

Church History 101
Lesson 8
The Central Role of Women in the Early Church

Key Concepts: One of the least discussed aspects of the early church is the central role played by women. There are numerous mentions of them in the scriptures, early church writings and Roman discussions of the church.

Story: It is impossible to fully tell the story of the early church without discussing the significant role of women. Their key role begins with Jesus' ministry. Women were those who financially supported Jesus and the disciples. As regards Jesus' death it was his female followers who were at the cross while most of the men had fled. It was probably women who took his body to the tomb. It was also women who went to the tomb and were first told of and then told others about Jesus' resurrection. In the Gospel of John it is Mary Magdalene who touches Christ and becomes an "apostle to the apostles."

In the nascent church women were leaders/co-leaders of house churches. We know this because Paul in his letters mentions women such as Chloe, Lydia, Apphia, Pricilla, Nympha, and John Mark's mother. They were also Apostles and deacons. Paul writes of Junia as being "of note among the Apostles." Early church writers understood this to mean that Junia was a leading Apostle. Phoebe is mentioned as a deacon, meaning she was probably in a leadership position in a local congregation.

In the book of Acts we read of Philip's four daughters who were prophetesses. Eusebius (c. 260-c. 340) believed these women to be part of the earliest apostolic succession. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 215) mentions that the apostles were accompanied by women whose mission was to evangelize other women in order to prevent scandals. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (c. 69- c. 156) mentions Grapte, the sister of Crescens as one who should receive one of the church's earliest non-Biblical writings in order to share it with others.

The early church also had special places for women deacons. Clement of Alexandria wrote that they should not only be accepted by the church leadership but praised for their work. The deaconesses assisted in baptisms, visited the sick, cared for the ill and looked after the needy. Finally there was an order of leaders called "the widows." These were women who were supported by benefactors in order to serve the church. They instructed women in the faith and served at the altar alongside men. One document refers to them as "*Presbyteresses*" which means female elders.

The Romans also point to the fact that women had central leadership roles. Pliny the Younger (61 – c. 113) while he was Roman governor in Bithynia, described how he had to interrogate the leaders of the church there, both of which were female slaves. The church also attracted upper-class women. The problem this raised was that these women had to marry within their class and there were not enough available eligible Christian men. Callistus, Bishop of Rome (d. c. 223) allowed women of senatorial rank to marry Christian slaves or freedmen, even though it was in violation of Roman law.

Many women also studied Greek, Hebrew and the scriptures. By the late 300's Jerome thought nothing of referring church elders to a woman named Marcella when they were not sure how to interpret a Biblical text. Augustine (354-430) declared that Christian women were better educated in Biblical matters than most philosophers.

Questions

1. How does this information help you understand the role of women in ministry?
2. How do you see the current role of women in ministry being informed by this history?
3. Why do you suppose that women were slowly pushed out of leadership positions?