Christian Women in the first two centuries

In what ways did the role of women in the early church change over its first two centuries?

This discussion will propose that: the place of women in the ancient world was controlled by powerful social strictures; women had, against both Greco-Roman and Jewish precedent, a significant place in the life and ministry of the first century church; that these early freedoms were quickly eroded, and suggest possible reasons for this development.

To begin with it is essential to first take into account the expectations and mores of Greco-Roman society in order to establish the context of Christian innovation and its extent, and adequately appreciate the pressures to conform. It is clear that in the ancient world respectable urban women were sequestered in their homes.

They took no part in public affairs, never appearing at meals or at social occasions... The ideal Athenian woman, according to Xenophon, a disciple of Socrates, was one who “might see as little as possible, hear as little as possible, and ask as little as possible.”

A study by Eva Keuls, based on evidence in literature and portrayals on pottery during Athens’ “golden age” demonstrates that women enjoyed few rights. Only those involved in prostitution (hetaerai) could enjoy a measure of personal liberty and these women, often recruited as child slaves, had little choice.

Marriage was seen as the means for providing heirs.

We have hetaerai for pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our bodies, and wives for the bearing of legitimate children and to keep faithful watch over our house.

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Attachment and affection between man and wife were constrained by the reality of arranged matches and a high mortality rate for women in childbirth. Pictorial representations of genuine mutuality between the sexes in Athens show men with hetaerai, not their wives.

Female children were often an unwanted commodity in the ancient world: even those born legitimately could be abandoned to the elements for little cause other than the inconvenience of providing a future dowry. A letter from Hilarion to his wife Alis, dated around 1 BCE, informs her of a delay in Alexandria (“do not be anxious”) and his solicitude (“how can I forget you?”) but also includes this instruction: “If by some chance you should give birth to the child, should it be a boy let it be; should it be a girl, throw it out.”

The first century was a time of social transition. Evidence of this is found in the initiative taken by the emperor Augustus to reinforce threatened gender norms through a "moral rearmament" campaign. For the pious emperor a woman's place was unquestionably at her husband's side. Augustus endorsed (and created legal sanctions in favour of) the equivalent of a "Focus on the Family" movement. Widows were fined if they remained unmarried after two years, and sanctions were imposed on childless couples and single adults. The rigour of acceptable practice may have varied (for example, whether women were required to be veiled in public), yet while a Roman woman was able to accompany her husband outside the home, Plutarch expansively "extolled those husbands who bestow upon their wives worth and dignity equal to that which they bestow upon their horses.”

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4 John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, In Search of Paul: How Jesus’s Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004), 96-98.


6 Ibid., 115.


8 Bristow, What Paul Really Said, 12.

9 Ibid., 13.
Was Jewish society any more “enlightened”? While the culture of Palestine drew on distinct traditions, it also placed firm boundaries on women. Access to the Jerusalem temple complex was restricted, and women could not be counted as part of a synagogue quorum.\(^{10}\) Ben Sira could opine: “for out of clothes comes the moth, and out of woman comes woman’s wickedness.”\(^{11}\)

From the historical evidence we can thus conclude that life for both men and women was very different from modern Western societies. Clearly, what emerges in the foundational writings of the Christian church must first be weighed against the culture of those times, rather than judged against contemporary values and practices.

How did this differ from practices in the early church? For information on the role of women in these earliest years of the Jesus movement the evidence is restricted to formative Christian writings. Discussing Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s work, Raymond Martin notes her view that the New Testament writers failed to “accurately reflect women’s actual leadership and participation in early Christianity.”\(^{12}\)

> [T]ranslators and interpreters typically assume that while 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 speaks about women prophets, the rest of chapters 11-14 refer only to male charismatics and male prophets...\(^{13}\)

Granted these limitations, the evidence that remains is still startling. Women were companions of Jesus, provided financial support for his ministry, remained with him when the disciples fled and were the first witnesses to his resurrection.\(^{14}\) Paul states that his gospel takes no account of divisions based on social status, gender or ethnicity.\(^{15}\) He sends his letter to the Romans via Phoebe “a minister in the church at Cenchreae” (16:1), and lists the female half of a husband and wife team (Prisca and Aquila) first (16:3). Junia is

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\(^{10}\) Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity*, 169.

\(^{11}\) Ecclesiasticus 42:13.


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 76.


\(^{15}\) Galatians 3:28
described as “eminent among the apostles” (16:7),
while Prisca, Euodia and Syntyche are called “co-workers.”
Christian worship fully included women at first - a departure from Jewish tradition where women were segregated.
Only in the mid second century was this practice compromised.
A woman, Lydia, was Paul’s first convert in Europe.
In a society where men outnumbered women (for reasons such as infanticide) the gender balance in the early church favoured women (following Rodney Stark’s reconstruction), and women constituted the majority of primary conversions.

This egalitarianism was unable to be maintained. As Ann Graham Brock demonstrates, tension over the role of women, in particular Mary of Magdala, seems to be embedded in the earliest layers of tradition. Foundational traditions acknowledging the role of Mary as “apostle to the apostles” were quickly set aside. This is evident as early as Luke’s Gospel, where Mary is denied both a direct resurrection appearance and commissioning, while the role of Peter is correspondingly enhanced.

The Pastoral epistles, seen by Crossan and Reed as “an attempt to sanitize a social subversive, to domesticate a dissident apostle, and to make Christianity and Rome safe for one another,” retreat from Paul’s position. The

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18 Bristow, What Paul Really Said about Women, 49-50, 53.
20 Acts 16:14
21 Stark, The Rise of Christianity, 97, 128.
22 Ibid., 99-100.
25 Brock, Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle, 19-40.
26 Crossan and Reed. In Search of Paul, 106.
introduction of the household duty code in other contested writings exhorts wives, children and slaves to be subject and obedient.  

These rules for household order are written, of course, from the perspective of the father (or *pater familias*) as the head of the household and so reinforce the patriarchal household structure that was assumed to be the norm in the Roman world. ... [A]s seen in Colossians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter, the household duty code primarily served apologetic purposes, as an implicit political and social trade-off for greater acceptance by Roman society.  

Hans Küng notes that in the second century the leading contribution of women theologians was reassigned to male contemporaries. Montanus’ role was less significant than that of the prophetesses Prisca and Maximilla. The theologian Philoumene, a contemporary of Marcion, was relegated to a lesser role than her disciple Apelles.

Acceptable roles for women were progressively marked off in what Laurie Guy terms “recognized orders,” enabling a process of marginalization. An increasing emphasis on the merits of celibacy led to “indirectly to a devaluation of women” who were redefined in a one-sided way as sexual beings. L. Michael White observes that this is “a far cry from the free flow of charismatic expression and the leadership of women... that one sees in the genuine letters of Paul.” It is difficult to argue with that conclusion. Whatever early tendency existed toward equality between the sexes seems increasingly to have been put to the death of a thousand qualifications:

> Women and men should go to church decently attired, with natural step, clinging to silence... All the more, a woman should observe the following: let her be completely veiled, unless she happens to be at home. ... For the Logos wishes this, seeing that it is fitting for her to pray veiled.

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28 White, *From Jesus to Christianity*, 276.


30 Ibid., 20.


32 Ibid., 24.

33 Clement of Alexandria, “Paedagogue” 3:11, cited in White, *From Jesus to Christianity*, 439
In the first Christian communities the absence of slaves and sophisticated lifestyles may have meant that women had greater freedom. Restrictions were commonly applied among those with social standing, but labour was needed from those on the bottom rung and women were permitted to perform all necessary services. But as the church’s power base moved to the cities and fell under “the centrifugal force of Roman rule” the pressure to conform must have become much greater. From the year 200 there is “no evidence for women taking prophetic, priestly, and episcopal roles among orthodox churches,” although there is a certain circularity in that evidence of women’s ministry is used after that date to determine heterodoxy (Ross Shepard Kraemer calls this “the typical scholarly response.”)

A more egalitarian model seems to have endured in some regions. Schüssler Fiorenza draws attention to *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* which Christians in Carthage at the start of the third century could still appeal to for women’s authority to teach and to baptize.

Schüssler Fiorenza also notes that the canonization process was contemporary with the struggle over women’s leadership. Heresy became identified with women’s leadership and orthodoxy with its denial. The “acid polemics of the Fathers” indicate that this debate was still underway into the third century.

The information on women found in the surviving canonical texts and the writings of patristic orthodoxy are not value-neutral. Rather, they document that the progressive patriarchalization of church office did not happen without opposition but had to overcome an early Christian

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36 White, *From Jesus to Christianity*, 41.


40 Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 53

41 Ibid., 54.
theology and tradition that acknowledged women’s leadership claims.\textsuperscript{42}

Jesus, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, did not support the institution of family, and the Jesus movement initially held a radical antifamily ethos.\textsuperscript{43} “Antifamily” references in the canonical New Testament remained, perhaps in part a response to the "kinder, küche und kirche” values promoted by Augustus. Jesus urges his disciples to set aside family members who do not embrace his mission,\textsuperscript{44} Paul counsels against marriage in some cases, remarriage in most.\textsuperscript{45} In the first century this may have provided an attractive alternative to the status quo for many women, particularly as the church set up support systems that bypassed family obligations.

[W]idows now played a significant role in the communities, as soon also did virgins, young women who had resolved from the start not to get married. ... In Christianity, alternative forms of life were now possible for a large group of women, forms of life which were not defined by biological determination.\textsuperscript{46}

Paul and the first generation of Christians, then, stand out from both the prevailing ethos and the compromises of succeeding generations. Moving in from the margins and reinventing itself, the church developed an apologetic capable of both engaging and reassuring its host society. Stark suggests that this coincided with the transition from a sect within Judaism to a cult in the Hellenistic world.\textsuperscript{47} His model indicates that well educated (and acculturated) individuals would be drawn into the community at this stage. Inevitably this would involve a reassessment of the role of women in the community’s practices, and this is evident in the later layers of New Testament writings. Ekkehard and Wolfgang Stegemann support this position:

Their culturally deviant behavior is to be understood rather on the basis of the specific cultural milieu – a wandering movement that was recruited from the impoverished lower stratum – and the common charismatic experiences of the men and women of this group.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 56

\textsuperscript{43} Martin, \textit{The Elusive Messiah}, 80.

\textsuperscript{44} Matthew 19:29

\textsuperscript{45} 1 Corinthians 7:8, 24-27, 39-40.

\textsuperscript{46} Küng, \textit{Women in Christianity}, 21-22.

\textsuperscript{47} Stark, \textit{The Rise of Christianity}, 29-47.

\textsuperscript{48} Stegemann & Stegemann, \textit{The Jesus Movement}, 386
This contrast between the earliest and later layers of Christian tradition should not be overstated however. “[A]ny attempt to reconstruct the participation of women in the charismatic Jesus movement is dependent on a narrow foundation in the sources.”49 It has been argued that the only direct statement concerning women in Jesus’ ministry is Mark 15:40-41.50 Attempts to declare 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 a non-Pauline interpolation are contested.51 The roots of both a radical egalitarianism and cultural conformity can be seen in the earliest witnesses.

We can conclude then that the role of women, in both the wider Roman world and Palestine, was severely restricted. Evidence from the first Christian writings suggests that these limitations were often (but perhaps not consistently) disregarded during the earliest decades of the Jesus movement. Such freedoms were quickly reigned in as the movement entered the wider Greco-Roman society. The trend to further qualify and limit women’s ministry is evident in the later compositions in the New Testament canon and continues to develop into the second century.

**Bibliography**


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49 Ibid., 378.

50 Ibid., 378.

51 Ibid., 399.


