

Women in Church History: an Examination of pre-Reformation

Convictions and Practice.

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The present essay is intended to offer a brief summary of pre-Reformational views and praxis in an area of considerable contemporary interest. It is offered with the hope that discussions on the role of women in the life of the church, especially when appeal is made to historical precedent, will be more nuanced in the future. Discussion focuses especially on 1 Timothy 2:8-15 since this is the passage where evangelical discussion is most frequently engaged.

The scarcity of the evidence and the Fathers' ambivalent attitudes to women sometimes render interpreting the evidence of the early church difficult. For example, a "tension" appears to exist in every patristic text that deals with women.¹ Thus, Clark comments,

Women were God's creation, his good gift to men - and the curse of the world. They were weak in both mind and character - and displayed dauntless courage, undertook prodigious feats of scholarship. Vain, deceitful, brimming with lust - they led men to Christ, fled sexual encounter, wavered not at the executioner's threats, adorned themselves with sackcloth and ashes...the Fathers praised and blamed, honored and disparaged the female sex.²

Consequently, what sometimes appears as an inconsistency, both in the appeal to Scripture and in articulating a coherent theology of women, may arise from the historical and

¹ M. G. Mara, "Woman," in the *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, ed. E. Ferguson (Chicago: St. James, 1990), 881.

² E. A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983), 15.

cultural context, the possible use of hyperbole and the tension experienced between received dogma and the heroic way women faced martyrdom. Nevertheless, it appears that a traditional interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 prevailed during the first five centuries of the church.

This is illustrated in the most thorough treatment of the passage preserved from the period: that of John Chrysostom.³ He argues that Paul offers instructions on prayer, requiring that “in like manner [to the men]...women approach God without wrath or doubting, lifting up holy hands” and that they “imitate not therefore the courtesans”. This command is addressed to wealthy wives but applies “much more ...[to] those who have professed virginity.” Thus, all women are exhorted to, “transfer this care to thy soul, to the inward adorning.”⁴ While Chrysostom recognised that the historical context was one in which some women were endeavouring to “thrust themselves into ministry in the church”,⁵ he universalises the teaching of the passage. Consequently, he stresses the fact that Paul teaches that women are “not speak at all in the church” whether on worldly or sacred issues. This is because, according to a “divine law”, they “have not received a commission”.⁶

Three reasons are offered for this (and reappear throughout church history): female vulnerability, the order of creation and the fact that sin entered the human race through the actions of a woman. Thus, Chrysostom notes, firstly, that “the sex is naturally somewhat

³ For a helpful analysis of the Fathers’ interpretative methods and the tendency of Chrysostom to adopt a moralistic and “flat” method of interpretation , see M. Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 53-85.

⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Timothy*, LoF, Vol. 12, Nos. VIII and IX, 62-75, esp., 63-66.

⁵ John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, trans. G. Neville (London: SPCK, 1964), Chapter 3, Section 9, 78.

⁶ Chrysostom, *Timothy*, 69f, 78.

talkative” and the “woman is softer of mind than a man and more subject to being flooded with emotion”. Secondly, he adds that “the male sex enjoy the higher honour. Man was formed first.” Finally, the man is to have precedence because the woman “made a bad use of her power over the man... The woman taught once, and ruined all.”⁷ Thus the primal history concerns contemporary women since the “sex is weak and fickle, and he [Paul] is speaking of the sex collectively.”⁸

Nevertheless, women can still be saved even though their sex has incurred blame since, “God hath given her no small consolation, that of childbearing...If they [the children] continue in faith charity and holiness with sobriety.”⁹ Moreover, the wife is not a spiritual inferior and is of great service to her husband since, “she keeps the house, takes care of all things in the house, she presides over her handmaids, she clothes them with her own hands, she causes thee to be called the father of children, she delivers thee from brothels, she aids thee to live chastely, she puts a stop to the strong desire of nature.”¹⁰

Chrysostom was fairly typical of the outlook of the Fathers. Thus, the *Apostolic Constitutions*¹¹ refer to the ordination of deaconesses,¹² permit women to prophesy¹³ and

⁷ Chrysostom, *Timothy*, 70f; idem, *Homilies of St. John Chrysostom on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, in LoF, Vol. 2, 348-368, esp., 353.

⁸ Chrysostom, *Timothy*, 71.

⁹ Ibid, 71f.

¹⁰ Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Thessalonians*, in LoF, Vol. 14, 512.

¹¹ G. T. D. Angel, “Apostolic Canons,” in *New Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd Edition, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 58. The Constitutions can be firmly dated to 381 but many reflect canons decreed at the Synod of Antioch in 341.

¹² *The Apostolic Constitutions*, ANCL, Vol. XVII, Book 8, Sections XIX, XX, 239f.

¹³ *Constitutions*, Book 8, Section II. 211f. A similar view is expressed by Tertullian who, on the one hand, says that while “women should be under obedience” they are not speak in the church for the “mere sake of learning” but, on the other, states, “they have the right of prophesying”. See Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, ANCL, Vol. VIII, Book V, Chapter, VIII, 410f.

pray publicly but forbid teaching.¹⁴ In doing so, they appeal to 1 Corinthians 11:2ff and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and specifically to the order of creation: “For if the ‘man be the head of the woman,’ and he be originally ordained for the priesthood, it is not just to abrogate the order of the creation, and leave the principal to come to the extreme part of the body. For the woman is the body of the man, taken from his side, and subject to him, from whom she was separated for the procreation of children.”¹⁵

More generally, the Fathers assume 1 Timothy 2:8-15 refers to public worship¹⁶ and 2:8-11 requires prayer to be offered in innocence and,¹⁷ especially in the case of women, humbly.¹⁸ Women are to cultivate their “inner” virtues¹⁹ and may, perhaps, prophesy,²⁰ but are not to teach (even sound doctrine).²¹ Women are the spiritual equals of men. Thus, Cyprian of Carthage states in his *Epistles* “the mercy of Christ, and the heavenly grace that

¹⁴ *Constitutions*, Book 3, Section VI, 96.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, Book 3, Section IX, 100.

¹⁶ Basil the Great, *Concerning Baptism*, cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Vol. IX, ed. P. Gorday (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 162f; Origen, *Editio Epistolarum Pauli*, in PG, Vol. 85, 782.

¹⁷ Tertullian, *On Prayer*, ANCL, Vol. XI, chapters XIII and XVII, 188f, 191f; Augustine, *De Vita Christiana*, PL, Vol. 40, Chapter 40, 1041f; Jerome, *Breviarium in Psalmes*, PL, Vol. 36, No. 21, 879-884; John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans., C. Luibheid, in *John Cassian; Conferences* (New York: Paulist, 1945), 9.3.3, 102, and Maximus Episcopi Tavriensis, *Sermones* (Brepols: Turnholti, 1962), 38, 3, 149, who argues the symbolic character of “lifting up holy hands” is that cross-wise, the believer confesses the Lord’s suffering.

¹⁸ Ambrose, *Duties of the Clergy*, PL, Vol. 77, 70, and Origen, *On Prayer*, trans. R. A. Greer, in *Origen* (New York: Paulist, 1979), 83, 98f.

¹⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, ANCL, Vol. IV, II, XI, 260; Tertullian, *On Female Dress*, ANCL, Vol. XI, 304.

²⁰ Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, ANCL, Vol. VII, II, XIII, 143. Despite the support of the *Apostolic Constitutions* this view does not seem to have been generally adopted in the patristic church. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Vol. VII, ed. G. Bray (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 146, notes that Origen, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul’s Epistles* and even the *Montanist Oracles* do not believe that women were permitted to corporately prophesy.

²¹ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, ANCL, Vol. XI, 1, 231f; *idem*, *Baptism*, 252, *idem*, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, ANCL, Vol. XVIII, 168. Pelagius, *Commentary on the First Letter to Timothy*, in *Pelagius’ Expositions of Thirteen Epistles of St. Paul*, Vol. 2, trans. A. Souter (Cambridge: University Press, 1926), 487 (and compare 494f), says Paul nevertheless, “very much wants them to exercise their authority in the home as teachers of virtue.” See also, *idem*, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, trans. T. de Bruyn, (Clarendon: Oxford, 1993), 151, where Pelagius notes that, at his time, women in the eastern Church could minister to their own sex in baptism and that Paul commends private tuition, even to men. See also Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on 1 Timothy*, as cited in Gorday, 167.

would subsequently follow, was equally divided among all; without difference of sex, without distinction of years, without accepting of persons, upon all people of God the gift of spiritual grace was shed.”²² Moreover, Clement acknowledged that wives accompanied the apostles and ministered alongside of them²³ This is confirmed in a statement which is reflective of early ascetic ideals, where he cites 1 Corinthians 9:5 and he says, “*Dicit itaque in quadam epistola: ‘Non habemus potestatem sororem uxorem circumcendi, sicut et reliqui apostoli’. Sed hi quidem, ut erat consentaneum, ministerio, quod divelli not poterat, praedicationi scilicet, attendentes, non ut uxores, sed ut sorores circumducebant mulieres.*”²⁴ However, teaching is forbidden to women on grounds of both nature and law²⁵ and the fact that the Fall occurred when the woman acted outside her appointed role.²⁶ Further reasons are that she is to blame for the Fall and under the greater judgement as a result²⁷ and women are an easy target for false teaching.²⁸ Verse 15 teaches that the home is the sphere of a woman's ministry²⁹ and “the childbirth” is often seen as a reference to Mary: “what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith.”³⁰

²² Cited in W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody: Hendrikson, 1998), 693. See also Minucius Felix, *The Octavius of Minucius Felix*, ANCL, Vol. XIII, XVI, 473, and Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, ANCL, Vol. XII, IV, XIX, 193.

²³ Clement, *Miscellanies*, III, VII, 112.

²⁴ *Ibid*, III, VII, 112.

²⁵ Ambrose, *Letters*, PL, Vol. 77, 1267-1269, Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, ANCL, Vol. XXI, III, XXII, 193f and Clement, *Miscellanies*, IV, VIII, 166

²⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ANCL, Vol. V, III, XXII, 4, 361.

²⁷ *Ibid*, III, XXII, 4, 362, Tertullian, *A Strain of the Judgement of the Lord*, ANCL, Vol. XVIII, 304, and Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, eds. H. Wace & P. Schaff (Oxford: James Parker, 1894), Vols. VII, XIII, 88. Augustine, *City of God*, ed. M. Dods (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), Vol. 2, Book 14, chapter 11 is more muted. While Eve believed the serpent, Adam did not wish to be separated from his partner even in sin. Nevertheless, his guilt is no less. Ambrose, *Paradise*, PL, Vol. 77, 10.47, 297f, and Gregory of Nyssa, *KATA EUNOMIOU LOGOS*, IB, PG, Vol. 45, also reflect a more positive attitude towards women.

²⁸ Irenaeus, *Heresies*, ANCL, Vol. IX, I, XIII, 1, 51f, and V, XXI, 1, 111. However, elsewhere Irenaeus places the blame on the man being misled by Satan. See, for example, *idem*, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, Vol. 16, trans. J. P. Smith (New York: Newman, 1952), 57.

²⁹ Clement, *Miscellanies*, III, X, 310.

³⁰ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary* and Cyril of Jerusalem, *Lectures*, XII, cited in Gorday, 165.

Thus, the Fathers viewed 1 Corinthians 11:2ff, 14:33ff and, especially, 1 Timothy 2:8-15 as clear, universal and normative. Women were forbidden the teaching office on the grounds of divine law, the realities of created nature in which the woman was made to support the man and on the basis of deemed weaknesses in the female make up and “her” responsibility for sin entering the world.³¹

Nevertheless, leadership by women was especially prominent in early heretical sects (for example, Montanism)³² which bore a resemblance to similar movements in Protestantism,³³ resisted “an increasingly rigid, ritualistic Catholicism”³⁴ and subsequently appeared attractive to those with pietistic leanings.³⁵

Thus women were actively involved in officially recognised and public speaking ministries by the middle of the second century.³⁶ The office of deaconess developed³⁷ and the Council of Chalcedon addressed positively the issue of their formal ordination.³⁸ Other women, especially the high born, studied and taught the Bible. These included Jerome’s

³¹ A similar picture appears in the medieval period. See, for example, R. B. Edwards, *The Case for Women’s Ministry* (London: SPCK, 1989), 104-111.

³² K. Brownell, “Gender in the History of the Church,” MWA, 25. See P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 1 (New York, Charles Scribners, 1910) 417-427, and N. Bonwetsch, “Montanus,” in *The New Schaff-Hertzog Encyclopaedia of Christian Knowledge*, vol. VII, ed. S. M. Jackson, 485-487 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1910). 285-287, and R. A. Tucker & W. Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 100, 114f.

³³ H. D. McDonald, “Montanism,” in Douglas, *Dictionary*, 674.

³⁴ G. Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1979), 54.

³⁵ For example, J. Wesley, “The Real Character of Montanus,” *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. XI (London: Wesleyan Methodist Bookroom, 1872), 485f.

³⁶ *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, ed. & trans., B. Radice (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 294. See also Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ANCL, Vol. II, Chapter lxxxvii, 210.

³⁷ As Brownell, 25, concedes.

³⁸ Tucker & Liefeld, 110

fellow-workers Paula, Eustochium and Marcella,³⁹ the sister of Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Peter of Sebaste and Marcellina, who taught Ambrose and Satyrus.⁴⁰ Something of the perceived ambiguity of the situation was recorded by Jerome when he said of Marcella,

In case of any dispute arising as to the testimony of scripture on any subject, recourse was had to her to settle it. And so wise was she and so well did she understand what philosophers call *to prepon*, that is, the becoming, in what she did, that when she answered questions she gave her opinion not as her own, but as from me or someone else, thus admitting that what she taught she had herself learned from others. For she knew that the apostle said: ‘suffer not a woman to teach,’ and she would not seem to inflict a wrong upon the male sex, many of whom (including some priests) questioned her concerning obscure and doubtful points.⁴¹

A similar picture of active ministry by women is witnessed later. Thus, while there are difficulties associated with referring to the “Celtic” church,⁴² most conclude that “insular” Christianity⁴³ the role of women was one “which their sisters in the majority of other contemporary European societies did not have.”⁴⁴ This conclusion seems warranted by the recorded ministries of Ita of Kileedy,⁴⁵ Hilda,⁴⁶ by the prominent place accorded to women’s

³⁹ Compare *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, trans. F. A. Wright (London: William Heinemann, 1954), 455, and see Jerome’s account of the life of Paula in his Letter 108, written to Eustochium. An English translation is to be found in S. L. Greenslade, ed. & trans., *Early Christian Fathers* (London: SCM, 1956), 348-382.

⁴⁰ F. Corrigan, *Benedictine Tapestry* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1991), 39, 43.

⁴¹ See Jerome, *Epistles*, in *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VI, eds. P. Schaff & H. Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), Epistle 127, 255f.

⁴² See, especially, I. Bradley, *Columba: Pilgrim and Penitent* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 1996), 7-9; T. O’Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edges* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000), 19-33; idem, *Celtic Theology* (London: Continuum, 2000), 1-24; D. E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh, Handsel, 2000); O. Davies, trans. & ed. *Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1999), 3-25, and P. Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995), 1-8.

⁴³ For example, M. Mitton, *Restoring the Woven Cord* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995), 111-122, and R. Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 73-82.

⁴⁴ P. Beressford Ellis, *Celtic Inheritance* (London: Constable, 1992), 19. See also, idem, *Celtic Women* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 14-19, and 267. See also the discussion in B. Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts* (Oxford: University Press, 1997), 109f.

⁴⁵ I. Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993), 16, 41, 71.

⁴⁶ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (New York: Washington Square, 1968), 221-226. Beressford Ellis, *Women*, 142-171, suggests there is evidence that some women (including Hilda) were ordained and even given episcopal rank.

names among church dedications in Cornwall that suggests an active missionary role by women⁴⁷ and by the prominence of women in the Anglo-Saxon church.⁴⁸ Later, women ascetics exercised a significant ministry of leadership and teaching: for example, Leoba⁴⁹, Liutberga,⁵⁰ Birgitta of Sweden,⁵¹ Heloise, Mechtilde of Magdeberg and the famous preacher, Hildegard of Bingen.⁵² Later still, Catherine of Siena was increasingly sought out as a confidante, teacher and public speaker,⁵³ Theresa of Avila had a prominent public ministry⁵⁴ and engaged in active teaching ministry: often, as in the case of the Beguines, through writing.⁵⁵ Again, women achieved prominence especially among lay-inspired movements such as the Catharii and Taborites.⁵⁶ Others, often inspired by St. Antony,⁵⁷

⁴⁷ See W. C. Borlase, *The Age of the Saints* (Truro: Joseph Pollard, 1893); T. Taylor, *The Celtic Christianity of Cornwall* (Felinfach: Llanerch, 1995), and, above all, G. H. Doble, *The Saints of Cornwall*, six volumes (Oxford: Holywell Press & Felinfach: Llanerch, various dates). N. Orme, *Nicholas Roscarrock's Lives of the Saints: Cornwall and Devon* (Exeter: Devon & Cornwall Record Society, 1992) specifically mentions (and to give them their contemporary spellings): Buryan, Colomb, Dominic, Endelient, Enodoc, Erth, Gunnoda, Gwen, Ia (Ive), Dilic, Ineda, Cynidr, Kew, Keyne, Mabyn, Morewenne, Nevidh, Nonn, Newlyn, Piala and Sapienta. Similar evidence could be given for Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Brittany.

⁴⁸ K. Moore, *She for God* (London: Allison & Busby, 1987), 21-35, notes the outstanding abbesses (many of royal parentage) within the Saxon church. On the Anglo-Saxon church see, further, P. Cavill, *Anglo-Saxon Christianity* (London: Harper Collins, 1999).

⁴⁹ See Rudolf of Fulda, *Life of Leoba, Abbess of Bichofstein*, in C. H. Talbert, *and The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1954).

⁵⁰ *The Life of St. Liutberga*, trans., J. A. McNamara (Fordham: University Press, 1997).

⁵¹ *Birgitta of Sweden, Life and Selected Writings*, ed. & trans., M. T. Harris (New York: Paulist, 1990), 77f, 86f.

⁵² S. Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* (London: Routledge, 1989), 41-56, 158-178, esp., 172ff, and *Scivias*, eds. & trans., C. Hart & J. Bishop (New York: Paulist, 1990), 14f. For Hildegard and Mechtilde, see also B. Ward, "The New Orders," in *The Study of Spirituality*, eds. C. Jones, G. Wainwright & E. Yarnold (London: SPCK, 1986), 283-291; G. H. Tavard, "Apostolic Life and Church Reform," in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. J. Raitt (London: SCM, 1988): 4, and Corrigan, *Benedictine*, 57f, 83f. Selected writings from a number of medieval women (including the above) can be found in M. Furlong, *Visions and Longings: Medieval Women Mystics* (London: Mowbray, 1996).

⁵³ See, generally, M. A. Fatula, *Catherine of Sienna's Way* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987), and, more specifically, *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue*, ed. & trans. S. Noffke (New York: Paulist, 19xx), 5, 7, and K. Foster & M. Ronayne, *I, Catherine* (London, Collins, 1980), 17, 23ff.

⁵⁴ As described in S. de Boulay, *Teresa of Avila* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991). Theresa's autobiography is in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, I, eds. & trans., K. Kavanaugh & O. Rodriguez (Kalamazoo: ICS Publications, 1987).

⁵⁵ See for example, *Gertrude of Helfta: The Herald of Divine Love*, ed. & trans. M. Winkworth (New York: Paulist, 1993), 81f; *Hadewijch, Works*, ed. & trans. C. Hart (New York: Paulist, 1980), 1ff, and *The Revelations of Mechtilde of Magdeburg*, ed. & trans. L. Menzies (London: Longmans, Green, 1953), 58f, 98 and S. Murk-Jensen, *Brides in the Desert* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998).

⁵⁶ Tucker & Liefeld, 162f. Often women resorted to writing (at the direct appointment of Christ) in order to exercise a ministry.

resorted to anchoritism:⁵⁸ a role that offered them great influence as teachers and spiritual directors. The most famous Englishwoman was Julian of Norwich,⁵⁹ who was sought out by many (including Margery Kempe) for her wisdom and teaching.⁶⁰ Thus, while these developments can be exaggerated (and many of these women were consciously swimming against the tide)⁶¹ their existence cannot be denied.⁶²

Thus, the historical evidence is not altogether unambiguous. It suggests that appeal to historical precedent as to the role of women in the church needs to be advanced with a greater degree of circumspection than has frequently been the case.

⁵⁷ The inspiration was fostered by St Athanasius' *Life of Antony* (see P. Schaff & H. Wace, eds. *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. iv (London: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 195-221).

⁵⁸ John of Ford's *Life of Wulfric of Haselbury* in P. Matarsasso, ed., *The Cistercian World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 235-273, describes a typical lifestyle.

⁵⁹ Her fame rests on her *Revelations of Divine Love*, eds., H. Backhouse & R. Pipe (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987).

⁶⁰ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. B. A. Windeatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 77.

⁶¹ Furlong, 5-10.

⁶² In addition to the sources cited above, see also R. B. Edwards, *The Case for Women's Ministry* (London: SPCK, 1989), 104-116.