

Women and Ministry in the Early Church

Women engaged in a variety of ministries in the early church.

It is difficult to generalize about the early Christian experience, but it is perhaps fair to say that women's ministry in the early church were especially prominent in areas of the Church's life that were charismatic and unstructured and were more limited in areas of the Church's life that were more institutional, structured and hierarchical in character.

Charismatic → Institutional

- (Authority comes from the readily discernable working of the Spirit in an individual's life) → (Authority is conferred by an institutional hierarchy to permit the functioning of an individual in certain structured institutional roles)
- Different understandings of authority (Being *an* authority → Being *in* authority)
- (Potentially greater freedom to act and to innovate → potentially greater quality control and sustainability/permanence)

A. Prophetic Roles of Women in the New Covenant

- Already prefigured by Anna, a prophetess, in Christ's infancy (Lk. 2:36-38)
- With the outpouring of the Spirit, both men and women prophesy in the Church (Acts 2:17-18 [this the fulfillment of OT prophecy]; Acts 21:9 [Philip had four unmarried daughters who prophesied]; 1 Cor. 12:4-11,28 [prophetic gifts given to the Church as a whole, without distinction between the sexes— see further 1 Cor. 11:4-5, where this is made explicit])
- Prophesying continues to hold a place of central importance in early Christian worship into the beginning of the second century A.D.
- After 120 A.D., prophesying within the context of early Christian worship gradually goes into decline and by the second half of the second century A.D. is primarily found among movements that are either schismatic (e.g. Montanism, a prophetic movement in a mountainous area of Asia Minor) or heretical (certain forms of Gnostic spirituality, in which women are treated as special recipients of revelation, sometimes given truths to relate to others which have not previously been generally made known).
 - Since these heretical and schismatic movements caused great disorder in the Church, a greater emphasis was given to institutional order (with the presbyter/elder [a man] taking on a more uniquely authoritative role).
 - Other more charismatic, unstructured forms of authority and ministry (in which women had previously been prominent) being viewed with increasing suspicion and mistrust.
 - The formation of new organizational structures outside the traditional institutional structure of the Church and the giving of authority to women to perform institutional functions traditionally reserved to men were treated with suspicion. (See e.g. Tertullian *De prescriptione haereticorum* 41, which criticizes the easy and undiscerning ordinations performed by schismatic and heretical groups, in which women were allowed to teach the whole congregation, dispute, perform exorcisms, promise healings and perform baptisms, drawing people away from the main body of the Church; compare *De bapt.* 1 and *De veland. virg.* 9, which refer back to 2 Tim. 2:11-12 and 1 Cor.

14:34-35, and the *Acta Matthaei* 28, where women are given ecclesiastical offices).

B. Total commitment to a life of prayer and service to the Church through singleness (virgins/widows).

- Jesus teaches that some will (and must) remain single, renouncing the possibility of marriage and family life for sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.
- Paul also teaches that singleness is in some ways preferable, since it allows for a total and undivided devotion to Christ that is difficult for the married to attain (1 Cor. 7:8,27,34).
- The early Church recognized and affirmed this commitment in two ways
 - The order of the (consecrated) virgins (requirements: to be of sufficient age to give voluntary assent and to make this lifelong commitment by free choice)
 - The order of widows (see 1 Tim. 5:9-14; must be 60 years old and approved by the bishop; received financial support from the Church; were sometimes placed under the authority of a *πρεσβυτης* (*presbutis*), i.e. an elder or senior widow).
- Women
 - were recognized and admitted to these minor orders through a public prayer without the laying on of hands,
 - would sit in a special position of honor at the front of the Church and
 - were subject to the authority of the bishop like the regular clergy.
- Their principal ministry was
 - prayer (on the need to pray without ceasing, see 1 Th. 5:17; 1 Tim. 2:8)
 - (in the case of the widows) the evangelization and teaching of younger women
 - virgins might also be charged with pastoral visitation of the sick (which was properly the work of the deacons).
- Virgins and widows were, however, forbidden to
 - teach doctrine to unbelievers or
 - perform functions reserved to the priesthood (e.g. teaching doctrine to the whole congregation and engaging in the regular performance of baptism or presiding over the Lord's Supper).

With the rise of the ascetic movement in the fourth century, holy women sometimes lived in places of solitude apart from any congregation or institutional ecclesiastical recognition.

- Because of their holiness of life, they were sometimes sought out for spiritual counsel.
- In the early years of Christianity in the British Isles, they also functioned, just as men of holy life did, as a "soul friend" (*anamchara*), i.e. a spiritual director for an individual or extended family, hearing confession of sins, offering absolution, and providing spiritual direction.
 - Although the hearing of confessions and offering of absolution eventually came to be reserved to the parish priest, holy women continued to provide spiritual direction to other women even outside the framework of the

monastic system (e.g. *Ancrene Wisse* 2.20-281 and Julian of Norwich in *The Book of Margery Kempe* 18)

C. Deaconesses (ἡ διάκονος ; ἡ διακόνισσα)

- The early Church understood 1 Tim. 3:11 to refer to deaconesses (not the wife of a deacon).
- Such a person could either have never been married (a virgin) or once married (a widow), but could not remarry after ordination.
- Age requirements varied: At least 40 years old; in some cases, identified with widows and minimum age set at 60.
- To be ordained by bishop as a regular minister of the church (normally with the imposition of hands) as a teacher and evangelist among women; reporting sometimes to a deacon and sometimes to the bishop, the deaconess served as an intermediary between lay women and the ecclesiastical hierarchy.
- Shared in deacon's care of the sick.
- Assisted women at baptism, provided post-baptismal anointing (after officiating minister anoints the forehead of the one baptized), and guard the doors during the baptism of women.