

A Medieval Makeover: Women's Roles Before and After the Reformation

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The journey of women's leadership in the church is hardly a straight line. It is a curvy road with plenty of twists and turns, sometimes pointing women to lead and, at other times, pointing them right out the door. The goal of this article is to examine the eras on either side of the Protestant Reformation. On one side, we will find women serving and leading in the church. On the other, they will be serving and leading in their homes. What led to this drastic exchange? To answer this, we will need to make a few broad-brush strokes over the top of the history of the early church and its interpretation of Scripture and women before arriving on the doorstep of the Middle Ages. This era sets the scene for where women will land, both before and after the Reformation. And what we will find is indeed a medieval makeover. This article explores the various religious, social, and historic dynamics surrounding the Reformation that led to driving women out of leadership in the church and back into their homes, as well as the ways we are experiencing the impact of these developments today.

The Early Church

Cissie Fairchild offers a robust study of women within religious and social circles in early modern Europe.¹ In her opening chapter, Fairchild describes how patriarchal views were established and sustained in the early church despite the Christian faith being built largely on the premise of the spiritual equality of all human beings. She explains how patriarchal interpretations of Scripture became the dominant and preferred narratives, beginning even with the story of creation. Genesis includes two accounts, the second of which, in Gen 2, provided plenty of fodder for those in the church in the early Middle Ages who began to bear down on women more forcefully regarding their accepted roles in the church and in society. In short, an interpretation of Gen 2 that took root at that time painted Eve as made, not in God's image, but rather in Adam's. Additionally, that Eve was the one tricked by the serpent introduces the idea that women are intellectually inferior, hence more readily deceived. And thus, the story of women as the weaker gender was born.

Despite four Gospels that include plentiful examples of Jesus elevating and liberating women, welcoming them in his ministry, and verses like Gal 3:28 from the apostle Paul which speak to the broad equality of all, male leaders in the church began to reinforce negative scripts about women, with support from passages like Eph 5:22–23, 1 Cor 14:34–35, and, famously, 1 Tim 2:12–14. Fairchild proposes that these misogynist interpretations were a response to the early life of the church when it was trying to move out from the underground and into the public sector where the Roman Empire had plenty to say about a male-dominated world. Perhaps the men in the church started to crawl back underground when they realized the opposition their Christian faith would face in allowing women to teach, preach, and lead.² For indeed, these

are ministries women had performed during the nascent era of the first-century church.

What exactly, then, was the fear about continuing to allow women to rise up and share these spaces with men? Sadly, the script that began to circulate was this: women were nothing more than objects of sexual temptation. They would be dangerous as leaders in the church and would lure others—especially men—into sin. One need only read the words of Tertullian, one of the earliest church fathers, to hear how readily these views were being accepted: “And do you not know that you are Eve? God's sentence hangs still over all your sex and His punishment weighs down upon you. You are the devil's gateway.”³ The early church fathers, including Augustine, John Chrysostom, and others, followed suit. Instead of being encouraged to marry, women were now encouraged to remain virgins and pursue lives of chastity. Fairchild says that in this way, they could “avoid the curse of Eve and gain salvation.” She goes on to explain the impact of this mindset moving into the Middle Ages:

... by the Middle Ages, Christianity had changed from a religion stressing the spiritual equality of all human beings to one whose message to women was of their essential sinfulness and their God-ordained subordination to men. This evolution took place because texts emphasizing female inferiority were frequently cited while those emphasizing equality were ignored. This suggests that people found what they wanted to find in Christianity—they found the patriarchal paradigm there because they already believed in it.⁴

A new normal had been accepted about women, and it would now hold for centuries.

The Middle Ages

Women began pushing against these long-held beliefs by the Middle Ages. As a key example, Christine de Pisan (1365–1429), herself a Christian, did so by thoughtfully reinterpreting passages like Gen 2 in *The Book of the City of Ladies*. This written work sought to refute the belief that women were so entrenched in sexual sin that they could not be saved. Pisan hoped to debunk ideas about gender roles and gender traits being natural inevitabilities.⁵ She went about her work not by directly refuting these ideas, but by carefully posing examples that might demonstrate counter thinking. In other words, she never came out and said that men and women are equal; she merely sought to begin quietly undoing the assumed ideas that had been accepted by many in the church and within the society of her day.

Pisan did not write alone. In the following century, her pen and resolve were joined by women like Marguerite de Navarre, a

French royal who wrote the novel *Heptameron* (1558). This book is described as a set of “linked stories about sacred and profane love told from a woman’s point of view.”⁶ De Navarre was followed by Spanish author Maria de Zaya whose work *Disenchantments of Love* (1647) handled issues of violence against women, which ironically were more often told by male authors of romance novels. According to Fairchilds, of the ten stories written by de Zaya, six provide a woman’s point of view depicting the murders of innocent women at the hands of their “supposed patriarchal protectors, fathers, brothers and husbands, to guard masculine honor; in the other four, they endure domestic violence before finding havens in convents.”⁷ This collection of writing alone is striking as it presents the two main options available to women in the Middle Ages: either to protect men by hiding the sexual temptation of women away in convents or to repackage the temptation by giving them into the hands of protective patriarchal marriage. Either way, the goal at hand seemed to be protecting men from women. These dynamics collided head on with the Reformation. Considering that Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door in Wittenberg in 1517, we are now situated to begin to understand where women’s roles landed both before and after the Reformation. In a world that had now rehearsed for centuries that women are sexually dangerous, intellectually inferior, and incapable of leading, the Reformation became the perfect backdrop to using religion as an excuse to contain women even further.

The Protestant Reformation

It is here that we should hear from the revered leader of the Reformation, Martin Luther himself. What were his ideas about marriage, women, and their roles in the church? According to German theologian Gertrud Wittenberg Tönsing, Luther had strong and defined views about all these things. Tönsing reports that Luther “rejected the emphasis on celibacy as a morally superior discipline.”⁸ Rather, Luther and others now began to support the idea that marriage was the ultimate ideal for women, their higher calling, and that now, instead of sexuality being a negative source of temptation, it could be celebrated as a gift from God. As Barbara MacHaffie highlights, this elevated the sacrament of marriage and shifted it to being a solution to the perceived issue of women as sexual temptresses. “Since sexuality was no longer viewed as evil, the married woman, at least, was not cast in the role of temptress and seducer.”⁹ Sex and women had before been bad; now they were good! Now, women could be seen as fulfilling God’s call on their lives through marriage, rather than working against God and men in ways that yielded corruption. Furthermore, marriage would continue to protect both men and women. Now women had a “safe place” to house their sexual desire and, rather than men being tempted, men and their sexuality could be served by women.

This lit a fire under the Reformation and its doctrine. The ground underneath women’s feet began to shift dramatically. The place of women in the church since the first century experienced a dramatic makeover. No longer were women leading and serving

alongside men in the church. Now, they were being sent home to serve, not alongside, but under men—in nearly every sense of the word. Martin Luther affirmed the “subordination of women as the result of woman’s sin!”¹⁰ John Calvin followed suit. He understood Gen 2 as confirming woman as “helper” to the man since she was made after him (thus subordinate), coupled with the fact that she was the first deceived, adding insult to injury in his mind. This led to removing the idea that living in a convent was a valid religious vocation. Now it was the opposite. The idea of a set apart life of virginity in a monastery was exchanged for women who were now being reassigned to their new “vocation” as mothers and homemakers. The Reformation moved women into subordinate roles where their primary calling would now be to serve as submissive wives whose worth would be found in their ability to bear and rear children and tend to the home. It was not only the birth of children that would mark this sudden shift. The cult of domesticity, though not officially recognized until the nineteenth century, was unofficially born, and we are still feeling its effects today. We will return to the cult of domesticity in a moment. For now, we continue to zoom in on the immediate effects and ideas surrounding women as a result of the Reformation.

In her 2021 book, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, Beth Allison Barr traces much of this history around views of women in the early church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and to the present. Regarding the significant impact of the Reformation, Barr says: “Before the reformation, women could gain spiritual authority by rejecting their sexuality. Virginity empowered them.” She goes on to highlight how women became nuns and took religious vows, and how women such as Catherine of Siena and Hildegard of Bingen contributed greatly to the leadership of the church. These medieval women served with authority alongside men.¹¹ “The further medieval women moved from marriage, the closer they were to God.”¹² But, Barr says, “After the Reformation, the opposite became true for Protestant women. The more closely they identified with being wives and mothers, the godlier they became.”¹³ Interestingly, in the case of Luther, Barr documents that Luther himself married a runaway nun named Katharina von Bora (later known as Katie Luther).¹⁴ The fact that Luther himself married a former nun seems to underscore his ideologies surrounding women during this era. Did he view himself as rescuing or redeeming a woman and her calling before God? MacHaffie seems to believe this is the case. She sees marriage through the eyes of Luther and the Reformation as a “redemptive rescue” for women who were associated with sexual evil. Marriage, via the Reformation, liberated women from being seen as seducers.¹⁵

Barr goes on to highlight that Luther certainly preferred the Martha-like characters of the Gospels to the Mary, mother of Jesus types. In Luke 10, Martha is found faithfully serving, modelling domestic subservience. Mary, on the other hand, also underwent a makeover with the Reformation. Once esteemed for her virginity, Tönsing points out that now “Mary was rediscovered [by Luther and others] as a mother, also of other children.”¹⁶ According to Tönsing, the Reformation may have “brought Mary back down

to earth”¹⁷ from her high and lofty status, but it did so by means of recasting the role of sexuality, procreation, and family life. It seems we traded one idealized role of Mary for another and, in doing so, continued to restrain women to roles that defined them either merely by their sexuality or by their ability to procreate. It is here that we return to the cult of domesticity, for Mary was the first victim of this shift. From super-spiritual virgin to domestic diva, Mary seems to have been the first to undergo this makeover.

According to MacHaffie, while the cult of domesticity would not fully emerge for a few centuries, it most certainly began brewing as soon as Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers took on this new accepted norm for women as called to the home front to serve men and their families. MacHaffie describes it this way: “By the middle of the nineteenth century in America, a cluster of ideas on the nature of women and their appropriate role was firmly planted in the popular mind of white America.” She aptly identifies this cluster of ideas as the “cult of true womanhood” or the “cult of domesticity.” MacHaffie describes this as the new American ideal—a woman who was “submissive, morally pure and pious. She found power and happiness in the role of wife and mother.”¹⁸ Barr also speaks to this cult, saying that while we cannot pinpoint its exact birthdate, it was conceived in the nineteenth century. Like MacHaffie, Barr identifies four characteristics of the cult of domesticity: piety, purity, submission, and domesticity.¹⁹ What is ironic here is that MacHaffie and Barr both point to the way women were now seen as the spiritual role models. This is why “piety” makes Barr’s list for the cult of domesticity where she explains the tenet that women are “naturally more religious than men and more attuned to spiritual matters.”²⁰ MacHaffie echoes this purported idea of women being “morally superior to men,” thus adding spiritual instruction in the home to their list of domestic duties.²¹

Perhaps we would do well to remember what sparked the Reformation. Ultimately, it was Luther’s desire to put an end to the corruption in the church via the sale of indulgences that kept others literally eating out of the hands of priests who were deemed the spiritual professionals. He sought to do away with these indulgences and to place Scripture into the hands of common people to feed themselves spiritually. At no point does it appear that Luther had a conscious goal to significantly alter the lives of women. Yet, this became one of the unforeseen outcomes of his passionate reforms. Because one of the main thrusts of Luther’s actions was to recover the authority of Scripture, this unforeseen outcome put him in a difficult place. By the time the sixteenth century arrived, the narratives about women as associated with sexual temptation and evil were centuries old.

If Luther was going to recover the authority of Scripture, he had quite a hill to climb to undo the distorted interpretations about women that preceded him. As Fairchild demonstrates, this would require Luther to recover the biblical idea of spiritual equality against ideas that women were spiritually inferior to men.²² While Luther partially succeeded, he came up against other German voices like that of Anabaptist preacher Balthasar Hubmaier. He is one example of the many European male voices

in the church during the Reformation who promoted women’s subordination. Like others, he pointed to the “old dichotomy between body and spirit to stress the carnal and hence evil nature of women.”²³ This left Luther at odds with a desire to recover Scripture and its authority on one hand, while finding himself convinced that the life of celibacy was no longer a holy calling from God. Luther attacked this way of life, “invading convents and urging nuns to leave.”²⁴ Luther’s influence was significant, and many joined him in these ideas and the efforts they produced.

Responding and Resisting

Where did this leave women at the time of the Reformation? Constrained. Confused. Conflicted. And as a result, a counter reformation emerged. This was an effort on the part of women, primarily in the Catholic Church, who had felt called to serve God uniquely and desired to retain their sense of calling. Movements to decloister and reorganize took shape as women within religious orders sought to move out into the community more visibly and shed their traditional garb.²⁵ These women resisted the efforts of Luther and others to shut down their convents. Yet these women also feared that Protestants, determined to “catch in the act” those committed to celibacy, would pounce on Catholic women who moved into the public sector by looking for immorality among clergy or nuns. It was as if they were simply waiting to say, “See! We always knew women were seducers who were out to corrupt celibate men!”

MacHaffie mentions one such Catholic sister named Jeanne de Jussie who was determined to resist these dynamics and fought to maintain their religious orders.²⁶ As a result, she and others experienced harassment from Protestant men because they voiced their disagreement with the way Protestantism was now glorifying marriage. De Jussie and sisters like her viewed this as a form of constraint on women. What were women in this era to do? They were being forced out of convents and into homes, while never truly being liberated from the notion that they, as women, existed to keep men happy and free from sexual temptation. It is not difficult to understand one of the striking trends that emerged during this time regarding the declarations women made in their wills.

Multiple documents record that, as women felt squeezed on both sides to please men, they found one way to liberate themselves: their wills in death. As the saying goes, “where there’s a will, there’s a way!” Stephanie Thomson and Katie Barclay have documented that women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw their wills as means to the agency they were denied while living. “The construction of family memory is a central area where women could exercise agency over not only how the family was envisioned for its own purposes, but how those representations could coalesce with other forms of historical knowledge-making to shape stories of place and social positioning.”²⁷ These women finally found a way to reject their constrained place in the church and, as those who tended to most of the family affairs at home, used their wills to make a statement.

Their religious patronage would not find its way back into the churches that limited them. Instead, many women wrote their

wills to direct their money to the poor. Women found a way to redirect the misuses of religious patronage that had prompted the Reformation. Rather than providing money back to these religious institutions, “bequests to parish churches decreased and poor relief came to dominate.”²⁸ Thomson and Barclay’s work goes on to explore the way wills became a “testament of post-mortem piety.” The work of Simone Laqua-O’Donnell confirms this trend. She studied 600 wills composed between 1600 and 1650 in Münster, Germany, and discovered that women overwhelmingly bequeathed their money not to the church, but to the poor.²⁹ While this is only one trend, it suggests that women were determined to find a way to preserve their values beyond those defined by the church. Even if it meant using their will in death to make such a statement.

Conclusion

As we step beyond the norms and assumed roles that took shape immediately following the Reformation, we can see that we are still, more than five centuries later, fighting the cult of domesticity. We have yet to fully recover a view of women that relegates them neither to sexually dangerous stereotypes nor as fit only for domestic duties. In both cases, these external assessments do not align with Scripture’s manner of prescribing worth. On one hand, we have been taught to celebrate the way the Reformation put the Bible back into the hands of the people, but at the same time, it tied an apron around the waist of Christian women and bound them to their homes. Today, traces of the cult of domesticity remain as women struggle to be viewed as equals and not treated as sexual threats in the church. As Barr is quick to remind, “Just because I agree with the Reformation theologically doesn’t mean I think everything that happened as a result of the Reformation is good.”³⁰ It appears that, while we Protestants were busy pulling the specks of control and monetary abuses out of the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church, we thrust a plank of male dominance right through our own.

The way women’s identity, sexuality, and viability for leadership in the church have been distorted seems intricately connected to the Reformation. Barr highlights that, “It is not an accident that the stories of the most authoritative women in Christian history stem from the fourth century through the tenth century, when the authority structures of Christianity—not to mention the political structures to which Christianity became attached—were more fluid.”³¹ I long for a return to the days of Teresa of Avila and Hilda von Bingen and Catherine of Siena. I long for a day when women are freely leading, teaching, and preaching, not over men, not under men, but alongside of men. I dream of not needing to do the dance of equality or figure out how to “be” without making men uncomfortable. Perhaps what I am dreaming for is the same dream the prophet Joel had when he prophesied: “I will pour out my Spirit upon *all* people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on servants, *men and women alike*” (Joel 2:28b–29 NLT, italics added). Yes, this day will come. May the church remember. May I remember. It will come.

Notes

1. Cissie Fairchild, *Women in Early Modern Europe 1500–1700* (Pearson Education, 2007).
2. Fairchild, *Women in Early Modern Europe*, 11.
3. Fairchild, *Women in Early Modern Europe*, 11.
4. Fairchild, *Women in Early Modern Europe*, 12.
5. Fairchild, *Women in Early Modern Europe*, 17.
6. Fairchild, *Women in Early Modern Europe*, 50.
7. Fairchild, *Women in Early Modern Europe*, 186.
8. Gertrud Wittenberg Tönsing, “Feminine Deity or Sister in Faith? A Lutheran Perspective on Mary, the Mother of Jesus,” *Grace and Truth* 15/2 (1988) 48.
9. Barbara J. MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition* (Fortress, 1986) 61.
10. MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 64.
11. Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Brazos, 2021) 102.
12. Barr, *Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 103.
13. Barr, *Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 103.
14. Barr, *Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 108.
15. MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 62.
16. Tönsing, “Feminine Deity or Sister in Faith?,” 48.
17. Tönsing, “Feminine Deity or Sister in Faith?,” 55.
18. MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 93.
19. Barr, *Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 165.
20. Barr, *Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 165.
21. MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 94.
22. Fairchild, *Women in Early Modern Europe*, 196.
23. MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 71.
24. Fairchild, *Women in Early Modern Europe*, 197.
25. MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 66–67.
26. MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 68.
27. Katie Barclay and Stephanie Thomson, “Religious Patronage as Gendered Family Memory in Sixteenth-century England,” *Journal of Family History* 46/1 (2021) 14.
28. Barclay and Thomson, “Religious Patronage,” 15.
29. Simone Laqua-O’Donnell, *Women and the Counter-Reformation in Early Modern Münster* (Oxford University Press, 2014) 53, see esp. the table on p. 53 for compelling data.
30. Barr, *Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 107.
31. Barr, *Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 114.

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