Gender Ontology and Women in Ministry in the Early Church

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Two gender ontologies

One’s ontology of gender underlies both hermeneutic precedence and exegetical considerations. Is human nature divided into two kinds, male and female, or is it a single nature, shared by males and females? The answers to this question drive hierarchist and egalitarian hermeneutics and exegesis.

Deborah F. Sawyer, in her history of women and religion in the first Christian centuries, believes that Christianity prescribes distinct gender roles founded on essentialist notions of gender: Men and women are constituted differently and thus function differently. She sees these notions, along with similar ones in Judaism, developing from dialogue with classical Greek philosophical ideas, in particular, with Aristotle's notion of essential gender identity. Sawyer notes that Aristotle did not remain unchallenged even in his own day. The persistence of the Amazon myth, the historical examples of Spartan women, and the popularity of the writer Sappho demonstrate pluralistic Hellenistic attitudes toward women. This pluralism militates against arguing from universal experience to universal precepts, because, even within ancient Greek culture, there was no universal construction of gender roles.

Gender teachings of the post-apostolic writers

Sawyer sees early Christianity—the Jesus movement—as a Jewish renewal movement with apocalyptic overtones that radically challenged conventional notions of society in general, including family relationships and gender roles. Historian Karen Jo Torjesen concurs, noting that the earliest stages of Christianity lacked the buildings, officials, and large congregations that marked its later stages. It is best understood as a social movement, informal, often countercultural, and adaptable. It was “marked by a fluidity and flexibility that allowed women, slaves, and artisans to assume leadership roles.” However, as Christianity developed, it moved away from Jesus’ egalitarian vision and adopted the prevailing Aristotelian notions of gender.

A third historian, Elaine Pagels, tracks the development of Christian notions of gender, sin, and freedom. Unlike Sawyer and Torjesen, Pagels does not find a monolithic adherence to Aristotelian notions of gender in post-apostolic Christianity. Indeed, she does not find a monolithic version of early Christianity at all. She points out that the first four hundred years of Christian orthodoxy denounced Gnostic interpretations of Genesis in the name of moral freedom, only to modify that theme radically in the fifth century with the writings of Augustine. Early Christianity introduced the notion of the intrinsic worth of every human being into Greco-Roman culture. It based that tenet on Genesis 1:26: All human beings are equally bearers of God’s image—a concept radically at odds with Aristotle's philosophy.

Peter Brown, in his work on the history of permanent sexual renunciation in the early church, offers readers a look at Greco-Roman notions of gender. Citing second-century medical literature, Brown points out that a Roman man understood the difference between himself and women “in terms of a hierarchy based on nature itself.” Yet, his nature was not irrevocably different from that of a woman. In fact, a fetus in the womb was undifferentiated until it had either amassed a “decisive surplus of ‘heat’ and fervent ‘vital spirit’” that rendered it male, or failed to do so, rendering it female. This male quality of heat was precarious. Lack of it at any time in a man’s life could cause him to collapse back into that primary undifferentiated state. He would not actually become a woman, but he always faced the possibility of becoming womanish. His best protection against this was to cultivate the character qualities of self-control that marked a man and to avoid the character defects of convulsive violence and irrational cruelty that they believed marked a woman.

Justin Martyr, in his Apology, wrote that demonic powers stood behind the Roman government—powers whose intent was to blind people to the truth of one God from whom all humanity derived its existence. Brown locates Justin’s concept of humanity within second-century Jewish images of the human person. Although humanity was plagued by a dualism between the body and the soul, its primary problem was that of a willful heart. The heart could either pursue obedience to God (singleness of heart), or it could rebel against God (waywardness of heart). Jesus demanded a singleness of heart that included a radical break with the normal patterns of settled life. Sexual renunciation was one way (among others) to demonstrate singleness of heart, and this way was open to both men and women. Justin praised Christians of both genders who had heroically practiced voluntary sexual renunciation. A universally applicable problem with a universally applicable solution suggests a universal human nature. Although Justin did not explicitly advance an egalitarian gender ontology, many who followed him did.

Clement of Alexandria, in Protreptikos Logos, rejected the tyranny of the imperial cult because it was “monstrous that . . . human beings who are God’s own handiwork should be subjected to another master.” Clement saw Christ’s divinity as pervading all humankind equally. In Stromata, Clement urges all Christians to engage in philosophical thought and its resultant moral self-restraint, “both slave and free must equally philosophize, whether male or female in sex. . . . For moral self-restraint is common to all human beings who have chosen it. And we admit that the same nature exists in every race, and the same virtue.” In Miscellanies, Clement posits a “sameness with respect to the soul” when thinking of virtue; only with respect to the “particular
construction of the body” are women destined for childbearing and housekeeping.16

In the second century AD, Tatian and the Enccratites (a sect founded by Tatian) taught that Adam and Eve had originally belonged to one category (nonanimal), had possessed the Spirit of God, and had been destined to live forever. The fall occurred when Adam and Eve turned away from God and to each other. Because Adam had left his Father and Mother (God and the Holy Spirit), he had become subject to death. Marriage to Eve and procreation had then become the only means by which humanity could continue. Adam and Eve’s sexuality led them to become part of the animal world that was subject to death, and, in procreating to overcome death, they founded a false society. Sexual renunciation allowed each person, male or female, to take steps “to regain the original unconfused ‘holiness’ that possession of the Spirit had conferred on Adam and Eve.”17 Adam and Eve had lost what they had shared—the same original, essential nature of holiness. Every aspect of human society that followed that loss, especially separate male and female roles, was contrary to God’s design.

John Chrysostom, regarded by some as giving voice to classic antiwoman theology, wrote and spoke on several occasions of the equal essence of men and women.18 David C. Ford claims that Chrysostom was not a misogynist and lists six factors that support his claim. Chief among those six are Chrysostom’s use of rhetorical exaggeration and his theological ethos affirming the goodness of all of God’s creation. Ford portrays Chrysostom as viewing all members of the human race as connected to each other “by virtue of their identically shared human nature.”19 Chrysostom saw the principal female roles in society as those connected to the care of the household and the family, but praised women who achieved extraordinary heights of spirituality, even though he held that male leadership in the church and family was normative.20

Chrysostom held that the normative pattern of leadership/submission in the world was not original to creation, but was necessitated by the fall. Sin led to women’s subjection. Unlike Origen, who thought that sexual differentiation occurred at the fall and will not persist into the next life, Chrysostom held sexuality and marriage in such high regard that he believed both were eternal.21 The pattern of male headship, however, will not persist into the next life. Thus, Chrysostom could posit an equal-with-differences theology that affirms the intrinsic equality of the sexes as of the same substance (tēs autēs ousias) and of the same honor (isotimia) while accepting male leadership as necessary and ordained by God to bring order to a fallen world. The single nature shared by men and women is also shared with Christ, a concept that allows for the human man, Jesus, to represent both men and women in his priestly work and to stand as a substitute for both.

Origen looked at sexuality and gender as a passing phase—a “dispensable adjunct of the personality that played no role in defining the essence of the human spirit.”22 The redeemed human spirit was on a journey back to an original perfection of dwelling in the life-giving warmth of the presence of God. Each created being shared an original equality of essence. The body in which a being now dwelt was the result of its choice to move away from God and to become different from its fellow beings. The body was necessary for the slow healing of the spirit, but it was transient. Societal roles that derived from the body were evanescent and inferior to the purity of the spiritual world.23

Cyril of Jerusalem joins Clement, Origen, and Chrysostom in rejecting an essentialist notion of gender. In Catechetical Lectures, Cyril states, “The soul is immortal, and all souls are alike (homoiai) both of men and women; for only the members of the body are distinguished.”24 He opposes the view that women are by nature seductive and affirms the goodness of the human body, “including the female body.”25

Ambrose of Milan promoted virginity and the ascetic life as virtues that allowed women to transcend the course of fallen human nature. Virgins (male and female) were able to revert to the innocent lives led by Adam and Eve before the fall. Ambrose’s gender ontology posits sexual differences, and any role differences arising from sexual distinctions between men and women, not as part of God’s original plan, but as the result of sin. Women, however, are more culpable than men, because Eve led the way into sin. Thus, women had to “endure the bondage, galling yoke, and slavery of marriage.”26 Marriage was an endless battle against sensuality, the great thief that robbed humanity of paradise.27

These men accepted their culture’s roles for the sexes and allowed those roles in the church, but they did not find theological justification for those roles in the original creation. Their notion of gender was culturally, not essentially, constructed. They stand in opposition to others who did in fact see women as constitutionally different from men. Ambrosiaster, in Quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti, wrote, “It is man who has been made in the image of God, not woman,” and concludes from this that women are not to teach, witness, or judge, much less exercise any authority.28 Pelagius, later condemned as a heretic for his teaching on the goodness of human nature, believed that Paul’s prohibitions stemmed from the order of nature, since man was created first. Theodoret of Cyrus also saw the creation order as grounds for women’s inferiority.29

Jerome’s gender ontology is inconsistent and confusing. In Rome, he taught women ascetics to practice scriptural exegesis on their own.30 His teachings on the life of virginity indicate that he believed virginity, in some sense, made men and women equal. Yet, his writings against Helvidius and Jovinian redound with criticism of women monastics who thought that after a lifetime of asceticism they could be the equals of men. In his advice to women contemplating the ascetic life, he urges them to remove all traces of femaleness, to become manly, and to practice manly virtues.31 He may have been defining manly virtues by prevailing cultural standards rather than by essential standards, since it seems unlikely that he would have urged women to act contrary to the nature that God had given them.

Augustine of Hippo, in On the Literal Meaning of Genesis, wondered why God made women at all and concluded that procreation must be the only answer, since companionship is more pleasant with two men than it is with a man and a woman. Women were created to be helpers to men, but, with what, Augustine
wonders, would Adam have needed help? Before the fall and the curse, the earth yielded its fruit with no effort on the part of humanity. He concludes that the only way that a woman can help a man is by having babies.\textsuperscript{32}

Augustine saw the leadership/submission dichotomy as built into the texture of creation. In his \textit{Literal Commentary on Genesis}, he offers the reason for female subordination: “[I]t is necessary for one of two people living together to rule and the other to obey so that an opposition of wills does not disturb their peaceful cohabitation. . . . One person was created before, the other afterwards, and most significantly, the latter was created from the former, the woman from the man.”\textsuperscript{33} Apparently, Augustine believed that the potential for interpersonal strife existed prior to the fall and considered that God preempted that possibility by creating a ruling order.\textsuperscript{34}

Unlike Jerome and Ambrose, who believed that the fall was a fall into sexuality, Augustine saw sexual differentiation as part of God’s original plan.\textsuperscript{35} In his \textit{Confessions}, Augustine compares the two forces of the human soul (reason and nature) to the two genders. Reason is the dominant force because it deliberates, and nature is the subjective force because it obeys. Reason is analogous to the male gender, nature to the female.\textsuperscript{36} Women have a nature different from, but equal to, the nature of men. Augustine’s gender ontology is essentialist.

\textbf{Post-apostolic women writers}

What gender ontology did the women of early Christianity hold? Very few works by early Christian women are extant. The list is limited to just four: Perpetua’s prison diary, preserved in \textit{The Martyrdom of Perpetua; Probât Cento}; Egeria’s travelogue, \textit{The Pilgrimage of Egeria}; and Eudokia’s epic poem, \textit{Martyrdom of St. Cyprian}.\textsuperscript{37} These writings do not directly address the issue of gender ontology, so readers must look within each text for clues that hint at how these women understood their personhood. Did they believe that God had created them intrinsically and inherently different from men, or did they see themselves as having the same nature as men, with the only God-given distinction that of physiology? The danger of reading into the text what one wants to find always exists, and this is especially true in this instance. Nevertheless, we must attempt to hear from these women what they believed about their own natures.

\textbf{Perpetua}

\textit{The Martyrdom of Perpetua} reflects the teaching that she as a catechumen would have received. The first two sections of the account come from an eyewitness rector, possibly Tertullian; sections three through ten are Perpetua’s own words, and the final eight sections contain an account of Saturus’s vision and the rector’s conclusion. The rector justifies the account by pointing to its edifying value and establishes an egalitarian tone by setting it within the context of the last days when God will pour out his spirit on all humanity, and men and women alike will prophesy. He (or she) also alludes to the divine prerogative of the Holy Spirit to administer all gifts to all people, an ambiguous reference either to justify further penning the account, or to point out that the gift of martyrdom comes to whomever the Spirit wills, whether those persons are male or female, slave or free. The characters in this drama are both male and female, slave and free. Perpetua, a young woman from a good family, is accompanied by two slaves, Revocatus and Felicitas, and two other young men, Saturninus and Secundulus. Saturus, whom the rector does not include as one of the arrested catechumens, but whose vision he records, is likely the instructor of the others prior to their arrest.\textsuperscript{38}

Perpetua reveals her self-identity early in her account, when she insists to her father that she must be called what she truly is—a Christian.\textsuperscript{39} She does not identify herself as a Christian woman, but simply as a Christian. Arguments from silence or omission do not prove or disprove anything, but this omission is interesting. Perpetua’s concern for her family’s suffering and for her infant son show that she does not reject traditional female roles, but neither does she confine her identity to those roles. Her reputation (presumably for spirituality) is so great that her brother\textsuperscript{40} suggests that she ask God for a confirmatory vision. He does not suggest that he approach God with a similar request. Again, caution dictates that we do not read too much into this, but it certainly could indicate that Perpetua and her companions regard her as their leader. What is indisputable from the text is that Perpetua has no hesitation in approaching God on behalf of herself and the others to ascertain the outcome of their case.

In Perpetua’s vision, she ascends the ladder to heaven after Saturus. She and he seem to be the only ones from the arrested band who figure in this vision. Perhaps he precedes her because of his status as teacher, or perhaps because of the voluntary nature of his arrest.\textsuperscript{41} Perhaps the only significance is that someone had to go first because the ladder was too narrow to permit more than one at a time to ascend. Perpetua describes her ascent in terms reminiscent of Genesis 3:15 and Revelation 12. She identifies with the seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent/dragon. That seed is male and was understood by Christians to refer ultimately to Christ. Perpetua sees herself as so united to Christ that she becomes like him in function, a theme borrowed from Revelation 12:11. Her identity is tied to Christ and, therefore, exceeds gendered church and cultural restrictions. She conquers the dragon and climbs the dangerous ladder, not primarily as a man or a woman, but as a Christian. The shepherd figure who waits at the summit addresses her as his child and feeds her from his own hand. Saturus has disappeared from the vision and Perpetua faces God alone.\textsuperscript{42}

A second vision places Perpetua in the position of intercessor for her blood brother who had died at the age of seven. A third vision assures her that her prayers on his behalf had been answered. In these visions, Perpetua does not work through the hierarchal church structure, indicating that she has circumvented
the priest, who normally spoke to God on behalf of the people. This indicates that she believed she could approach God directly, without the mediation of an earthly priest.43

In a fourth vision, Perpetua faces an Egyptian fighter in the arena and discovers that she will battle him as a man, prevail against him as a man, and receive the victor’s branch as a woman. There is no hint that she thinks of her essential nature as any different from that of her male companions, as is evidenced by her ability to envision herself as either female or male.44 That which is essential to her self-image is her Christianity.

Prior to the day of her martyrdom, God grants Perpetua a release from both the emotional and physical pain of caring for her infant son, an indication that God has not confined her to traditional female roles. She transcends the normal physical limitations of lactating women. A similar idea is conveyed by the supernatural early labor of Felicitas. God intervenes, allowing her, too, to transcend the limits imposed by pregnancy.45

The redactor includes Saturus’s vision in which he and Perpetua are carried, side by side, to heaven by four angels. Other angels honor and admire the martyrs and direct them to the presence of an aged man sitting on a throne (representing God), who treats them both in the same manner, stroking their faces with his hand. Neither receives preference. They also encounter two bishops who entreat the martyrs to make peace between them. In this vision, merit supersedes hierarchy, and Perpetua counsels the bishops. Perpetua’s gender is no hindrance to her ministry, and she receives the same treatment as Saturus does. In Saturus’s view, women and men do the same things in heaven; no gender roles are evident there.46 Saturus’s vision includes both his and Perpetua’s activities, an indication that he viewed her as his equal.

The redactor comments on Roman cultural sexism as he pens the account of the mad heifer used to attack Perpetua and Felicitas, “selected so that the woman’s sex would be matched with that of the animal.”47 He records the ineffectiveness of the animal, implying that God supernaturally intervened to circumvent any loss of honor in the women’s martyrdom. The account presents an egalitarian spirit among the martyrs: Women and men mutually encourage one another; slaves and free persons seal their martyrdom by giving each other the kiss of peace.48

Perpetua functions as a symbol of the universal Christian. Her depiction in terms of both male and female indicates that the early church saw the prophetic Spirit breathing where it willed, with no gender preference. No one in the group (including the redactor) perceived Perpetua’s actions as violating a God-ordained male headship. Perpetua and her fellow martyrs provide a “universal solution valid for men and women.”49

Perpetua’s ability to envision herself as either male or female contradicts Paul Jewett’s assertion that our gender identity is essential to our self-awareness.50 Jewett may subscribe to an essential notion of gender; Perpetua does not. The text of The Martyrdom of Perpetua offers no hint that Perpetua, her companions, or her redactor viewed her perception of herself as both male and female as a psychological anomaly. Nor did the church that included this account as part of its literature for services view her as an aberrant female and a threat to God-instituted male/female differences. Even Augustine, whose gender ontology was less than flattering to women, honored Perpetua by preaching sermons in her honor, quoting and paraphrasing from the account of her martyrdom.51

Proba

Proba, the second of the four early women writers, wrote in an era (the mid-fourth century) when Greco-Roman women were beginning to experience more freedom, but women in the church were increasingly restricted from roles they might have held earlier.52 The very act of a woman writing a theological treatise during this period demonstrates a “radical character” and a “self-assertive identity.”53 Despite opposition from Jerome and Cæcilius, the church retained Proba’s Cento as a school text for the instruction of boys until the twelfth century, alongside such other works as Aldhelm’s Symposia and Enigma; the poems of Cyprian, Gregory, and Fortunatus; and works of Abelard and Seneca.54

A cento is a literary work wherein one author uses bits and pieces of another author to create something entirely new. Proba selects and reorganizes lines and half-lines from Virgil’s Aeneid and Georgics to show that the incarnation of Christ fulfills the Old Testament. Her intent is to educate her posterity and possibly her husband.55 The enduring significance of her work as a school text testifies that some part of the church accepted Proba as a theological writer and teacher.56

The nature of a cento requires that we do not read too much theology into the work. Proba was limited to what Virgil had written. Nevertheless, her choice of lines allows the reader a glimpse into the theology that underlies the work. Proba’s Cento opens with allusions to her previous literary efforts that had addressed less exalted subject matter; presumably, this was not her first work.57 She makes no apology for trespassing on ground forbidden to women, possibly because she felt she had breached no gender boundaries. The Cento moves through the creation account, which culminates in the creation of humanity on the sixth day. Proba chooses lines that explain the creation of Eve in terms of her coregency with Adam over the rest of God’s creatures. “Now another is sought for this one [Adam], but none dares come forth to be called his comrade in sovereignty.”58 None of the animals is fit to reign with Adam, so God creates someone who is. Proba retains orthodoxy by portraying both Adam and Eve as culpable in the fall, with Eve following the serpent’s lead. The lines from Virgil that depict the temptation do so in terms of the serpent usurping God’s authority and leadership, and not in terms of Eve usurping Adam’s headship.59

Proba skillfully demonstrates the post-fall change in Adam’s attitude toward Eve by using lines from Virgil that praise the maiden (Eve) as a wondrous gift before the fall and lines that depict her afterward as full of treachery and monstrous crime.60

When Proba comes to the judgment, she finds Virgilian lines that compare with the Genesis account to describe Adam’s punishment in terms of unremitting labor as he struggles to find food, fear between animals and humans, and suffering, disease, and
death. For Eve, however, the punishment is less specific: She will not know what kinds of perils she faces, and she, too, will die. It is unclear if Proba felt that male headship resulted from the fall; she may have been unable to find suitable material from Virgil to express such an idea, or she may have believed that the change in Adam’s attitude, depicted earlier, amply demonstrated the corresponding change in the male/female relationship.

Proba’s actions in writing a theological treatise demonstrate that, in her eyes at least, women did not have to be subordinate to men in the ecclesial matter of teaching, nor does the material she chose from Virgil contradict the egalitarian ontology implied by Proba’s actions. If Proba believed that women could teach men, then she would hardly have believed that male headship was mandated by God at creation and carried forward into society and the church by his decree.

_Egeria and Eudokia_

The remaining two works do not offer much insight into the gender ontology of their authors. Egeria (possibly late fourth century) composed a travel journal of her pilgrimage to the Holy Land with the intention of sending the writing to her friends at home, a group of biblically literate and devout women who had banded together and who served the church in some unspecified way. Egeria’s focus on liturgical practices hints that these women may have functioned as precursors to the later canonesses of medieval Europe who oversaw the proper observance of the liturgy in the cathedral. The connections between what Egeria and her contemporaries may have done in the church and their view of gender as either essential or constructed are too tenuous to draw.

Eudokia, the remaining author, enjoyed a privileged status as the wife of the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius II. Late classical and medieval writers attribute six works to Eudokia: two poetic paraphrases of the _octoeuch_ (the first eight books of the Old Testament) and the prophecies of Daniel and Zechariah, a poem about the martyrdom of St Cyprian, a speech to the people of Antioch, a poem celebrating the victory of her husband over the Persians in AD 422, and a Homeric cento on the life of Christ. As with Proba, the act of writing for the public realm, especially theological writing, indicates that Eudokia held a gender ontology that would see nothing inherently wrong with women teaching men.

The testimony of these four women writers of the early church may not be representative of all Christian women in the first five centuries. The evidence available to us, however, shows that there were indeed some women writers and teachers of the early church and that these women did not view themselves as constitutionally unfit for leadership. Whatever restrictions their gender imposed on them derived from culture, not from creation.

**Other ministerial roles**

The historical evidence for women in teaching and authority roles in the early church may be ambiguous, but the evidence for other ministerial roles is more conclusive. In the late second or early third century, Clement of Alexandria extrapolated the need for female deacons from 1 Corinthians 9:5 and 1 Timothy 3:11. He saw societal gender separation as evidence of women traveling with Paul and the other apostles in order to evangelize women in their own quarters. Solid evidence of female deacons comes from Pliny the Younger. In his _Epistle to Trajan_ (ca. 110), he refers to the torture in Bithynia and Pontus of two female slaves who were deacons (or ministers). By the third century, widows functioned as clergy in the Alexandrian church. Origen saw widows, or senior women, as exercising a teaching ministry to other women, but never to men. The function of church widows was to “inculcate in young women the qualities which make them good wives, good mothers, good housekeepers, gracious and charitable Christians.” Women may have ministered in the role of teacher, but only to other women.

In Syria, the ministerial roles of widow and of female deacon were governed by rules recorded in the _Didascalia Apostolorum_. Qualifications included age and quiet demeanor as well as marital status and duties centered on prayer. A widow was not to instruct those who asked her about the Christian faith unless she was refuting idols or speaking about the unity of God. For deeper teaching, she was to direct questioners to the rulers of the church.

Reasons offered for restricting women from teaching included their general lack of education, the Gentile (non-Christian) attitude about the unreliability of women, and the example of Jesus in appointing only men to be his teaching disciples. By this time, the early church had appropriated the religious structures of Israel, adding the all-male priesthood of the Old Testament to reasons for excluding women from the offices of priest, presbyter, and bishop. Ironically, the _Didascalia_ repeats the typology of Ignatius of Antioch in presenting the deaconess as the typological figure of the Holy Spirit, but restricts her from teaching in the church, which is one of the functions Christ delineates as belonging to the Holy Spirit (John 16:13).

John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople, and Theodoret, bishop of Cyrhus, commented on Phoebe (Rom 15) as a deacon and praised those who imitated her. Both men, along with Theodore of Mopsuestia, saw the text of 1 Timothy 3:11 as providing qualifications for women deacons. Chrysostom follows what by then was the tradition of conflating teaching with authority and restricts women from teaching. His reasoning was based on the post-fall condition addressed by Genesis 3:16 and supported by 1 Timothy 2:11.

By the fifth century, practice in the eastern church was more varied. The church at Edessa put deaconesses in charge of reading the Divine Office (the recitation of certain prayers at fixed hours) for the nuns. A deaconess may also have functioned as the head of a community of nuns. In spite of this authority and liturgical function, however, no deaconess or other woman assumed a sacramental leadership role. The Arabic _Canon of Nicaea_ 74 records the deaconesses’ sole function as that of receiving women in baptism. The Justinian legislation (Novellae) of the sixth century varies considerably from one piece of legislation to another, sometimes indicating ordination for deaconesses and at other times excluding them from the list of clergy.
Contemporary gender teaching

Contemporary essentialist notions of gender blend aspects of the gender ontologies and roles discussed above. Men and women are equally human and equally bear God’s image, but are constituted differently. Men are designed to lead, women to follow. This difference comes directly from God in creation; it is not the result of the fall. Explanations from Genesis 1–3 by proponents posit male headship as both natural and normative. They fail, however, to tell us why any kind of headship was necessary before the fall.

One proponent defines male headship, instituted by God at creation, thusly: “In the partnership of two spiritually equal human beings, man and woman, the man bears the primary responsibility to lead the partnership in a God-glorifying direction.” This statement is somewhat similar to Augustine’s assertion, cited earlier, that, to prevent a clash of wills when two people live together, one person rules and the other obeys. Just as one wonders how, prior to the entrance of sin into the garden, the wills of two people could clash, one also wonders why, in an equal partnership, one partner bears “primary responsibility.” Furthermore, why would one spiritual person need to be led by another person who was equally spiritual?

Another proponent of male headship is more explicit about the equal-but-different character of the sexes. God’s creation of humanity provides concrete examples of man-ness and woman-ness: two different kinds of humanity.” This writer views humanity as consisting of two pieces that were joined at the beginning: “in that original ‘put-together,’ woman was derived from man,” thus providing a rationale for “some kind of male precedence in public Church relations.” The difference between the two natures is highlighted in 1 Timothy 2:8–15, culminating in verse 14, which forbids women from teaching or ruling due to their susceptible nature.

This concept (a dual nature of humanity) is fraught with disturbing implications, the foremost being which kind of humanity Christ assumed. Gregory of Nazianzus wrote in his refutation of Apollinarism, “The unassumed is the unhealed.” Gregory contradicted Apollinaris’s claim that Christ had a real human body, but not a real human mind. Gregory believed that the seat of sin was in the mind—that was the precise place where humanity most needed healing. If the Son of God did not assume a real human mind, he could not redeem the human mind. The same principle holds true for gender. If the two-kinds-of-humanity position is correct, then Christ, who was a real human man, must have had real male humanity. He did not have real female humanity. Women, therefore, have no acceptable sacrifice, since the sacrifice must be of the same nature as those for whom it is offered. An essentialist notion of gender leaves the nature of one gender unassumed and unrepresented before God.

Stanley Grenz and Denise Kjesbo point out that the patristic writers and church councils avoided the problems inherent in essentialist gender ontology by emphasizing Christ’s humanity rather than his maleness.

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question about the significance of Jesus’ maleness: Is it soteriological or cultural? Contemporary egalitarians acknowledge that the male incarnation may have been culturally necessary; they deny that it could have been soteriologically necessary. Grenz and Kjesbo, while fundamentally agreeing, explain that sexuality “is an indispensable dimension of our existence as embodied human creatures.”

They hasten to add, however, that the incarnation of God the Son as a male does not mean that maleness constitutes essential humanness. First-century AD society would have dismissed a female incarnation of God solely because of her gender. Teachings about self-sacrifice and the treatment of women as social equals would have lost their radical force had those teachings come from a woman. Christ came into a specific historical culture; in order to gain a hearing for the message of God’s liberating love, he came as a male.

Gender ontology and biblical texts

Gender ontology influences which texts readers view as filters for their interpretations of other biblical passages that refer to women in the church. Male hierarchists interpret all the work of New Testament women as supportive, but never as authoritative. One such proponent of male headship, after listing the women Paul mentions in Romans 16, concludes that, even though women had an active role in spreading the gospel, “the New Testament offers no examples of female apostles, evangelists or elders. There are no examples of women teaching in public.” Evidence to the contrary is explained in a way that keeps the principle of male headship, based on creation, intact. Another hierarchist refers to Philip’s daughters, who prophesied, and Priscilla, who taught Apollos, and concludes that, while their service is gifted and of profit for the church, it is within the “biblical limits of the tradition of male authority.”

Two leading hierarchal writers explain the apostle Junia in Romans 16:7 in one of three ways. (1) She was possibly a man, because sometimes the name is rendered Junius, which could be a man’s name. As support, they cite Epiphanius of Salamis who believed that Junias was a man who became the bishop of Apameia in Syria. They do add, in an endnote, however, that they are perplexed by Epiphanius’s reference to Priscilla as a man, when they know from the biblical text that she was a woman. (2) Possibly, she was not an apostle, but simply well known by the apostles, or (3) she was an apostle of a non-authoritative type, a messenger, such as Epaphroditus. If this is the case, she simply traveled with a group and did not have a ministry of authority similar to Paul’s apostleship, which was as governor of the churches. These writers do not explain why Junia, as an apostle, would not fit the category of teaching apostle exemplified by Barnabas, Silvanus, Timothy, and James.

Egalitarians point out that, when Scripture refers to men who worked hard or served, no one tries to explain their roles as supportive. They conclude that gender role presuppositions drive the exegesis of these texts rather than a careful consideration of the terms themselves. Moreover, Arthur Frederick Ide argues that
there were New Testament female elders and points to 1 Timothy 5:1 and 2: “Do not rebuke a male presbyter (presbyters) but exhort him as you would a father; treat younger men like brethren, women presbyters (presbyters) like mothers, younger women like sisters.”92 Ide is not alone in asserting that Christian women held the office of elder. Karen Jo Torjesen cites evidence from early inscriptions that shows that both Jewish and Christian women held leadership offices. She lists the memorial inscriptions of four different Christian women from three different centuries and from three different places: Paniskianes the presbytera (second or third century Egypt), Epikatas the presbytis (third or fourth century in Thera), Ammon the presbytera (third century, no place given), and Kale the presbytis (fourth or fifth century in Sicily).93 Torjesen also points to a Roman basilica with a mosaic and an inscription to Theodora Episcopa—Bishop Theodora—with the “a” in Theodora partially marked by scratches as though someone had tried to deface the feminine ending.94 Francine Cardman adds two more women presbyters to the list: Leta from the catacomb of Tropaea in southern Italy and the presbyter Flavia Vitalia, recorded on a sarcophagus from Salona in Dalmatia. She, too, mentions Bishop Theodora, but concludes that the date of the chapel (c. 820) and its decoration (mausoleum style) make it likely that the inscription refers to Theodora, the mother of Pope Paschal I, who likely had the chapel built to honor her.95 Further inscriptive evidence includes a fragmentary epigraph on a tombstone from Solin that reads sacerdota or female priest. The cross on the stone indicates that the entombed was a Christian, not a pagan.96

One hierarchal theologian acknowledges that egalitarians present biblical passages (Titus 2:3, in particular) that might be interpreted to prove the existence of female elders. However, he believes those interpretations are wrong.97 He fails, however, to address the passage mentioned by Ide: 1 Timothy 5:1–2. He explains that the author of the Pastorals does not refer to female elders in Titus 2:3. This text uses the word presbytidas, which he argues means older women, but not women elders. This theologian supports his argument by commenting that the usual word for elders has a feminine form (presbytera), and that form does not appear in the Titus passage.98 His analysis of the words is accurate, but he seems unaware that, in 1 Timothy 5:2, Paul did indeed use the very word that he acknowledges should be used to refer to female elders: presbyter. This argument against reading the Titus passage as meaning women elders supports Ide’s argument about reading 1 Timothy 5:1–2 as evidence of women elders.99

Implications and applications

What does the historical development of women’s ministerial roles imply for modern Christianity? The female deaconate seems to have existed primarily to observe propriety. Women deacons (or ministers) could visit women parishioners without arousing suspicions of improper sexual relationships. Male priests and bishops who feared women as potential seducers could delegate to female deacons those tasks that might bring male clergy into too personal and private contact with women. Yet, a helpful mini-

2. Sawyer, Women and Religion, 55–58, 112. Sawyer notes that Aristotle’s strong negative reaction against the Spartan women was later taken to be the universal Greek cultural attitude toward women. John Temple Bristow sees a unified Stoic and Aristotelian disdain for women as marking the Hellenistic philosophy of Paul’s day (John Temple Bristow, What Paul Really Said About Women: An Apostle’s Liberating Views on Equality in Marriage, Leadership, and Love [San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988, repr. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1991], 8–14). The Stoic Seneca, however, in urging a female acquaintance to refrain from excessive grief at the loss of her son, grounds his entreaty in her ability, furnished by “Nature, which draws no distinction between persons.” Nature, according to Seneca, has not constituted females essentially different from males: “But who has stated that Nature has been ungenerous to women’s natures and has tightly restricted their virtues? They have just as much energy, believe me, just as much aptitude for noble actions, should they wish; they endure pain and toil as well as we do, if they have grown accustomed to them” (Seneca, “Consolation to Marcia,” in Seneca: Dialogues and Essays, trans. John Davie, ed. Tobias Reinhardt [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 60–68).
4. Sawyer, Women and Religion, 43.
7. Pagels, Adam, Eve, and the Serpent, xxv.
19. Ford, Women and Men in the Early Church, 41, citing Homily XV on St. John (Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers [hereafter NPNF] 1, XIV), 54; Homily XXVI on St. John (NPNF 1, XIV), 93; Homily XXXIV on 1 Corinthians (NPNF 1, XII), 204; and Homily I Concerning the Statutes (NPNF 1, IX), 343.
21. For Origen’s views, see Ford, Women and Men in the Early Church, 27 n. 70. For Chrysostom’s views, see Ford, Women and Men in the Early Church, 144–45. Role and status differences are temporary and transient, and, as such, their significance is secondary. When Chrysostom uses the terms “superior” in regard to men and “inferior” in regard to women, he refers to this difference in role and status. Likewise, when he refers to women as weaker, he means that they have physically weaker bodies, not that they are constituted spiritually or intellectually weaker. Chrysostom refers to maleness and femaleness as “bodily accidents” that neither injure nor assist a person to enter the new covenant (119 n. 6, commenting on Galatians).
29. Theodoret of Cyrus, Commentary on 1 Timothy (PG 82, 809A).
34. Augustine saw this potential as possible even in a hypothetical all-male household in Eden and posited rank according to creation order as the solution. Whichver man had been created first would have been the leader (Augustine, On the Literal Meaning of Genesis, IX.56). Cited in Torjesen, When Women Were Priests, 220–21.
36. Augustine, Confessions XIII, 32.
40. This term would seem to indicate a male believer rather than a sibling. Perpetua refers to her deceased sibling as her blood brother, but, when she refers to this man, he is simply her brother. Wilson-Kastner et al., A Lost Tradition, 20, 23.
42. Wilson-Kastner et al., A Lost Tradition, 21.
43. Wilson-Kastner et al., A Lost Tradition, 23.
44. Wilson-Kastner et al., A Lost Tradition, 24.
45. Wilson-Kastner et al., A Lost Tradition, 22, 26–27.
47. Wilson-Kastner et al., A Lost Tradition, 29.
49. Wilson-Kastner et al., A Lost Tradition, 10.
52. Wilson-Kastner et al. provide details about the possible and probable identity and dates of Proba. A Lost Tradition, 33–35.
53. Wilson-Kastner et al., A Lost Tradition, 35.
54. Wilson-Kastner et al., A Lost Tradition, 37, 39. Wilson-Kastner suggests that Gelasius may have objected to the use of Proba’s Cento on the grounds of its literary weaknesses: The Virgilian material lacked enough salient detail that those unfamiliar with the theology implied in the Cento might miss it altogether.
56. Wilson-Kastner et al., A Lost Tradition, 42.
57. Cento, lines 1–54, in Wilson-Kastner et al., A Lost Tradition, 45.
58. Cento, lines 123, 124, in Wilson-Kastner et al., A Lost Tradition, 49.
63. Contemporary scholars question her full authorship of the cento, ascribing the beginning of it to a Bishop Patricius and only the end of it to Eudokia. (Wilson-Kastner et al., “Introduction to Eudokia’s Martyrdom of St. Cyprian,” A Lost Tradition, 39–40).
64. Clement of Alexandria, Stromata 3.6.53. Cited in Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History, ed. and trans. Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University...
Press, 2005), 117. The authors cite their sources as Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1879–); and Monumenta de viduis diaconissis virginesque tractantia, ed. Josephine Mayer. Florilegium Patristicum 42 (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1938).


66. Commenting on 1 Cor 14:35, Origen wrote, “It is shameful for a woman to speak in church” whatever she says, even if she says something excellent or holy, because it comes from the mouth of a woman.” Cited in Patricia Cox Miller, Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 29. Miller cites her source as Origen, Commentary on 1 Corinthians, fragment 74, text in Claude Jenkins, ed., “Origen on 1 Corinthians,” Journal of Theological Studies 10 (1968–9): 29–51.

67. Grysyn, Ministry of Women, 28. See also Madigan and Osiek, Ordained Women in the Early Church, 14.


70. Madigan and Osiek, Ordained Women in the Early Church, 107.

71. Grysyn, Ministry of Women, 41.


74. Madigan and Osiek, Ordained Women in the Early Church, 121.


82. Davidson, A Public Faith, 82–83.

83. Hebrews 2:14–17: “he shared in their humanity . . . to make atonement for the sins of the people.”


85. Grenz and Kjesbo, Women in the Church, 208–09.

86. Grenz and Kjesbo, Women in the Church, 209.

87. Grenz and Kjesbo, Women in the Church, 209. God created men and women to live in egalitarian harmony; the fall destroyed that mutuality; Jesus freed males from the bondage of their roles in hierarchal domination, which belongs to the fallen order; and he freed women from the cultural restrictions of a patriarchal system by bringing them into a new order where sex distinctions no longer determine rank.

88. Susan Foh, “A Male Leadership View,” in Four Views, 79. Foh adds a footnote to explain that neither Junia, whose name may or may not have been feminine, nor her companion Andronicus, who definitely was male, was an official apostle (n.11, 103).


94. Torjesen, When Women Were Priests, 10.


98. Schreiner, “The Valuable Ministries of Women,” 220.

99. Vern Poythress examines 1 Timothy 5:1–2, but does not mention the Greek words at all. Perhaps he assumes that the author uses the same words there as he does in Titus. See “The Church as Family: Why Male Leadership in the Family Requires Male Leadership in the Church,” in Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 233–47, esp. 238–39.
William Hendriksen, in his commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, notes that the term *presbyteros*, when used elsewhere in the Pastoral, means elder or presbyter (referring to function, but, in this instance, it means a man of advanced age, “as the context clearly shows.” He points out that *aged man/presbus* (the word in Titus) cannot mean church elder, and that *older man/presbyteros* (the word in 1 Tim) elsewhere in the Pastoral is rendered church elder. He also explains the same kind of distinction between *aged woman/presbytis* (Titus), and *older woman/presbytera* (1 Tim), but fails to draw any implications (William Hendriksen, NTC, *I and II Timothy and Titus* [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976], 166, 365 n. 196.) In his commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, Patrick Fairbairn follows Chrysostom in translating/interpreting *presbys* as elderly person (man), with the emphasis on relative age rather than official standing, but reminds readers that the opposite view once prevailed and is the translation of the Authorized Version. When he approaches the passage in Titus, Fairbairn, 100, notes the difference between the words *presbs* (Titus) and *presbyteros* (Timothy) and comments that the latter might have been understood by Titus to refer only to persons in office. That, however, is as far as he goes. Patrick Fairbairn, *Pastoral Epistles* (1874, repr. Minneapolis, MN: Klock & Klock, 1980), 192, 271.


101. Madigan and Osiel, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, 163–64, 191–92. The authors refer to the “Letter of Attō,” Bishop of Vercelli, to Ambrose the Priest, in which Attō replies to Ambrose’s questions about the term *presbytēra* in the ancient canons. The canon to which Ambrose refers is *Canon 11* of the Council of Laodicea, held in the late fourth or early fifth century. This canon condemned the practice of appointing female presbyters: “Concerning those who are called presbytiades or female presiders (prokathāmenai), it is not permitted to appoint them in the church.” Attō explains that the term could refer to a woman who had married a priest prior to that priest’s ordination, but adds that the primitive church, because it lacked enough men to do the work, used to ordain women to preside over some churches and refers to Phoebe (Rom 16) as one of those women. He believes that women “who were called female presbyters assumed the office of preaching, leading and teaching . . . a custom that is no longer expedient.” Although the letter itself is late (early tenth century), its author clearly believed that, prior to the fourth century, churches ordained women as presbyters who functioned in the exact same way that male presbyters did. The Council of Laodicea put an end to the practice. A letter written six centuries after the document upon which it comments cannot provide unambiguous evidence as to the way the original readers of that document would have defined the term *presbytēra*, but it does prove that someone in the history of orthodox Christianity believed that women could have held the office of presbyter. Sources: Council of Laodicea Canon 11, Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum*, 2,565–66; Mayer, *Monumenta*, 11; full English text with comment, *NPNF* (n. s.), 14.130–31; Letter of Attō, Bishop of Vercelli, to Ambrose the Priest; Letter 8, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne et al. (Paris: Garnieri Fratres, 1844–91) 134.114–15. Mary Rose D’Angelo reminds readers that longstanding tradition, repeated as late as Thomas Aquinas, awarded Mary Magdalene the title *apostola apostolorum*, the apostle of the apostles. D’Angelo, “Reconstructing ‘Real’ Women from Gospel Literature: The Case of Mary Magdalene,” in *Women and Christian Origins* [see n 3], 105–06). For a full history of the tradition, D’Angelo recommends Jane C. Schaberg, “Thinking Back through the Magdalene,” *Continuum* 1 (1991): 71–90. John Chrysostom counted Junia as an apostle and praised her, exclaiming, “Oh! How great is the devotion of this woman, that she should be even counted worthy to be called an apostle!” In reference to Rom 16:7; PG 60.670a (*NPNF* 1, 555). Cited in Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church*, 107.

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