Women in the Early Christian Church
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Just as the history of early Christianity is shrouded in mystery, most of the information about women in the early church is also of a doubtful nature. However, from general readings of the New Testament and the writings of the Early Fathers, we do find some references that can give us a clue. From these writings, we get an indication that Christianity had a stronger appeal for women as compared to men. This was probably true throughout all social strata of the society in the Roman Empire.

Historical records show that not a single high-ranking man is mentioned as a Christian during the first century after Jesus. However, there are some possible indications that there were some influential women who may have converted to Christianity in secret. For instance, Pomponia Graecina who is mentioned by Tacitus for 'foreign superstition', is considered by some Western scholars to be a Christian. This is a mere supposition without any real proof. It is also likely that she may have been a follower of some other non-Roman religion. Pomponia was the wife of Aulus Plautius and she flourished during the first century. Her husband Plautius was the celebrated general who led the Roman armies to the conquest of Britain in 43 C.E.

Another famous woman who is thought to have converted was Flavia Domitilla, the wife of Titus Flavius Clemens. The latter was a cousin of the Emperor Domitian (51-96 C.E., who was the Roman Emperor from 81-96 C.E.). Clemens was also the Emperor’s consul. Upon leaving his office as consul in 95 C.E., Clemens was tried on charges of ‘atheism’ and ‘practice of Jewish rites and customs’ along with his wife Flavia Domitilla. The husband was martyred, while Domitilla was banished to the island of Pandataria in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Most Christian scholars believe that Domitilla had indeed converted to Christianity. This belief is in inferred from the existence of a Christian cemetery on a ground that she owned. On the other hand, the conversion of her husband is not established. He was at best only a sympathizer due to his wife’s probable conversion.

It is only from the second century onwards that we have clearer information about the status of women in the Church. Of the different roles performed by women in the Early Church, we shall examine their involvement in the life of the church as missionaries, as part of the ministry, and as social workers. Development in each of these roles can possibly be traced through
a maze of speculation through the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, with greater certainty in the following decades.

Before we proceed any further, it is important to note that no document has come down to us that may indicate Trinitarian tendencies among any of these early women followers of Jesus. They were believers in Jesus, and were willing to sacrifice in the name of his teachings. The discussions and debates about the nature of God and Jesus and Trinity belong to the third century of the Christian era. Thus, it would not be out of place to assume that most of these women of the early centuries like a majority of the early believers were monotheists, who were willing to sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel (Injil) of Jesus. In addition, their influence on men was great. Even though they did not hold office in the church hierarchy, they were instrumental in bringing their men towards the teachings of Jesus.

**Women Followers of Jesus**

Let us first re-examine the period of Jesus and the apostles through the New Testament documents. In the New Testament, we find considerable material in the epistles of Paul dealing with women in general. He seems to have had association with a number of women as a part of his mission. On the other hand, there is little in the Gospels that could tell us about women during the ministry of Jesus. Some of the glimpses that we get in the four gospels in the Bible include:

- The story of how Mary gives birth to Jesus and how Elizabeth gives birth to John (Luke 1:26-55).
- Jesus’ teaching to the two sisters Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42).
- Jesus acknowledges the widow who gave 2 copper coins – her total wealth – into the treasury which was more than what all the rich had given altogether. (Luke 21: 1-4).
- His defence and announcing the forgiveness of the sins of the prostitute who washed and anointed his feet (Luke 7:36-50).
- His healing of various women – one who had been crippled for eighteen years (Luke 13:10-17), one who had been hemorrhaged for 12 years (Matt. 9:20-22), raising the daughter of a ruler to life from death (Matt. 9:18-19, 23-26; Mark 5:35-43), healing a Canaanite woman’s daughter who was possessed by the demon (Matt. 15:21-
curing Simeon’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:30), bringing Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, back to life (John 11:1-44).

- Woman pours ointment of pure nard over Jesus’ head (Mark 14:3-9).
- Jesus asks for water from a Samaritan woman and tells her all she did (John 4:7-30).
- Women (his mother, mother’s sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene) are the only ones to stand by the cross before the crucifixion (John 19:25-27; Mark 15:40-41).
- Women (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary mother of James & others) are the first to discover and relate that Christ is risen from the dead (Matt. 28:1-10; Luke 23:55, 24:10; John 20:1-18; Mark 16:1-8).

It is obvious from the above quotes that Jesus had several women followers. The only role they played was as followers and believers, since none of them was included into the group of the 12 apostles. They had no role in ministerial affairs. According to the norms of the society, the women followers of Jesus were also not accorded any leadership role. However, it is interesting to note that in a number of circumstances, women came to Jesus to seek intercession or healing for their loved ones.

Jesus seems to have had an equal concern for women and men from all walks of life. Although Jesus was supposed to be a Jew, yet he was also concerned about the women from other tribes and nations like the Samaritans and Canaanites and others. Other than this, nothing much can be said about women specifically during his time.

The Period of Paul and the Apostles

The letters of apostles (ḥawāriyyūn) in the New Testament show a further development in the role of women. During the period following the ascension of Jesus to the Heavens, the spread of Christianity takes on a different perspective with the entry of the Gentiles into the fold. So far, the followers had primarily been Jews. Paul was the apostle of the Gentiles. Most of Paul’s consorts were from amongst the Gentiles. During this period, we see the growth of Christianity at a much faster pace among the Gentiles than among the Jews.

Moving to Paul’s epistles, we can see another aspect of the women of the New Testament times. Women seem to play much more important roles in
ecclesiastical affairs alongside Paul. In the Epistle to the Romans (16:1-6), a number of women are mentioned, the most notable among them being ‘Phoebe, our sister, who is a deaconess (diakonos) of the Church at Cenchrease, ....for she has often been a helper (prostates) both to myself and to many others’⁸. Paul’s reference to the word diakonos here has drawn much controversy among Christian scholars as to whether it is meant in a ministerial sense, or merely as a ‘servant’. If it were taken in the ministerial sense, then this would imply the existence of the order of deaconesses from the very beginning. However, we do not find mention of deaconesses until the end of the fourth century in the Eastern churches, except for the mention of two deaconesses (ministre) in the letter⁹ of Pliny the Younger (63-c. 113) to the Roman Emperor Trajan around 112 C.E. This could mean one of two things:

1) That there was an order of deaconesses in the first and the beginning of the second century which gradually disappeared or was suppressed for some unknown reasons.

2) That the word diakonos is used in this period not in a ministerial sense but as a servant or helper of the Church.

The second hypothesis is more likely to be true. In the immediately following lines of this passage of Romans, Paul mentions Prisca and Aquila as ‘my fellow workers (sunergous) in the Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks’¹⁰. He also praises Mary ‘who has worked so much (ekopiasen) for us’,¹¹ and Tryphaena Typhosa and Persis who have ‘worked hard (kopian) in the Lord’¹². In the Philippians 4:2, there is a reference to Euodia and Syntyche who ‘have labored side by side with me in the Gospel (en to evaggelio)’¹³. It is most likely that the various terms used to describe all these women, including diakonos, are used in the same connotation.

While Paul returns from Macedonia and Ephesus to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey, he stops at Caesarea (in Palestine) and enters the house of Philip the Evangelist and stays with him. This Philip had four unmarried daughters who ‘prophesied’ (Acts 21:9). It is unclear as to what this means, but it could well mean that these girls were teachers. However, by and large Paul was known to forbid the role of women as teachers and to speak in congregation (1 Tim 2:11-12, 1 Cor. 14:34-5). Thus he seemingly contradicts himself. While encouraging women to take on a more active role, he seems to be unable to extricate himself from the norms of the society.

During the post-apostolic period, forbidding women to be teachers seems to have been the policy of the Catholic Church in the early centuries. Later on,
we hear of deaconesses in the fourth and fifth centuries who are permitted to teach other women in the pagan houses that the deacons cannot approach.

The Marcionites and Gnostics — Second Century

The latter part of the first century and the second century saw the rise of numerous sects and heterodox churches among the Christians, each preaching a different doctrine about God the Father and Jesus. Among them were the Marcionites, one of the Gnostic sects that permitted Women to teach and baptize. The Marcionites were against the Old Testament and its God. The church in Rome excommunicated the founder of this movement Marcion in 144 C.E. Interestingly, the Gnostic movements had their own New Testament books that were vastly different from those read by other sects. Among these Gnostic apocryphal works of the New Testament, they attribute books of revelation to certain women of the time of Jesus. Among these are the Pistis Sophia attributed to Mary Magdalene, the Egyptian Gospel to Salome, and the Gospel of Mary to Mary.

The Montanists — Second Century

Another important movement of the latter part of the second century was Montanism. Its founder, a Phrygian called Montanus was seized by the Spirit. Together with two women, Prisca and Maximilla, Montanus delivered utterances of the Paraclete in a state of ecstasy. The movement was puritanical and preached the nearness of the End. They claimed that the heavenly Jerusalem would descend on Phrygia. It is interesting to note the role played by the two women companions of Montanus in the missionary leadership of this movement. Among the coverts to Montanism, was the famous early father of the church and African orator Tertullian (d. 235 C.E). Ironically, the extreme feeling in Church against leadership of women is expressed by this very same Tertullian that ‘Women are not permitted to speak in the church, but equally they are forbidden to give the official teaching, to baptize, to make the offering or to lay claim on any function (munus) of men, or of the sacerdotal ministry (officium) (Vrig vel. 9:1).

The Widows — First to Third centuries

The other early important group of women is the one that is given the title of ‘Widows’. Whether this was an order and whether these women were ordained has also brought different points of view. In the First Epistle to Timothy, we have the passage ‘A widow indeed is one who has put her trust
in God and perseveres day and night in the intercessions and the prayers. Before she can be inscribed on the roll, a widow must be sixty years old at least, once married, one who has practiced hospitality, washed the feet of the saints and been given to all good works’ (1 Tim 5:3-10). The stress is on the ascetic and contemplative side of the life of the widows, but the interesting point is their enrolment on the register and the conditions attached thereto. In this passage, the widows are not widows in the general sense of the word, but a section of women who fulfil the above conditions. This is the first indication of an ‘Order of Widows’. Ignatius (d. 112-114 C.E.) mentions them as ‘the virgins called widows’ using the term in an ecclesiastical sense.

During the early part of the third century, we find Tertullian who is against the inclusion of a virgin into the order of the Widows. In his eyes, a widow cannot be a virgin. She should have been ‘trained by experience of all human affections to know how to help other women... (and) that they have passed through all the trials by which feminine virtue can be tested’. He calls such a widow-virgin a monster. He visualizes women to be elected to this Order after the age of sixty. He mentions that a Widow cannot be enrolled in the ‘Order’ if she has been married twice. He describes the Widows along with the three male Orders as a ‘guild’ (Mon. 11:1).

It is thus only during the third century that the existing Order of Widows is incorporated into an ordained ministry. The Widows were listed after the Bishops, priests and Deacons. According to Tertullian, these three male and one female groups thus constituted the ‘Church Order (Mon. 11:4) and the Clergy’ (Mon. 12:1).

Writings of Origen (185-255 C.E.) also indicate the incorporation of Widows into an ordained ministry. In his view, not only fornication but also second marriages are a bar to ecclesiastical dignities. Thus all four groups were barred from entering into second marriages.

This raises the question as to whether the Widows were indeed an order in the strict sense. Various later documents based on the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome (written around 200-220 C.E. and which has not survived) give us a clue that Widows were enumerated after bishops, priests and deacons, but before readers and sub-deacons. ‘A widow may be instituted as such by word alone and is to be counted amongst the Widows, but she is not to be ordained, because she does not offer oblation, nor has she a ministry. Ordination is for the clergy because they perform the liturgical services, while the Widow is instituted for prayer, which is a function of all Christians’. Other sources mention their special duties as ‘constancy in prayer, care of the sick, and frequent fastings’.
Although widows were never ordained as such like the bishops, priests and deacons, they were included in the hierarchy of the ordained ministry. She was not even allowed to baptize other women. Her role was restricted to prayer, fasting and caring for the sick.

**Order of the Deaconesses — Fourth Century**

The Order of the Widows started to decline towards the end of the third century and became defunct by the end of the fourth century. Just as this order fades away, another order takes its place, the Order of Deaconesses. The latter was enshrined in the ideal of the Virginity, while the widowhood was more of a charitable nature where the widows at times abused their rights.

The deaconesses were ordained and performed ministerial functions unlike the Widows. They sat with the bishops during liturgy, and assisted in the baptism of women. While the minister anointed the head of a woman to be baptized, the deaconess anointed her body. She also performed the role of a teacher for the women who were baptized. In addition, the deaconesses inherited the functions of the Widows like prayer, visiting and caring for the sick, etc.

**Concluding Remarks**

Looking at the major events that molded early Church history, we see that women had little or no role to play in the development of the Christian creeds, which occurred primarily in the fourth and fifth centuries. They simply remained followers, while the men traversed the powerful corridors of the Church and the Ecumenical Councils. None of the powerful bishops were women, and we do not see any woman who even takes a leading role behind the lines in the development of the trinitarian philosophy.

Various other examples could be cited of the involvement of women in the early Church, but it would probably suffice to say that women were involved to a fair extent only in social work of evangelization and in helping the clergy in their various jobs where necessary. These took on different forms in the shape of the Widows and the Deaconesses with the passage of time. However, these Orders remained subservient to the male Orders.

Thus, the women were not the leaders of the nascent community, nor did they hold any real position in the hierarchy of the Church. In reality, most of the early fathers of the Church remained hostile towards the involvement of women in ministerial and ecclesiastical affairs. Women were looked down upon, and were never regarded as having any real role in the leadership of the Church. This state of affairs is epitomized in the *Teaching*
of the Apostles, which tells us: ‘we had with us Mary Magdalene, Mary the
mother of James and Salome. But if it had been necessary for women to
teach, he (i.e. Jesus) would himself have commanded them also to instruct
the people’ (15:125).\textsuperscript{25} In this manner, the early Church and the ministries
remained the domain of men, and women were there merely as helpers of
servants, and played only a marginal ecclesiastical role.

At the same time, women seemed to have taken a lead in conversion to the
new religion, and had an impact on the conversion of their men during the
early period. Even the conversion of Constantine the Great – the first
Roman emperor ever to have converted to Christianity in the fourth century
– was mainly due to the influence of his mother and wife.

Lastly, one needs to reassert that there is no historical indication of
Trinitarian beliefs amongst the Christian women of the early centuries, just
like there is none for the men of that period. By and large, most of them
probably remained within the monotheistic preaching of Jesus.

End Notes

\textsuperscript{1} The term ‘Early Fathers’ in Christian terminology refers to leaders of the Church
after the apostles.

\textsuperscript{2} Tacitus (55-117 C.E.) \textit{The Annals of Imperial Rome}, tr. Michael Graut, Penguin

\textsuperscript{3} See: \textit{The Catholic Encyclopedia}, The Encyclopedia Press, NY, 1909, under
‘Flavia Domitilla’, and ‘Dominitian’.

505, and Thomas J. Shalion, ‘Early Roman Christian Cemeteries’ in ibid, p. 513.

\textsuperscript{5} The term ‘ministry of Jesus’ in Christian terminology refers to the period of
Jesus’ active teachings, i.e. the equivalent of the period of prophethood
\textit{(nubuwwah)} according to Islamic terminology.

\textsuperscript{6} Please note that all Biblical references are from the \textit{Revised Standard Version of
the Bible}.

\textsuperscript{7} See references of the incident from the gospels given above.

\textsuperscript{8} ‘Letter of Paul to the Romans’ 16:1-2, in \textit{The Bible}.

\textsuperscript{9} Henry Bettenson, \textit{Documents of the Christian Church}, p 4

\textsuperscript{10} ‘Letter of Paul to the Romans’ 16:1-2, in \textit{The Bible}.

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Ibid.} 16:6

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.} 16:2


17 *AdSmyrn.* 13:1


19 Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers*, p. 151


22 Danielou, p. 17

23 59, Achelis, 75

24 The first Ecumenical Council was held in 325 CE at Nicaea where Jesus was inducted into being the ‘Son of God’ having the same essence as the Father for the first time in Christian history. Subsequent Ecumenical Councils during the fourth and fifth centuries reaffirmed this doctrine and added other elements to it like the Holy Ghost and the Mother of God concepts. All these Councils were dominated by men.


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