with this fault too, that the talkativeness of women was allowed a place in the sacred assembly, or rather that the fullest liberty was given to it. Hence he forbids them to speak in public, either for

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 299.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 301.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

the purpose of teaching or of prophesying.”⁹⁸ Calvin considered Paul’s counsel “as referring to ordinary service, or where there is a Church in a regularly constituted state,” because there are exceptional situations where out of necessity it requires “a woman should speak in public.” But here “Paul has merely in view what is becoming in a duly regulated assembly.”⁹⁹

In his comments Calvin explained Paul’s remark that women are under subjection according to the law (1 Cor 14:34). And “If the woman is under subjection,” Calvin wrote, “she is, consequently, prohibited from authority to teach in public.” He argued that Paul’s reasoning is simply “that authority to teach is not suitable to the station that a woman occupies, because, if she teaches, she presides over all the men, while it becomes her to be *under subjection*.” This does not prevent a woman from the opportunity of learning, but she should do this “in private, that they may not stir up any disputation in public.”¹⁰⁰

Ephesians 5. Commenting on the husband-wife relationship in Eph 5:23, where it is mentioned that the husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is head of the church and Savor of the body, Calvin wrote, that “God has given to the husband authority over the wife; and a resemblance of this authority is found in Christ, *who is the head of the church*, as the husband is of the wife.”¹⁰¹ He added, “As Christ rules over his church for her salvation, so nothing yields more advantage or comfort to the wife than to be subject to her husband. To refuse that subjection, by means of which they might be saved, is to choose destruction.”¹⁰²

1 Timothy 2. In his commentary on 1 Tim 2:11-15, Calvin connected this passage with modesty. He said, “After having spoken of dress, he now adds with what modesty women ought to conduct themselves in the holy assembly. And first he bids them learn quietly; for *quietness* means silence, that they may not take upon them to speak in public. This he immediately explains more clearly, by forbidding them to teach.”¹⁰³ He further explained, “Not that he takes from them the charge of instructing their family, but only excludes them from the

⁹⁸ Ibid. 395.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 396.

¹⁰¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*. Trans. William Pringle. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 269. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom41>. (accessed July 17, 2013).

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 50. <http://www.ccel.org/> (accessed July 17, 2013).

office of teaching, which God has committed to men only.”¹⁰⁴ Although at times there have been exceptions, “if women at one time held the office of prophets and teachers, and that too when they were supernaturally called to it by the Spirit of God, He who is above all law might do this; but, being a peculiar case, this is not opposed to the constant and ordinary system of government.”¹⁰⁵

Calvin gives two reasons why women are subject to men. According to Paul’s reasoning, “Not only did God enact this law at the beginning, but he also inflicted it as a punishment on the woman. (Ge 3:16.)”¹⁰⁶ Moses revealed that “the woman was created afterwards” and “that she was joined to the man on the express condition, that she should be at hand to render obedience to him. (Ge 2:21.) Since, therefore, God did not create two chiefs of equal power,” but gave the man a help, “the Apostle justly reminds us of that order of creation in which the eternal and inviolable appointment of God is strikingly displayed.”¹⁰⁷

Because Adam was not deceived, but Eve was, Calvin noticed an allusion to the punishment inflicted on the woman that she was to be subject to the authority of her husband (Gen 3:16). He explained, “Because she had given fatal advice, it was right that she should learn that she was under the power and will of another; and because she had drawn her husband aside from the command of God, it was right that she should be deprived of all liberty and placed under the yoke. Besides, the Apostle does not rest his argument entirely or absolutely on the cause of the transgression, but finds it on the sentence which was pronounced by God.”¹⁰⁸

Calvin saw no problem with the subjection of Eve to Adam before as well as after she sinned. He said, “there is nothing to hinder that the condition of obeying should be natural from the beginning, and that afterwards the accidental condition of serving should come into existence; so that the subjection was now less voluntary and agreeable than it had formerly been.”¹⁰⁹

What about the promise to the woman at the conclusion of this section that she will be saved in childbearing? Calvin explained, “First, here the Apostle does not speak merely about having children, but about enduring all the distresses, which are manifold and severe, both in the

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 51, 52.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

birth and in the rearing of children.”¹¹⁰ Second, “when a woman, considering to what she has been called, submits to the condition which God has assigned to her, and does not refuse to endure the pains, or rather the fearful anguish, of parturition, or anxiety about her offspring, or anything else that belongs to her duty, God values this obedience more highly than if, in some other manner, she made a great display of heroic virtues, while she refused to obey the calling of God.”¹¹¹ Calvin added, “Even ‘child-bearing’ is obedience acceptable to God, only so far as it proceeds *from faith and love*. To these two he adds *sanctification*, which includes all the purity of life which becomes Christian women. Lastly follows *sobriety*, which he formerly mentioned, while he was speaking about dress; but now he extends it more widely to the other parts of life.”¹¹² It is by fulfilling the role that God designed for women, in faith, love, and holiness with self-control that she will experience that grace of salvation.

1 Timothy 3. Having concluded the section on the submission of the woman, Calvin saw a natural connection to Paul’s discourse on “ordaining pastors, and appointing the government of the Church”¹¹³ (1 Tim 3:1-7). He reasoned, “Having forbidden women to teach, he [Paul] now takes occasion to speak of the office of a bishop. First, that it may be more clearly seen that it was not without reason that he refused to allow women to undertake so arduous a work; secondly, that it might not be thought that, by excluding women only, he admitted all men indiscriminately.”¹¹⁴ Not everyone is qualified for this office. Calvin explained that “on account of the dignity of the office . . . it is requisite that he be a man endowed with rare gifts, and not any person taken out of the crowd.”¹¹⁵

Regarding the requirement that a bishop/elder should be a husband of one wife, Calvin sees this as a prohibition against polygamy. But this is not all. Paul sees the need that pastors should not be “unacquainted within human life, but that he shall be a good and praiseworthy master of a household.”¹¹⁶ This experience makes the pastor “better trained and adapted for governing the Church.”¹¹⁷ A celibate existence will not give such an experience. Pointing to 1 Tim 3:5, Calvin explained, “we ought to observe the reason which is added, that he who does

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 55, 56.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

not know how to rule his family, will not be qualified for governing the Church.”¹¹⁸

Commenting on the requirement of “having his children in subjection with, all reverence,” Calvin remarked, “the apostle does not recommend a clever man, and deeply skilled in domestic matters, but one who has learned to govern a family by wholesome discipline. He speaks chiefly of *children*, who may be expected to possess the natural disposition of their father; and therefore it will be a great disgrace to a bishop, if he has children who lead a wicked and scandalous life.”¹¹⁹ The meaning of the word “reverence” Calvin explained by a similar requirement in Titus 1:6 which states that the pastor’s children should not be “liable to the reproach of profligacy or of intemperance,” which indicates “that their morals shall be regulated by all chastity, modesty, and gravity.”¹²⁰ Calvin concluded his comments by stating “that he who is unfit for governing a family will be altogether unable to govern a people. Besides that it is evident that he is destitute of the virtues necessary for that purpose, what authority will he have over the people, seeing that his own house makes him contemptible?”¹²¹

Women’s status and ordination in John Wesley

About two centuries after the magisterial reformers, we observe a greater involvement of women in the church and its ministry among certain segments of Protestant Christianity. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was the first within his movement to authorize a woman to preach. Mary Bosanquet, a very influential member of Methodist movement, was one of the first woman preachers. In 1761, Wesley granted a license to preach to Sarah Crosby.¹²²

Wesley’s appreciation for the importance of women in the church has been credited to his mother, Susanna Wesley. It is said that she instilled in him and in his brother Charles Wesley a deep appreciation for the intellectual and spiritual qualities of women. Susanna Wesley, and other women in the early Methodist movement, were involved in evangelism and were active members in church activities.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 63.

¹²¹ Ibid., 63.

¹²² Laurence W. Wood, *The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 223, 224.

¹²³ Stanley J. Grenz, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove, Ill. : InterVarsity Press, 1995), 43. See also Paul Wesley Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of the Early Methodism* (Philadelphia: American Theological Library Association, 1991).

Despite Wesley's allowing women to preach, he denied women the leadership and disciplinary office of a pastor or an elder in the congregation. Wesley believed that it is man's proper office to lead and to instruct the congregation. Women can preach, says Wesley, but men only can lead, both in the home and in the church family. This position on women in ministry was based on his understanding of gender-related passages of the New Testament and the qualifications for leadership offices in the church.

Note Wesley's commentary on the following passages:

1 Corinthians 14:34, 35. Wesley viewed this verse as follows: "Let your women be silent in the churches - Unless they are under an extraordinary impulse of the Spirit. For, in other cases, it is not permitted them to speak - By way of teaching in public assemblies. But to be in subjection - To the man whose proper office it is to lead and to instruct the congregation. Gen 3:16."¹²⁴ And he continued, "And even if they desire to learn anything - Still they are not to speak in public, but to ask their own husbands at home - That is the place, and those the persons to inquire of."¹²⁵

Ephesians 5:22, 23. Wesley commented, "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands - Unless where God forbids. Otherwise, in all indifferent things, the will of the husband is a law to the wife. As unto the Lord - The obedience a wife pays to her husband is at the same time paid to Christ himself; he being head of the wife, as Christ is head of the church."¹²⁶ That the husband is the head of the wife means he is "The governor, guide, and guardian of the wife. And he is the saviour of the body - The church, from all sin and misery."¹²⁷

1 Timothy 2:12-15. Wesley viewed these verses as follows: The woman is not "To usurp authority over the man" (vs. 12). This means to usurp authority "By public teaching."¹²⁸ The first reason was "that woman was originally the inferior" (vs. 13).¹²⁹ The next reason was that "Adam was not deceived. The serpent deceived Eve: Eve did not deceive Adam, but persuaded him. 'Thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife,' Gen. iii, 17. . . . She is more easily deceived, and more easily deceives. The woman being deceived transgressed. 'The serpent deceived' her,

¹²⁴ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, 2 vols. (London: 1813), 2: 102. *Wesley's Notes on the New Testament*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 422. <http://www.ccel/wesley/notes> (accessed July 17, 2013).

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 490.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 540.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Gen. iii, 13, and she transgressed” (vs. 14).¹³⁰ Nevertheless the woman will be saved. This means, that she, and “women in general, who were all involved with Eve in the sentence pronounced, Gen. iii, 16. Shall be saved in childbearing - Carried safe through the pain and danger which that sentence entails upon them for the transgression; yea, and finally saved, if they continue in loving faith and holy wisdom” (vs. 15).¹³¹

1 Timothy 3:1-7. On the position of the leader or pastor of a congregation, Wesley remarked that he must be “the husband of one wife” (vs. 2), which disqualifies those involved in polygamy and divorce from leading a church. This teaches us that “ministers, of all others, ought to stand clear of those sins.” Wesley does not see it as a condition for pastors to be married or not allowed to marry a second time.¹³² However, the church leader must have “his children in subjection with all seriousness” (vs. 4), because “levity undermines all domestic authority; and this direction, by a parity of reason, belongs to all parents.”¹³³

From Wesley’s understanding of the gender-related passages of church leadership and offices, it is clear that he holds that women should not be occupying the office of an elder or overseer of the church. Even though Wesley involved women in many of the functions of the church, including preaching, he never advocated that women be ordained as elders or bishops, whose task was to lead the church and who were involved in teaching with doctrinal authority.

Women’s status and ordination in early Adventist publications

If we compare Wesley’s position on women’s involvement in the mission of the church, it seems that the position of the Adventist pioneers is very similar. They encouraged women to be involved in the church, including preaching, but refrained from ordaining women to headship functions in the church like that of elder and minister. Notice the similarity of Wesley’s position with the following pioneer views:

In 1866, based on his understanding of the male headship established at the creation and the Fall (Gen 3:16; 1 Cor 11:8, 1 Tim 2:13, 14), Uriah Smith wrote that “The leadership authority is vested in the man. . . . This order is not to be reversed, and the woman take the position which has been assigned to the man; and every action on her part which shows that she

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, 541.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

is usurping this authority, is disorderly, and not to be allowed.”¹³⁴

In 1878, an editorial by the editor of *The Signs of the Times*¹³⁵ discussed the implications of the headship principle for the involvement of men and women in the ministry. It said,

. . . it appears that something, or speaking of some kind, was herein [1 Cor 14:29-35] permitted to the men which was not permitted to the women. But we have seen, and shall notice further, that they were allowed to pray and to prophesy, but under certain restrictions. . . . And this appears yet more evident from the explanatory declaration in his words to Timothy, “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” 1 Tim 2:12. The divine arrangement, even from the beginning, is this, that the man is the head of the woman. Every relation is disregarded or abused in this lawless age. But the Scriptures always maintain this order in the family relation. “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church.” Eph 5: 23. Man is entitled to certain privileges which are not given to woman; and he is subjected to some duties and burdens from which the woman is exempt. A woman may pray, prophesy, exhort, and comfort the church, but she cannot occupy the position of a pastor or a ruling elder. This would be looked upon as usurping authority over the man, which is here prohibited.¹³⁶

In 1895 the *Signs of the Times* carried the article “Who Should Be Church Officers?” In it Milton C. Wilcox answered the question, “Should women be elected to offices in the church when there are enough brethren?” He replied,

If by this is meant the office of elder, we should say at once, No. But there are offices in the church which women can fill acceptably, and oftentimes there are found sisters in the church who are better qualified for this than brethren, such offices, for instance as church clerk, treasurer, librarian of the tract society, etc., as well as the office of deaconess, assisting the deacons in looking after the poor, and in doing such other duties as would naturally fall to their lot. The qualifications for church elder are set forth in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and in Titus 1:7-9. We do not believe that it is in God’s plan to give to women the ordained offices to the church. By this we do not mean to depreciate their labors, service, or devotion. The sphere of woman is *equal* to that of men. She was made a help meet, or fit, for man, but that does *not* mean that her sphere is *identical* to that of man’s. The interests of the church and the world generally would be better served if the distinctions given in God’s word were regarded.¹³⁷

These comments show that the Adventist pioneers followed in the same biblical headship understanding that the Protestant Reformers and John Wesley and the Methodist movement had

¹³⁴ [Uriah Smith], “Let Your Women Keep Silence in the Churches,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 26, 1866, 28.

¹³⁵ The editorial board of *The Signs of the Times* consisted of James White, J. N. Andrews, and Uriah Smith. At that time the resident editor was J. H. Waggoner.

¹³⁶ [J. H. Waggoner], “Woman’s Place in the Gospel,” in *The Signs of the Times* 4, no. 48 (Dec 19, 1878), 380.

¹³⁷ [Milton C. Wilcox], “No. 176. Who Should Be Church Officers?” *The Signs of the Times*, Jan. 24, 1895, 3.

adopted. They held fast to the principles that the Bible provides for guiding the leadership practices in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Summary and Conclusion

The analysis of the Ante-Nicene period showed that women-elders were a completely unknown phenomenon. None of the Anti-Nicene Fathers were supportive of women in leadership positions. Not even dissenting groups such as Montanists are mentioned as having ordained their women to be elders and presbyters or to perform the Eucharist or baptism. The only place where women were recorded as performing the duties of an elder was in the Gnostic circles and in the case of an adulterous woman possessed by the devil, reported by Firmilian, bishop of Caesarea.

The analysis of the available primary sources does not support the idea that the early Church had many women as elders and bishops and that this practice disappeared because of the sacramentalization of the church offices in the third and fourth centuries

Women were not permitted to function in leadership positions as elders and bishops/overseers because of the interpretations of the biblical texts in 1 Cor 11 and 14 and 1 Tim 2 by the early church fathers prior to the Council of Nicea.

In the period after the Council of Nicea and the acceptance of Christianity as a state religion, the independent practices of women performing Eucharistic rituals or exercising leadership in the churches seems more documented.

The fifth century Christian writers mention several heretical groups (such as Pepuzians, Priscillianists and Collyridians) that had women not only as prophetesses but also as elders and bishops. These movements had different reasons for ordaining women. The Pepuzians ordained women because of the vision of a female-like Jesus and because they had a woman prophetess. The Priscillians ordained women because of their Manichean belief in the unimportance of material bodies, therefore making no differences between the sexes. And the Collyridians ordained women because of a pagan background of women priestesses.

In the Orthodox Church we do not find accounts of women being ordained. The exception is Brigit, who was ordained as a bishop by the prophetic utterance of the bishop Mél. The story of her life sounds legendary, and it is difficult to ascertain its reliability. We find women who are designated *Presbytidas* who appear to be widows and head deaconesses who

sometimes assisted in holding the cup in the orthodox churches. This seems to be a practice that was present in many churches of Eastern origin. This custom was prohibited by the Council of Laodicea and a series of western councils.

Several tomb inscriptions have been located which seem to allude to an official church position of some women, although the title could also refer to a head deaconess. Some of the tomb inscriptions might refer to older or elderly women who were mentors in charge of teaching and instructing younger women.

Post-Nicene Christianity had a greater share of women involved in the role of church leaders than did Ante-Nicene Christianity. However, never did any church father or official church document affirm such practice. The church fathers who wrote on the status of women in church work all disapprove of women elders or women usurping the roles of elders and bishops. In general, ordinations of women occurred strictly within heretical movements. The only documented deviation from male priesthood in the mainstream Christian churches would be the occasional overemphasis of the importance of female deaconesses and widow *presbyteras*.

Among the magisterial reformers, the position of the Bible as the only rule of doctrine and practice was strongly stressed. The discovery of the priesthood of believers improved the position of the laity in the ministry of the church, and the sharp distinctions between laity and clergy diminished greatly. There was also an improvement of the status of the women. However, when it came to leadership functions in the church, the reformers did not approve women to function as elders and ministers, predominately on the basis of the Pauline headship teachings in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, Ephesians 5, 1 Timothy 2 and 3, and Titus 1.

Greater female participation in leadership was seen among the Anabaptists and the Zinzendorf community, but these movements did not influence the vast majority of the Protestants at that time.

In the eighteenth century, one observes a greater participation of women under John Wesley and his Methodist movement. However, when it comes to the women being chosen to the office of elders and bishops, Wesley objected. The same biblical passages that the reformers used to prohibit women from functioning as elders or heads of churches prevented Wesley and the Methodists from allowing women to occupy these headship positions.

If we look at the Adventist pioneers on women's involvement in the mission of the church, we notice that their position is very similar to that of Wesley and Methodism. These

pioneers strongly encouraged female participation, excepting in the headship office of elders and ministers. The same biblical passages that the early church fathers, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley used to define their attitude on objecting to having women function in headship roles in the church were used by the Adventist pioneers. Today's discussions will reveal whether the Seventh-day Adventist Church will continue to follow this understanding of the Bible on the involvement of women in ministry.