



## WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

WOMEN IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY  
MRCC FALL '21

1

## SPIRIT GIVEN TO MEN AND WOMEN

"All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers....When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place....All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." (Acts 1:14; 2:1-4)

"Peter said, 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.'" (Acts 2:17-18)



2



## NEW BIRTH

“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer

Jew or Greek,

there is no longer slave or free,

there is no longer male and female;

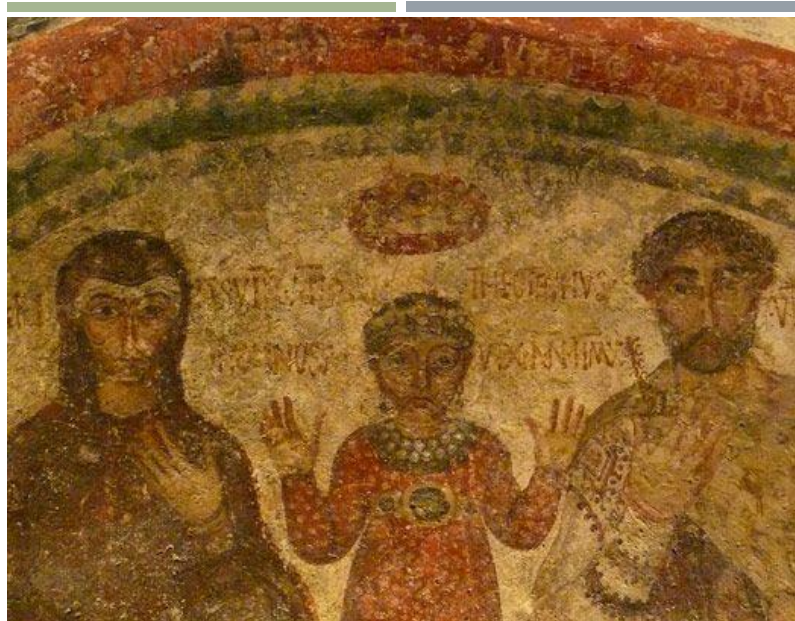
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

(Galatians 3:26-29)

3

## “FAMILY OF GOD”

- New vision of family rooted in discipleship and obedience to God’s kingdom rather than biological kinship
- “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:33-35)
- “You are all brothers and sisters.” (Mathew 23:8)

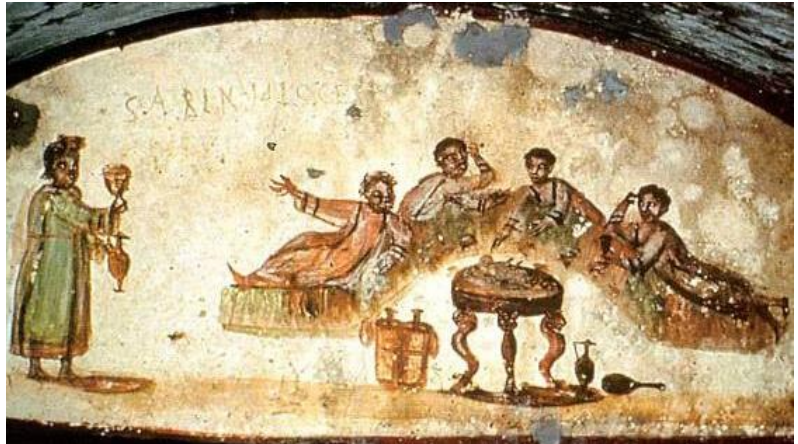


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WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH



## HOUSE CHURCHES

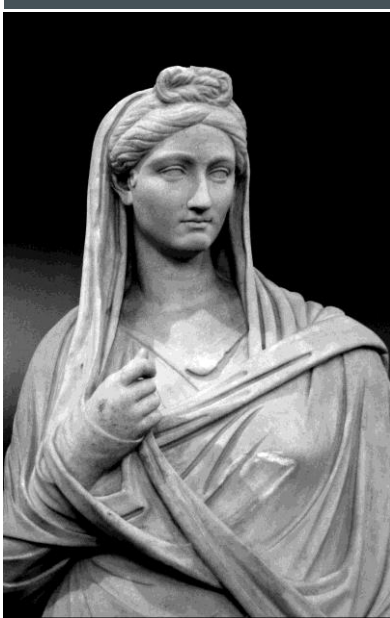
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## WOMEN LEADERS

- **Mary**, mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12)
- **Lydia**, leader in Philippian church (Acts 16:1-15)
- **Prisca and Aquila**, leaders in Rome (Rom 16:3-5), Corinth (Acts 18), and Ephesus (1 Cor 16:19)
- **Apphia**, leader in Colossae (Phil 1:1-2)
- **Euodia and Syntyche**, leaders in Philippian church (Phil. 4:2)
- **Chloe**, leader in Corinthian church (1 Cor 1:10)
- **Phoebe**, leader of church in Cenchrea (Rom 16:1-2)
- **Nympha**, leader in Laodicea (Col 4:15)
- The **“Elect Lady”** (2 John 1, 5)

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WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

## LEADING IN THE “DOMESTIC SPHERE”

“... in ancient Mediterranean society, among both Jews and non-Jews, **women often played quite powerful social and political leadership roles**. Such roles were rooted in these women’s authority at the household level. Much business and commerce centered around households of the wealthy. These households could be sizable domestic communities including immediate family, extended family members, servants/slaves, and employees. In the ancient world, both men and women could be householders and patrons. Women’s experience as managers of these households, their ‘social authority, economic power, and political influence,’ established their leadership in other domains in Greco-Roman society and even synagogue leadership in Jewish society.”

Deborah Gill and Barbara Cavaness, *God’s Women—Then and Now* (Grace & Truth, 2009)

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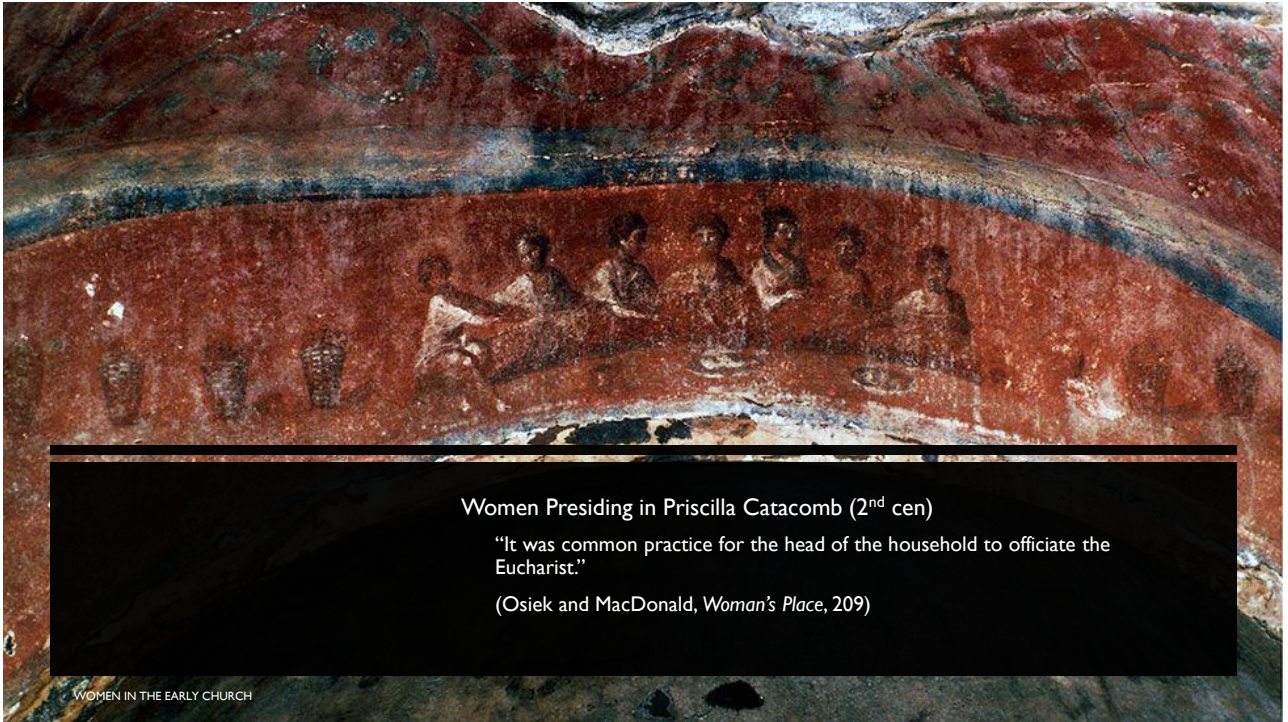
## CRITICISM OF CHRISTIANITY

“If they wish to avail themselves of their aid they must leave their father and their instructors and **go with the women** and their playfellows **to the women’s apartments**, or to the leather shop, or to the fuller’s shop, that they may attain to perfection—and by words like these they gain them over.”

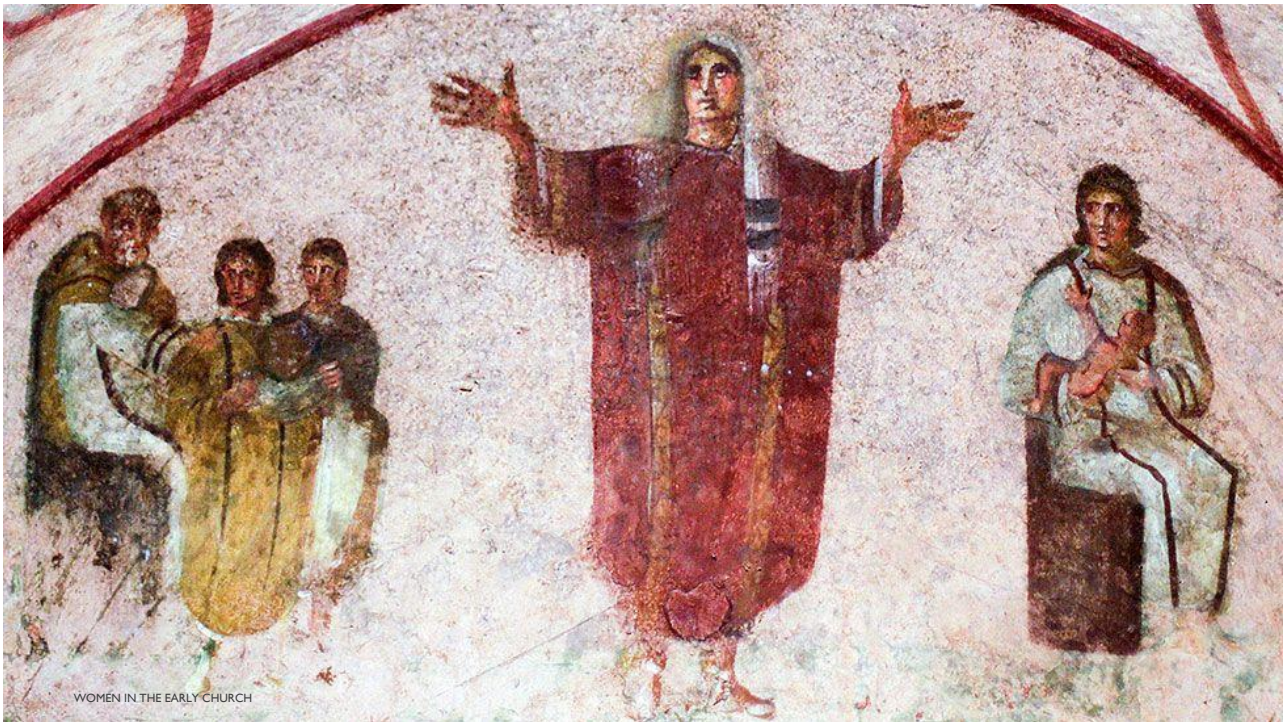
(*Contra Celsum* 3.55)

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## ROMANS 16

WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

11

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.

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## PRISCILLA: Missionary, Church Planter, Teacher

- Mentioned 6 times in NT; 4 times her name comes first
- Biography:
  - Lived in Rome, but expelled by Claudius in 49 along with other Jews
  - Moved to Corinth, then Ephesus
- She helped start three house churches
- Taught Apollos (Acts 18:26)



WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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## JUNIA, the “Lost Apostle”

- “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.” (16:7)
- Richard Bauckham suggests that Junia could be a Latinized form of Johanna, perhaps the wife of Chuza (Luke 8:1-3)
- Origen believed she was among the 72 disciples (Luke 10)
- “To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles— just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle.” (John Chrysostom, *ep. Rom.* 31.2)



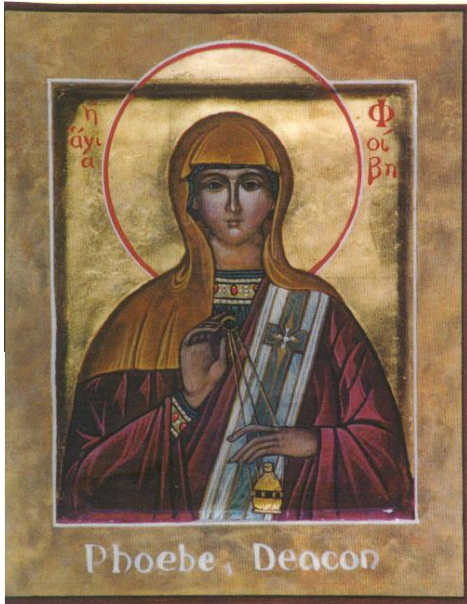
WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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## JUNIA’S GENDER REASSIGNMENT

- Worried about the propriety of a woman being an apostle, scribes and translators beginning in the 12<sup>th</sup> century designated Junia a male, ‘Junias’
  - Giles of Rome (d. 1336)
  - Luther’s German version (1522)
  - Revised Version (1881)
- Logic:
  - it was unthinkable that a woman could have been an apostle
  - It is grammatically possible for ‘Junias’ to be a masculine name
  - Therefore, in Rom. 16:7 Paul must have been commending a male apostle named Junias.
- Junia persists as a male in 37 out of the 59 English versions available on the Bible Gateway.





WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

## PHOEBE

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a **deacon** of the church at Cenchree, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a **benefactor** of many and of myself as well.”

(Romans 16:1-2, NRSV)

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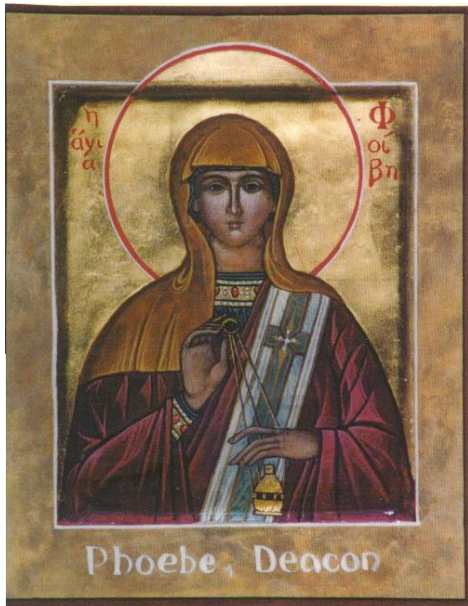
## TRANSLATING

### προστάτις (prostatís)

Verse	NKJV	NASB	ESV	NRSV	NIV
Romans 16:2 (church leadership)	helper	helper	patron	benefactor	benefactor
Romans 12:8 (church leadership)	leads	leads	leads	the leader	to lead
1 Thessalonians 5:12 (church leadership)	are over you	have charge over you	are over you	have charge of you	care for you
1 Timothy 5:17 (church leadership)	rule	rule	rule	rule	direct
1 Timothy 3:4 (household organization)	rules	manages	manage	manage	manage
1 Timothy 3:5 (household organization)	rule	manage	manage	manage	manage
1 Timothy 3:12 (household organization)	ruling	managers	managing	manage	manage

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(Romans 16:1-2, NRSV)

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## TRANSLATING διάκονος (diákonos)

Verse	NKJV	NASB	ESV	NRSV	NIV
Romans 16:1 (Phoebe)	servant	servant	servant	deacon	deacon
Romans 13:4 (a ruler)	minister	minister	servant	servant	servant
Romans 15:16 (Paul)	minister	minister	minister	minister	minister
Ephesians 3:7 (Paul)	minister	minister	minister	servant	servant
Ephesians 6:21 (Tychicus)	minister	minister	minister	minister	servant
Colossians 1:23 (Paul)	minister	minister	minister	servant	servant

WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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## PLINY'S LETTER TO TRAJAN (112 AD)

These examinations made me think it necessary to inquire by torture what the truth was; which I did of two servant girls, who were called **deaconesses**: but still I discovered no more than that they were addicted to a bad and to an extravagant superstition.

Hereupon I have put off any further examinations, and have recourse to you, for the affair seems to be well worth consultation, especially on account of the number of those that are in danger; **for there are many of every age, of every rank, and of both sexes**, who are now and hereafter likely to be called to account, and to be in danger; for this superstition is spread like a contagion, not only into cities and towns, but into country villages also, which yet there is reason to hope may be stopped and corrected.



Women in the Early Church

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Women in the Early Church

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## DIDASCALIA APOSTOLORUM Church Manual (3<sup>rd</sup> cen.)

"Wherefore, O bishop, appoint workers of righteousness as helpers who may co-operate with you unto salvation. Those that please you out of all the people thou shalt choose and appoint as deacons: a man for the performance of the most things that are required, but a woman for the ministry of women." (16)

- Instruct women converts after baptism (following Mary's example)
- Care for sick women
- Evangelize pagan women

"For our Lord and Savior also was ministered unto by women ministers, **Mary Magdalene, and Mary the daughter of James and mother of Jose, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee, with other women beside.** And you also have need of the ministry of a deaconess for many things."

## *APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTIONS* Church Manual (4<sup>th</sup> cen.)

"**Ordain also a deaconess** who is faithful and holy, for the ministrations towards women. For sometimes he cannot send a deacon, who is a man, to the women, on account of unbelievers. You shall therefore send a woman, a deaconess, on account of the imaginations of the bad. For we stand in need of a woman, a deaconess, for many necessities; and **first in the baptism of women**, the deacon shall anoint only their forehead with the holy oil, and after him **the deaconess shall anoint them**: for there is no necessity that the women should be seen by the men."

After baptism, "let a deacon receive the men, and a deaconess the woman."

Women in the Early Church



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## *INSCRIPTIONS*



Women in the Early Church

"Here lies the slave and bride of Christ, **Sophia, the deacon, the second Phoebe**, who fell asleep in peace on March 21<sup>st</sup> during the 11<sup>th</sup> indiction..."

"Here lies **Maria the deacon** of pious and blessed memory who, according to the saying of the Apostle, **raised children, exercised hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, and distributed her bread to the needy**. Remember her, Lord, when she enters into your kingdom."

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The Office of Deaconess

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR WOMEN DEACONS?

Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons.

**Women likewise** must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be married only once, and let them manage their children and their households well; for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

(1 Timothy 3:8-13)

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Women in the Early Church

## RITE OF ORDINATION

Prayer at the ordination (*cheirotonia*) of a deaconess

"Holy and Omnipotent Lord, through the birth of your Only Son our God from a Virgin according to the flesh, you have sanctified the female sex. You grant not only to men, but also to women the grace and coming of the Holy Spirit. Please, Lord, look on this your maid servant and dedicate her to the task of your diaconate, and pour out into her the rich and abundant giving of your Holy Spirit.

Preserve her so that she may always perform her ministry (*leitourgia*) with orthodox faith and irreproachable conduct, according to what is pleasing to you. For to you is due all glory and honor."

(Barberini gr. 336 manuscript, 8<sup>th</sup> cen.)

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## END OF FEMALE DIACONATE

- Office continued in the East, but declined in the West after 5<sup>th</sup> century
- “It has been suggested by some people that women somewhere or other seem to have assumed for themselves the ministry of levites (that is, deacons). **This is against apostolic discipline and has been unheard of until this time.** The practice is highly questionable and not allowed by ecclesiastical discipline. Any such ordination that has taken place is against all reason and is to be destroyed. All care is to be taken that no one presume in this way again.” (Council of Nîmes, 394 AD)

Women in the Early Church



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## END OF FEMALE DIACONATE

- In late 4<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Gelasius pronounces women's ordination a "lethal wound for the church"
- In 441, First Council of Orange ordered female ordination to cease; Council of Epaone follows in 517
- “No woman shall henceforth receive the *benedictio diaconalis*, on account of the weakness of this sex” (Second Synod of Orleans, 533 AD)
- Menstruation also cited: “the impurity of their menstrual periods dictated their separation from the divine and holy sanctuary” (Dionysius of Alexandria)
- Last recorded deaconess in the West was in 1054 AD

The Office of Deaconess



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Women were being ordained as priests in fifth-century Italy and Sicily (Gelasius, *Epistle* 14.26)

Women in the Early Church

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# WOMEN OFFICIANTS?

Women in the Early Church

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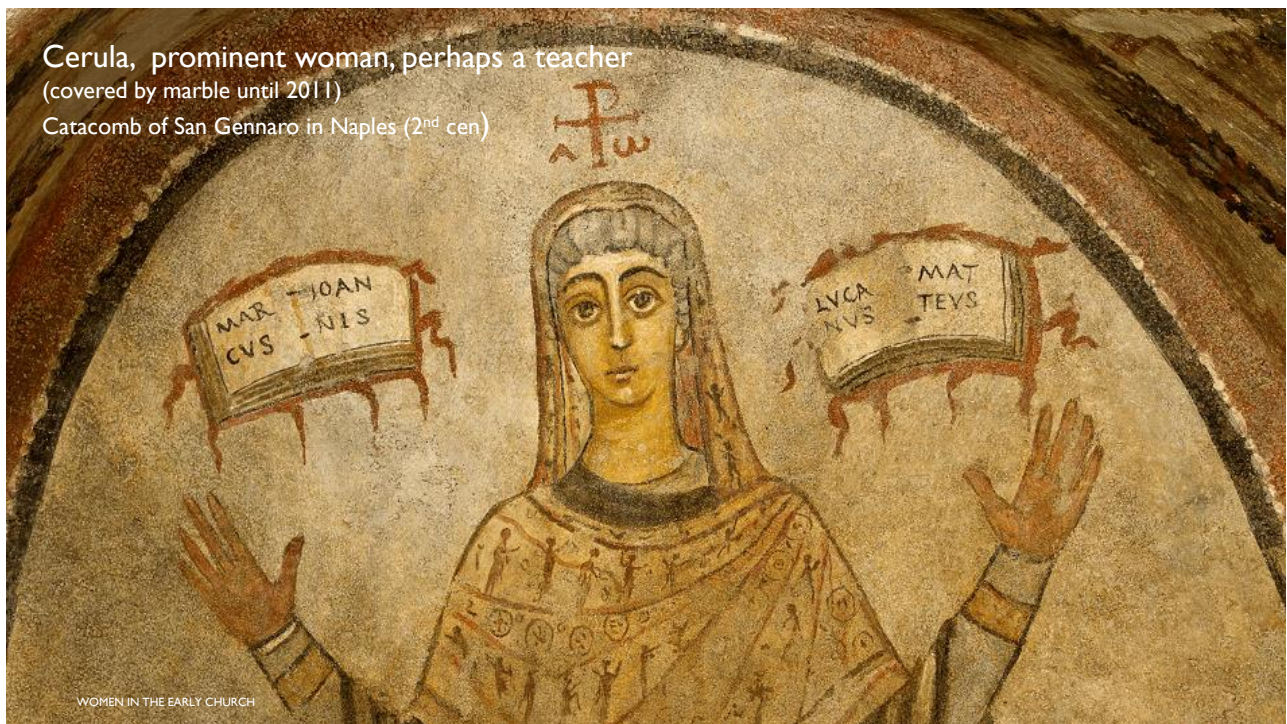
## WOMEN PRIESTS

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 come 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.**

(Epiphanius, *Medicine Box* 78.23.2, 79.3.6–79.4.14)

Women in the Early Church

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## SPIRITUAL GIFTS

“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

Ephesians 4:11-13



Women in the Early Church

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## CORINTHIAN WOMEN

WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Corinthian women “pray and prophesy” in worship (1 Cor 11:4-6)

“When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged....

As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

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## UPPITY WOMEN



WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

“At home our freedom is conquered by female fury, here in the Forum is it bruised and trampled upon, and because we have not contained the individuals, we fear the lot.... Indeed, I blushed when, a short while ago, I walked through the midst of a band of women... I should have said, ‘What kind of behavior is this? Running around in public, blocking streets, and speaking to other women’s husbands! **Could you not have asked your own husbands the same thing at home?** Are you more charming in public with others’ husbands than at home with your own? And yet, it is not fitting even at home... for you to concern yourselves with what laws are passed or repealed here.’ Our ancestors did not want women to conduct any – not even private – business without a guardian; they wanted them to be under the authority of parents, brothers, or husbands; we (the gods help us!) even now let them snatch at the government and meddle in the Forum and our assemblies. What are they doing now on the streets and crossroads, if they are not persuading the tribunes to vote for repeal?... If they are victorious now, what will they not attempt? **As soon as they begin to be your equals, they will have become your superiors.**”

(Cato’s Speech, reported in Livy, *History of Rome* 34.4-7)

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What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached? Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized. So, my friends, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order.

39

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WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

## WOMEN PROPHETS



“Philip had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.” (Acts 21:9)

Hermione

Eutychia

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## WOMEN PROPHETS



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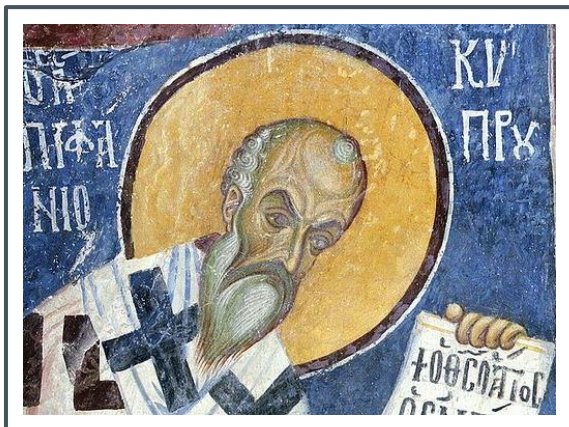
Ammia of Philadelphia (Eusebius, Church History 5.17.2-4)

Prisca and Maximilla, prophets in Asia Minor in early 2<sup>nd</sup> century (New Prophecy Movement)

- “‘Christ came to me dressed in a white robe,’ she said, ‘in the shape of a woman, instilled into me wisdom, and shared with me how that this place is holy, and that Jerusalem will come down from heaven here.’” And, because of this, even down to this day, they say, that certain women and men also are initiated there on the site, so that those people can wait for Christ and see him [themselves]. They are women in this group whom they refer to as prophetesses.” (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 49.1)

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## SILENCING THE PROPHETS



WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

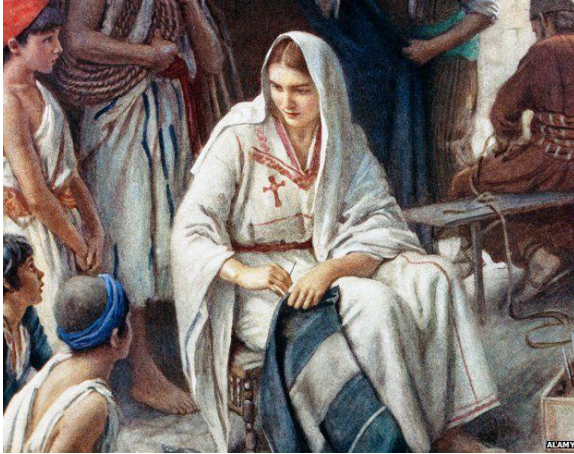
Even though they ordain women as bishops and presbyters because of the example of Eve, they should listen to the Lord when he says, “Your resort shall be to your husband, and he shall rule over thee.” [Gen 3:16]. And they have missed (perhaps on purpose) the command of the apostle which says, “I do not allow a woman to speak, or to have authority over a man,” [1 Tim 2:12] and again, “the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man;” [1 Cor 11:8] and, “Adam was not deceived, but Eve, deceived first, fell into condemnation.” [1 Tim 2:14].

[Dramatic sigh.] There is definitely abundant error in this world.

(Epiphanius, *Panarion* 49.3)

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## FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC

“Women’s leadership was a widespread phenomenon in the early Christian churches.... For more than two hundred years Christianity was essentially a religion of the private sphere, practiced in the private space of the household rather than the public space of a temple.... By the fourth century Christians were worshipping in their own public temples, called basilicas.... As Christianity entered the public sphere, male leaders began to demand the same subjugation of women in the churches as prevailed in Greco-Roman society at large.”

Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*, 35-38.

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## RESOURCES

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