

The Ministry of Women and the Merger of Church and State in Fourth-Century Christianity

SHELLEY SIEMENS JANZEN

The Jesus movement in early Christian history introduced a scandalous egalitarian message to the Greco-Roman world. This informal, adaptable, and often counter-cultural movement challenged conventions by welcoming marginalized women and slaves to serve as leaders. According to sociologist Rodney Stark, “there is virtual consensus among historians of the early church as well as biblical scholars that women held positions of honor and authority within early Christianity.”¹ Given the ministry opportunities for women in the apostolic church, we should expect to see this pattern replicated as Christianity spread. However, as this movement organized through the second and third centuries, a variety of forces began to surface in the institutionalizing church that curtailed these possibilities. Ultimately, despite noteworthy female initiative and leadership in the development of Christianity, the institutional merger with the Roman Empire in the fourth century was pivotal in the suppression of the NT pattern.

The New Testament Pattern

The NT gives evidence of women’s exemplary leadership in the emerging church. Priscilla is an example of a woman who thought wisely about the gospel and taught other leaders in the church. “The prototype of the *didaskalos* [‘teacher’] is the apostolic theologian Priscilla, who when the rhetorically skilled Alexandrian Apollos arrived in Ephesus ‘gave him further instruction about the Way.’”² Mention of Priscilla before her husband, Aquila, in Acts 18 breaks with tradition and may indicate her leadership.³ By including this story, the narrator reveals new roles that women were adopting as coworkers in the Christian community.

Phoebe is another example of a woman championed in the NT for her leadership ministry. “The clearest NT identification of an individual with titles associated with senior local church leadership is not a man at all, but a woman: ‘Phoebe deacon . . . of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her . . . for she has been a leader of many’ (Rom. 16:1–2).”⁴ Her role as the deliverer of Paul’s letter to the Romans was significant as it involved being chosen as Paul’s representative, undergoing lengthy theological preparation, and presenting the letter with rhetorical skill to house churches in Rome.⁵

Due to the focus of this article, an extensive list of examples is not necessary; instead, one final example of early female leadership will suffice. Romans 16:7 records that Junia was an apostle who suffered imprisonment with Paul and was also outstanding or prominent among the apostles. Though contested by certain biblical interpreters due to the obvious egalitarian leadership connotations, that Junia was a woman, and an apostle, was accepted by virtually all early and medieval commentators.⁶ Consider Chrysostom’s unambiguous statement: “To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles—just think what a wonderful song of praise that is!”⁷

The Constantinian Shift

Unfortunately, this gift- and service-based leadership was drastically redirected as the church entered a privileged political merger with the Roman Empire. “The most impressive transitory change underlying our common experience, one that some thought was a permanent forward lunge in salvation history, was the so-called Constantinian shift.”⁸ In 325, the Council of Nicaea convened, and the once-persecuted church consolidated under the leadership of Emperor Constantine. “Even though many ‘Constantinian’ tendencies began before the fourth century and reached their culmination only much later, the term ‘Constantinianism’ serves as a schematic designation for the profound changes that took place as a result of the Christian faith’s becoming the official religion of the whole of society.”⁹ This transformation into “Christendom,” with the embedded loss of distinctiveness, would have a significantly negative impact on women in ministry.

Initial political outcomes of the Constantinian shift that negatively impacted women in ministry included the dramatic change in both the status and function of church leadership. Now that the church was sponsored by Rome,

Christianity was attracting members of the municipal ruling elites, who were trained for public life and experienced in city politics. Many Christian communities welcomed these aristocratic members, and they moved quickly into leadership positions. These men were schooled in the institutions of public life. . . . [They] brought into the churches new leadership models, models that had proved effective for governing large and diverse communities.¹⁰

Increasingly, distinguished and aristocratic church leaders were also civic leaders. The leadership infrastructure of the church began to reflect the prominence of clerical leadership and these new, more overtly political roles. The office of bishop became more monarchical and modeled after civic leadership. Since women’s civic roles were limited, women’s leadership in the church became more contested and controversial.¹¹ Ultimately, fewer women held ecclesiastical office as the state-sponsored church adopted civic responsibility and Greco-Roman political models.

A further political shift that had regrettable consequences for women’s ministry was the opportunity for fourth-century churches to operate in government sponsored, imperial-style locations. “Christian communities moved their meetings out of the courtyards of members’ households and into elegant new purpose-built basilicas with marble columns. In many cases, the new basilicas were paid for by the Emperor himself—indeed, the original meaning of the term ‘basilica’ is an audience-chamber for a king (*basileus*).”¹² Christian worship locations came to reflect the most dignified centers of governmental authority. As the physical

architecture of the church transformed into these elaborate spaces, Christian leadership became associated with secular government and lordship, which subordinated the ministry of women.

It is worth examining how these political changes in status, responsibility, structure, and location directly affected the definition of Christian leadership. Whereas in the early decades of the church, leaders were recognized by exemplary, functional service, leadership now moved toward the model of civic councils. Consequently, “the concept of leadership began to shift subtly from ministry to governance. An important development of this transition was the growing divide between the clergy and the laity. The language in which this demarcation was cast echoed the division in city politics between the rulers and the subjects.”¹³ The prior understanding that leaders existed to build up the body, of which Christ was the direct Lord, began to resemble secular definitions of governmental leadership. “In the Constantinian perspective . . . there no longer exists a people over whom God *directly* exercises his lordship; the emperor and his like have occupied God’s place.”¹⁴ Roman political hierarchy and concepts of intermediary rank and status became emphasized within Christian understandings of leadership. Women who were functioning as exemplary ministers now found their service redefined with suppressive parameters.

These political transformations of the church during the Constantinian shift introduced a range of sociological changes to Christians in general and to the women of the church in particular. “At the beginning of the second century, the Christian community was perhaps 0.1 percent of an imperial population of maybe 60 million. By the time of Constantine, it constituted perhaps 10 percent. . . . Now the number of converts began to soar. By the 380s, it may well have made up the majority of the imperial population.”¹⁵ The journey from a persecuted minority group to the official religion of Rome inside of fifty years dramatically affected the membership and social dynamics of the church. A community that had been deeply committed and socially risky evolved into an institutional affiliation constrained by social custom.

This massive sociological change in church constituency had direct ramifications for women’s social experience in the church. To begin with, “a wider mix of women found themselves drawn under its canopy. Of course, some of the Christian women of the fourth century came from families that had adhered to the faith from its earliest days, but far more numerous were those to whom the stories and doctrines of the Christians were something of a novelty.”¹⁶ This amalgamation of a large portion of secular men and women with a socially unique church unfortunately resulted in a movement toward conventional social restrictions for women. Social behaviour “experienced a regression toward greater conformity with the patterns of the dominant secular culture. The Church, as it moved forward into the early Middle Ages, moved backward in its social structures. Perhaps the group most adversely affected by this regression were the devout Christian women, many of whom would never . . . use the gifts God had granted them.”¹⁷ The charismatic ministry of women found little support within the strict Roman social hierarchy

of early Christendom. One example of this move toward social convention was in the church’s limitation of women’s ministry in what Romans considered male domains. In general, public spaces were considered the social realm of men, and the privacy of the home was the sphere of women. As churches moved to public locations, these public vs. private social structures made women’s leadership more controversial.¹⁸

These social patterns incorporated by the church found their source in suppressive Greco-Roman gender philosophy. Christianity’s movement toward distinct spheres of influence based on gender can be traced to classical Greek philosophical ideas, in particular to Aristotle’s notion of essential gender identity, in which women were considered incomplete men.¹⁹ The prevailing dualism of classical thought, in which men were superior to women, precluded women from Roman leadership categories. Theology at this time reflected much of this hierarchal philosophy. “Augustine of Hippo, in *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*, wondered why God made women at all. . . . Augustine saw the leadership/submission dichotomy as built into the texture of creation.”²⁰ Tertullian, whose writings remained influential in the fourth century, further mirrored classical leadership philosophies. In his vision, women’s behaviour would again conform to the standards of a lost golden age—not, unfortunately, the golden age of the Jesus movement’s radical egalitarianism, but of Rome’s restrictive understanding of gender roles.²¹

Relevance for the Church Today

The topic of women in church leadership continues to be directly relevant and hotly contested. Reevaluation of leadership definitions and structures is challenging the remaining Constantinian trappings. Service-focused definitions of church leadership still face opposition from those who define church leaders as men holding an office of government within a God-ordained institutional hierarchy. For example, “the complementarians’ more hierarchal understanding of church structure tends to undermine their good intention to maintain a servant focus. It is difficult to see pastors primarily as servants of God’s people when ordination appears to endow a privileged few with power and status.”²² A move away from the historically secular definition of leaders as office-bearers and toward the organic NT recognition of exemplary ministry is needed.

Many would argue today that a fundamental revision of church leadership structure and even church location is necessary to facilitate charismatic ministry and revival. “Simply letting women ‘join the old boys’ club’ solves very little. . . . [If] male-dominated, overly hierarchal modes of church management remain in place . . . then the ordination of women turns out to be a questionable victory.”²³ A move away from what some regard as efficient military or corporate church structures toward a congregational model is required. Another option could include a move to more informal gathering places, which might foster creativity and growth consistent with the example of the early church. “Studies have demonstrated that the ‘success rate’ of missionary encounters that take place in the home of a friend or family member is five hundred times higher than encounters in an institutional setting or a public place.”²⁴

Conclusion

The search for precedent should be rooted in the NT examples of women recognized by Jesus, as well as Paul and other NT authors, as functional leaders. A historical framework is also valuable for contextualizing current debates and recognizing definitions and structures that continue to sideline or suppress women in church ministry. “Understanding why and how women, once leaders in the Jesus movement and in the early church, were marginalized and scapegoated as Christianity became the state religion is crucial if women are to reclaim their rightful, equal place in the church today.”²⁵

Notes

1. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) 109.
2. John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1985) 33.
3. Priscilla is named first in Acts 18:18 and 26, where the context is ministry. Earlier, in 18:2, Aquila is named first when the couple is introduced. In Paul’s writings, Priscilla is named first twice (Rom 16:3, 2 Tim 4:19), and Aquila is named first once (1 Cor 16:19).
4. Philip B. Payne, “Is It True That in the New Testament No Women, Only Men, Are Identified by Name as Elders, Overseers, or Pastors, and that Consequently Women Must Not Be Elders, Overseers, Or Pastors?” 1, <http://pbpayne.com/?p=501>.
5. Jeffrey D. Miller, “What Can We Say about Phoebe?,” *Priscilla Papers* 25/2 (Spring 2011) 17.
6. Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Eerdmans, 2002) 166. See also Dennis J. Preato, “Junia, a Female Apostle: An Examination of the Historical Record,” *Priscilla Papers* 33/2 (Spring 2019) 8–15.
7. Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Fortress, 2005) 32.
8. John Howard Yoder, “Is There Such a Thing as Being Ready for Another Millennium?,” in *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor*

of Jurgen Moltmann, ed. Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg, and Thomas Kucharz (Eerdmans, 1996) 63.

9. Antonio Gonzalez, *God’s Reign and the End of Empires* (Convivium, 2012) 274.
10. Karen Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*, reprint (HarperOne, 1995) 155–56.
11. Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*, 157.
12. Kate Cooper, *Band of Angels: The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women* (Overlook, 2013) 140.
13. Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*, 156.
14. Gonzalez, *God’s Reign and the End of Empires*, 275.
15. Kevin Madigan, *Medieval Christianity: A New History* (Yale University Press, 2015) 20.
16. Cooper, *Band of Angels*, 140.
17. Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) 210.
18. Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*, 157.
19. Carrie L. Bates, “Gender Ontology and Women in Ministry in the Early Church,” *Priscilla Papers* 25/2 (Spring 2011) 6.
20. Bates, “Gender Ontology,” 7–8.
21. Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*, 158.
22. Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry*, 7th ed. (IVP Academic, 1995) 218.
23. Grenz and Kjesbo, *Women in the Church*, 230.
24. Cooper, *Band of Angels*, 11–12.
25. Ian Jones, Kirsty Thorpe, and Janet Wootton, eds., *Women and Ordination in the Christian Churches: International Perspectives* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008) 50.



SHELLEY SIEMENS JANZEN holds a BA from Columbia Bible College and a graduate diploma from Regent College. She is currently completing a Master of Arts in Theological Studies at Regent College in Vancouver, BC, where she lives with her husband, Tony.

Book Review

Valiant or Virtuous? Gender Bias in Bible Translation

by author Suzanne McCarthy and eds. Jay Frankel, Christy Hayhoe, and Ruth Hayhoe (Wipf and Stock, 2019)

Reviewed by MICHAELA MILLER

In the last years of her life, Suzanne McCarthy dedicated herself to offering a helpful and accessible text on the sometimes-complicated topic of gender and Bible translation. She passed away in 2015 as this book neared completion, and members of her family brought it to completion and publication.¹

McCarthy approaches this important matter from an egalitarian perspective in a systematic and thorough way, addressing not only the biblical text but also the history behind many translation trends. While she presents a significant amount of technical information, readers with or without academic training in biblical studies or Bible translation will find this book understandable and informative.

Section 1: Gender Attributes

Valiant or Virtuous? Gender Bias in Bible Translation is organized into four distinct sections, the first being Gender Attributes. McCarthy dedicates four chapters to this discussion, each addressing a different adjective used for both men and women throughout the Bible. She notes that the same descriptors are often translated differently for men and women, providing a detailed survey of each word and its usage. In these chapters, rather than only offering a list of where each word appears in the biblical text, McCarthy provides a wealth of background material that illuminates the historical development of translation practices and traditions regarding each term. While her treatment of the biblical