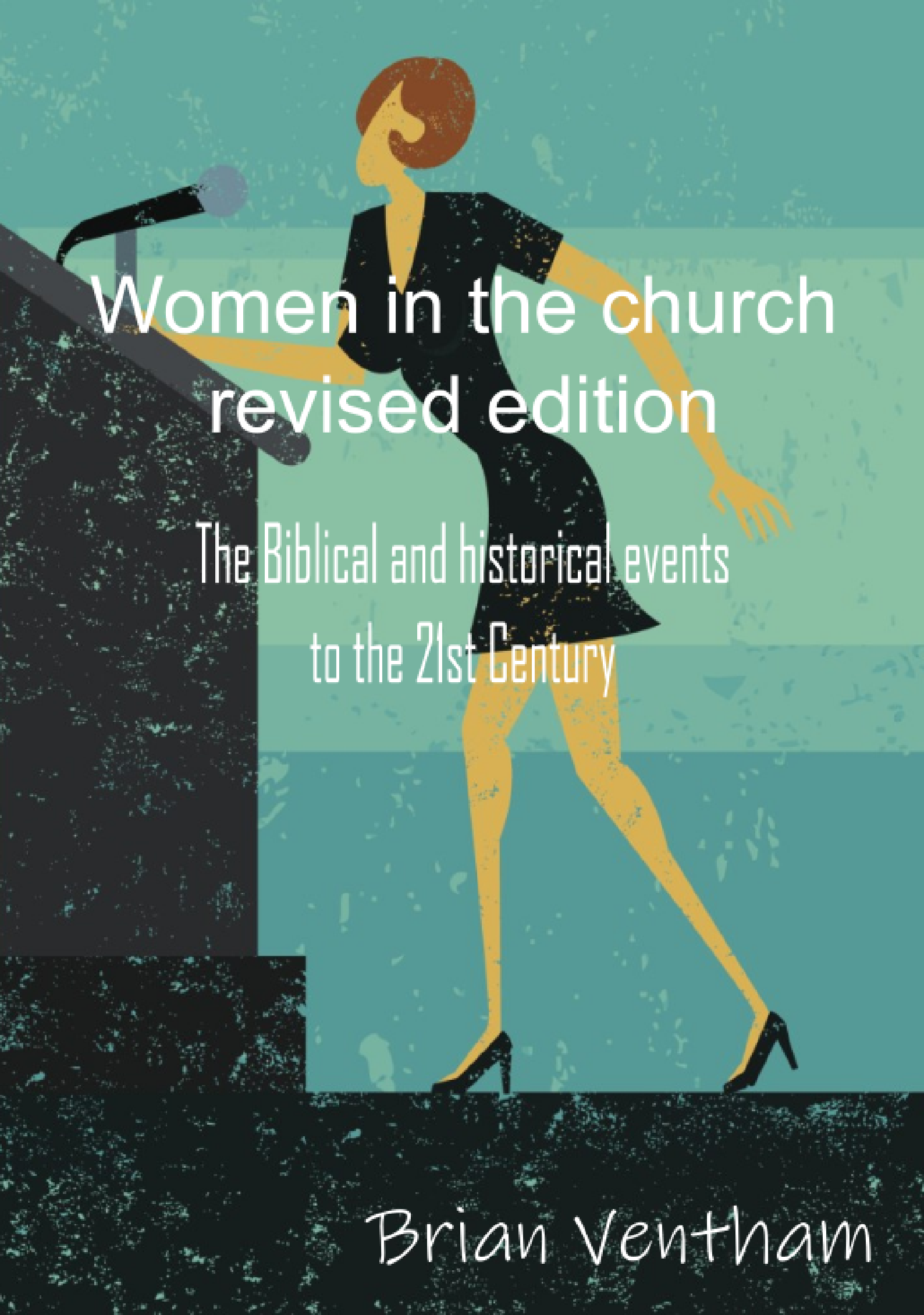


Women in the church revised edition

The Biblical and historical events to the 21st Century

Brian Ventham

Introduction

Please note that some of this writing has been taken from research manuscripts and brought together in this form so that the material can be considered as a whole and make sense in the discussion of this subject.

Equality or Complementarianism?

The Woman's Role in the Church

First and foremost, this is not about genders. It is not about the superiority of men over women. It is not about intellect, ability, education, or how good someone is at speaking. It is about **the order of creation and the order God established**, as Paul explains.

It is important that Scripture has the final word in any discussion concerning what is true. Terminology can easily twist an argument when words are taken out of their context, and history can sometimes give us an explanation for what happened without necessarily telling us whether what happened was biblical.

In this book I will attempt to examine the biblical teaching concerning the role of women in the Church, and then follow the development of that role through church history. I will endeavour to approach the evidence without imposing assumptions upon it, allowing

Scripture to establish the foundation before turning to the historical record.

The purpose of this book is to take the reader through the ages and examine the changing role of women within the Church. History teaches us much about how the Church developed through the generations—its changes, its disputes, its traditions, and the pressures that influenced it.

But history also raises important questions.

Why were women appointed to particular roles in the Church? What did those roles actually involve? Where did the terminology **deaconess** come from, and what did it mean in different periods of Church history? Did the role remain the same, or did it change as the Church itself changed?

These are questions that cannot be answered simply by looking at modern definitions and projecting them backwards onto the early Church. We need to examine the evidence from the earliest records available and allow the historical documents to speak for themselves.

We will therefore take a journey through the rise and fall of empires and examine their impact upon the Church, following the development of women's roles from the early Christian centuries through the changing world in which the Church existed.

The purpose is not simply to discover what women did, but to understand **why they did it, who appointed them, what authority they were given, and whether those developments remained consistent with the biblical foundation established at the beginning**

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Chapter 1

The Order of Creation

Before we examine the historical development of women in the Church, we need to establish the biblical foundation upon which the rest of this book will stand.

The question is not whether men are better than women, nor whether women are capable of teaching, serving, leading, or accomplishing great things. Scripture gives us many examples of women whom God used.

The question is one of **order**. Did God establish an order in creation? If He did, did that order have significance only before the Fall, or does Scripture show that it was to continue through humanity and into the Church?

Paul's teaching becomes particularly important here because, when he addresses the conduct of men and women in the Church, he does not appeal first to culture, education, ability, or social custom. He takes us back to the beginning. “For Adam was first formed, then Eve.” 1 Timothy 2:13 That is where we must begin.

God's Order in Creation

Genesis presents God as the supreme authority over His creation. “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” — Genesis 1:1. Everything begins with God. Authority does not originate with humanity; it comes from God. Within creation, however, God established distinctions of responsibility and order. Humanity was given dominion over the earth:

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion...” — Genesis 1:26. Genesis 2 then gives us a more detailed account of how God created man and woman. Adam was formed first from the dust of the ground: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground...” — Genesis 2:7.

Then God said: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.” — Genesis 2:18. Eve was subsequently formed from Adam: “And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.” — Genesis 2:22.

This is not a statement about superiority and inferiority. Both man and woman were created by God. But they were not created in the same order, nor were they given identical functions.

Paul later draws directly upon this order when explaining the relationship between man and woman: “For the man

is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man." — 1 Corinthians 11:8–9. The distinction therefore existed **before sin entered the world**. Creation order cannot simply be dismissed as a consequence of the Fall.

Adam, Eve, and the Command

There is another point in the Genesis account that deserves careful consideration. We commonly speak of *"Adam and Eve's sin"* as though God had given the same command directly to both of them. But Genesis does not present the command in that way. God gave the command to Adam: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it..." — Genesis 2:16–17.

This happened **before Eve was created**. Genesis then records the creation of Eve. We are never told that God subsequently repeated the command directly to her. Yet Eve clearly knew of the prohibition. When the serpent questioned her, she replied: "But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die." — Genesis 3:3.

How did Eve receive this information? The most natural explanation is that Adam communicated God's command to her. Scripture does not tell us exactly when or how he did so, but it does tell us who originally received the command: **Adam**. This distinction becomes important when we consider what happened next.

Eve's Transgression and Adam's Responsibility

I do not believe we should describe Eve as innocent. Genesis plainly tells us that she took the fruit and ate it. But we should distinguish **Eve's personal transgression** from **Adam's federal responsibility**. Genesis gives us the sequence: “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes... she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.”— Genesis 3:6.

Then comes the next verse: “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked...” — Genesis 3:7. That sequence deserves our attention. **Eve ate. Adam ate. Then the eyes of them both were opened.**

The text does not say that the consequences described in verse 7 occurred when Eve alone ate. The decisive

moment in the narrative is connected with Adam's eating. Paul's explanation of the Fall makes this even more significant.

When Paul explains how sin and death entered the human race, he repeatedly identifies **one man**: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin...”— Romans 5:12. “For if by one man's offence death reigned by one...”— Romans 5:17. And: “For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners...”— Romans 5:19.

Paul does not trace the entrance of sin and death into humanity through Eve. He traces it through **Adam**. This is why the familiar expression *“when Adam and Eve sinned”* can obscure an important biblical distinction. Eve transgressed personally. **Adam transgressed federally.**

Eve was deceived, as Paul tells us: “And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.” — 1 Timothy 2:14. Adam, however, was not deceived. He knowingly ate. And it was Adam whom God had originally commanded.

This distinction is important because the Bible does not tell us that a man and a woman disobeyed God in the garden. It tells us Man disobeyed God and the woman disobeyed the man. It establishes a pattern of responsibility that Paul later uses when discussing the relationship between men and women in the Church.

The Fall Did Not Create the Order

Some argue that male authority over women was introduced by the Fall. Genesis 3:16 certainly describes a change in the relationship after sin: “Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.” But that does not mean that the distinction between man and woman, or the order between them, began with sin.

The order existed before the Fall. Adam was created first. Eve was created from Adam. Eve was created as a helper suitable for Adam. And God gave Adam the command concerning the tree before Eve existed. The Fall therefore did not create the distinction. **It severed the relationship with God, Genesis 5:3. Not corrupted it.**

The authority that existed within God's creation could now be exercised selfishly, harshly and sinfully. What was intended to function within God's order could become domination. That is why biblical authority must never be separated from biblical responsibility. God-given authority is not a license to dominate.

Creation Order and the Church

This brings us to Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy. Paul writes: “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.”— 1 Timothy 2:11–12. Whatever questions we may have about the application of this passage, we should notice **why Paul gives the instruction**. He does not say: *Because the women of Ephesus are uneducated, or otherwise.* He does not say: *Because Roman culture requires it. Or Because women are less intelligent.* He immediately takes us back to Genesis: “For Adam was first formed, then Eve.”— 1 Timothy 2:13.

And then: “And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.”— 1 Timothy 2:14. Paul's argument is therefore rooted in **creation and the Fall**, not merely in the circumstances of one congregation. That matters greatly. If Paul's instruction were based solely upon a temporary cultural problem, then his appeal to Adam and Eve would be unnecessary. Instead, he reaches back to the beginning.

Equality in Christ

This is where Galatians 3:28 is frequently brought into the discussion: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” This is a wonderful

statement of the equality of believers in Christ. But what exactly is Paul saying? He is speaking about our standing **in Christ**. The Jew and Gentile are one in Christ. The bond and free are one in Christ. Male and female are one in Christ. Yet Scripture continues to recognise distinctions of responsibility between these people.

The same Paul who wrote Galatians 3:28 also wrote 1 Timothy 2:12–13. Therefore Galatians 3:28 cannot simply be used to cancel the other passage. **Equality of spiritual standing does not necessarily mean identity of function or authority.** A servant and his master may both stand equally in need of salvation. A husband and wife are equally accountable before God. Adam was formed first and directly from the ground; Eve was formed from Adam; and Paul himself distinguishes the man's relationship to God's image and glory from the woman's relationship to the man's glory.

But equality before God does not require every person to occupy the same position or exercise the same authority. Christ Himself provides the clearest example. Paul writes: “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.”— 1 Corinthians 11:3. Submission therefore cannot automatically mean inferiority. Christ's submission to the Father does not make Christ less divine. Likewise, biblical order between man and woman should not be confused with a difference in human worth.

When Culture Changes, Does God's Word Change?

History provides us with a simple illustration of how cultural priorities can influence the Church. For generations, the traditional marriage vows in England included the bride's promise to obey her husband. During the twentieth century, as attitudes towards the relationship between men and women changed, that word increasingly became unacceptable, and church marriage services were revised.

This does not mean that the Church abandoned biblical teaching altogether. It does, however, illustrate how the public expression of that teaching can be gradually eroded as cultural expectations change. What was once accepted as part of the Church's understanding of marriage can eventually become something the Church feels compelled to reconsider.

But a change in society is not an excuse for changing God's instructions. God does not revise His truth to accommodate each new generation. His Word was not established according to the spirit of the age, and it does not become obsolete when the world finds it uncomfortable.

As the Lord declares, “For I am the LORD, I change not” (Malachi 3:6). And Peter reminds us that “the word of the Lord endureth for ever” (1 Peter 1:25).

The Church must therefore be careful not to confuse changing cultural priorities with a change in God's revealed will. The question is not whether God's Word agrees with the spirit of the age, but whether we are willing to bring our understanding and practice into agreement with His Word.

Women Whom God Used

Scripture contains many examples of women whom God used. Miriam was a prophetess. Deborah was a judge. Huldah was a prophetess. Women followed Jesus, supported His ministry, witnessed His crucifixion and were among the first witnesses of His resurrection. The New Testament also gives us women who served the churches faithfully. These examples should not be ignored simply because they complicate the discussion. But neither should they be used to establish an authority that Scripture does not actually give them.

A woman can be greatly used by God without holding every office or exercising every form of authority. That distinction will become increasingly important as we examine the New Testament examples of Priscilla,

Phoebe and Junia. The question is not simply: **Did a woman serve God?** Of course they did. The more important question is: **What kind of service did she perform, and what authority accompanied that service?**

Service and Authority

A woman may serve the Church without that service giving her authority over the congregation. A woman may teach another woman. A woman may instruct children. A woman may assist in the work of the Gospel. A woman may minister to the needs of other women. A woman may be recognised for her faithfulness, courage and service. None of these things are insignificant.

But service and authority are not automatically the same thing. The question we must ask is: **Who gave the authority?** And then: **What authority was actually given?** This becomes particularly important when we examine words such as *minister*, *servant*, *deacon*, *apostle*, and *teacher*. A title can tell us that someone held a recognised position, but the title alone does not necessarily tell us the full extent of that person's authority.

This is where much of the modern argument can become confused. Someone may point to a woman who served the Church and say, *"Therefore women may exercise*

every ministry." But that conclusion does not follow. We must examine the actual evidence. What did she do? Who appointed her? Whom did she serve? Was she exercising authority over men? Was she teaching the assembled congregation? Was she governing the Church? Or was she performing another form of recognised and valuable Christian service?

Those questions cannot be answered simply by looking at a modern definition of ministry and projecting it backwards onto the New Testament.

The Foundation for What Follows

The purpose of this first chapter is therefore not to settle every question about women in the Church. It is to establish the foundation from which those questions must be examined. God established an order in creation. Adam was created first. Eve was created from Adam and for Adam's corresponding role.

The command concerning the tree was given to Adam before Eve was created. Eve transgressed, but Paul places the federal responsibility for the Fall upon Adam. And when Paul later gives instruction concerning authority and teaching in the Church, he takes us back to that same creation order.

That gives us a foundation. But it does not yet answer every question. What, for example, are we to make of women such as Priscilla, Phoebe and Junia? What did the word *deacon* actually mean? Did women hold recognised offices in the early Church? If they did, what did those offices involve? Were women ordained, blessed, appointed, or simply recognised for service?

And perhaps most importantly: **Did the historical Church preserve the biblical distinction between service and authority, or did those roles gradually change?** To answer those questions, we now need to leave the Garden of Eden and enter the pages of the New Testament.

Chapter 2

Women God Used

Having established the order of creation, we now come to an obvious question. If God established an order between man and woman, does that mean God did not use women in significant ways? The answer from Scripture is clearly **no**. God used women. He used them to speak, to warn, to encourage, to serve, to influence kings, to preserve His people, and to accomplish purposes that men sometimes failed to accomplish.

This is important because we must not allow our understanding of biblical order to become so rigid that we deny what Scripture itself records. The question is not whether God used women. **He did.** The question is: **What did God use them to do, and what authority did He give them?** That distinction will become increasingly important as we move from the Old Testament into the New Testament.

Miriam

Miriam is one of the earliest women specifically identified in Scripture as a prophetess. “And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand...”— Exodus 15:20. Miriam played an important part in the history of Israel., and she was clearly recognised among God's people. But Scripture does not present Miriam as a priest. That distinction matters.

God had established the priesthood through Aaron and his descendants. The priesthood was a particular office with particular responsibilities before God. Miriam's position as a prophetess therefore demonstrates something important:

God could give a woman a particular spiritual function without giving her every function that existed among God's people. Her calling did not make her a priest. Her

usefulness to God did not erase the boundaries God had established elsewhere. This is the first principle we need to remember. **God's use of a person in one capacity does not automatically establish that person in every other capacity.**

Deborah

Deborah provides an even more striking example. “And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time.”— Judges 4:4. Deborah was not merely a woman mentioned in passing. Scripture tells us that she judged Israel. Men came to her for judgment: “And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah... and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment.” — Judges 4:5.

This is a remarkable example, and it should not be explained away simply because it does not fit neatly into an argument. God used Deborah. She was a prophetess. She judged Israel. Deborah summoned Barak and relayed the LORD's command to him. And God used her in the deliverance of Israel from its enemies.

But what does Deborah actually prove? It proves that **God can use a woman in a position of significant responsibility.** It does not automatically prove that every form of spiritual authority was therefore open to women.

There is a temptation to reason: God used Deborah to judge Israel; therefore women may occupy any position of authority in the Church. But that conclusion does not follow from the example.

Deborah was a judge in the period of the Judges. The Church is not simply a continuation of the civil and national structure of Old Testament Israel. More importantly, Scripture never presents Deborah as an Aaronic priest. God's use of Deborah was specific. And this gives us another principle: **A particular calling does not automatically become a universal rule.**

Huldah

Huldah gives us another example. When the Book of the Law was discovered during the reign of Josiah, the king's representatives came to her at the direction of the king (2 Kings 22:12–14), and that her message was subsequently reported to Josiah who sought out Huldah the prophetess: "And Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asahiah, went unto Huldah the prophetess..."— 2 Kings 22:14. Huldah then delivered the word of the LORD concerning what had been discovered. Again, God used a woman to speak His word. There is no need to minimise this. Huldah was a prophetess, and her prophetic word was taken seriously.

But once again, we should notice what Scripture does **not** say. It does not say that Huldah became a priest. It does not say that the priesthood was therefore opened to women. It does not say that every office of spiritual authority was now available to her.

God gave Huldah a particular prophetic function. That function was significant, but it remained **her function**. This is a recurring biblical pattern. **God may appoint an individual for a particular purpose without changing every other boundary He has established.**

Esther

Esther provides another example, although her role was different again. God placed Esther in a position from which she could influence the king and ultimately play a vital part in the preservation of the Jewish people. She was a woman in a position of extraordinary influence.

Yet Esther was not a priest, prophetess or teacher of Israel. Scripture presents Esther primarily as a queen through whom God preserved His people, Her influence came through the particular circumstances in which God had placed her. Mordecai's words are especially significant: “And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” — Esther 4:14.

Esther's story demonstrates the sovereignty of God in placing a person where that person is needed. Again, however, we must distinguish **influence from office**. A person can have enormous influence without possessing every form of authority. That distinction will become important when we eventually examine women in the early Church.

Women and the Priesthood

The Old Testament therefore gives us an interesting picture. Women were used by God. Women prophesied. Women judged. Women influenced kings. Women served God's purposes in extraordinary circumstances. But the priesthood remained a defined office.

God established the priesthood through Aaron and his descendants. It was not simply another word for leadership. The priest had defined responsibilities concerning the tabernacle and later the temple, sacrifices, holy things, and the worship of Israel. This gives us an important distinction: **Leadership, prophecy, service and priesthood were not automatically the same thing.**

Therefore, when someone points to Deborah, Miriam or Huldah as evidence that God used women, the answer should not be to deny their importance. Instead, we

should agree with Scripture. Yes, God used them. Then we ask the next question: **What exactly did God appoint them to do?**

God's Use Does Not Erase God's Boundaries

There is a principle here that runs throughout Scripture. God does not have to give a person every responsibility in order to use that person greatly. One person may prophesy. Another may teach. Another may serve. Another may administer. Another may lead. Another may be sent.

Paul makes this principle particularly clear when discussing the body of Christ: “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers...”— 1 Corinthians 12:28. Then Paul asks: “Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers?”— 1 Corinthians 12:29. The obvious answer is no. God distributes different functions among His people.

Therefore, we should not reason: **God called this person, therefore this person may do everything.** Nor should we reason: **God gifted this person, therefore this person automatically possesses every form of authority.** Calling, gifting, function and authority are related, but

they are not necessarily identical. This becomes particularly important when we reach the New Testament. A person may be sent by God without being a pastor. A person may prophesy without being an elder. A person may serve the Church without governing the Church.

A person may be recognised as an apostle in some sense without that automatically establishing that person as a teacher over the congregation. We must examine what Scripture actually says.

What About Galatians 3:28?

There is one passage that is frequently brought into this discussion. Paul writes: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”— Galatians 3:28.

This verse is sometimes presented as though Paul is saying that every distinction between men and women has disappeared in Christ. But we need to read the verse in its context. Paul is discussing our position in Christ and the promise made through faith. The preceding verses say: “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. — Galatians 3:26.

And: “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” — Galatians 3:27. Then comes verse 28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul is establishing the unity of believers in Christ. The Jew does not receive a different salvation from the Greek. The slave does not receive a different Christ from the free man. The woman does not receive a different salvation from the man.

We are all one in Christ. That is a glorious truth. But Paul does not subsequently behave as though every distinction of responsibility has disappeared. The same Paul who wrote Galatians also wrote about husbands and wives, fathers and children, masters and servants, elders and congregations, and men and women in the Church.

Galatians 3:28 establishes the unity of believers in Christ, but it does not, by itself, settle every question concerning responsibility and authority within the Church. Those questions must be examined through the wider teaching of Scripture. We must not use one passage to cancel another, but allow each passage to be understood within its proper context.

The Church Is Not Israel

There is another reason why we must be careful with Old Testament examples. Israel was a nation. The Church is the body of Christ. The Old Testament contained a national structure, a priesthood, a sacrificial system, a temple, civil rulers, prophets, judges and kings.

The New Testament Church operates under the New Covenant. Therefore, we cannot simply transfer every Old Testament position directly into the Church. Deborah was a judge in Israel. Miriam was a prophetess in Israel. Huldah was a prophetess in Israel. Their examples tell us something important about God's willingness to use women.

But they do not, by themselves, define the offices of the New Testament Church. For that we must turn to the New Testament itself. And this is where the argument becomes more difficult. Because now we encounter women who were active participants in the Christian Church. We find Priscilla. We find Phoebe. We find Junia. We find women who laboured for the Gospel. We find women who supported the apostles. We find women who were recognised by Paul. And we find terminology that requires careful examination.

A Question of Authority

We have therefore arrived at an important point. The biblical evidence does not allow us to say: **“God never used women.”** He clearly did. But neither does it allow us to say: **“Because God used women, every position of authority was therefore open to women.”** That conclusion also has to be demonstrated from Scripture. The question is not simply: **Was she used by God?** The question is: **What did God use her to do?** And then: **What authority accompanied that calling?** This is where the distinction between **service and authority** becomes essential.

A woman can serve Christ faithfully without that service making her the governing authority over the congregation. A woman can speak the word of God without necessarily being appointed as the teacher of the assembled Church. A woman can be sent on a mission without necessarily holding the office of elder. A woman can be highly respected without being given authority over men.

The biblical examples we have considered do not remove the need to establish these distinctions. They actually make the question more important. Because if God can use women in remarkable ways while still maintaining particular boundaries, then the existence of a woman's calling cannot by itself settle the question of her authority.

From Israel to the Early Church

We are now ready to move into the New Testament. The question changes. We are no longer asking simply: **Did God use women?** The Old Testament has already answered that.

We are now asking: **How did the early Church understand the place and ministry of women?** What did Jesus establish? What did the apostles teach? What did the early Christian communities actually do? And when we encounter words such as *servant*, *minister*, *deacon*, *apostle* and *prophet*, what did those words mean in their original setting?

Most importantly, when a woman was recognised for Christian service, **did that recognition give her authority over men, or did the service remain within a particular sphere?** Those questions take us directly into the New Testament. And there we will begin with the women who are most frequently presented as evidence that Paul's teaching concerning women cannot mean what it appears to say. The first of these is **Priscilla**.

Chapter 3

Women in the New Testament Church

Having looked at women whom God used in the Old Testament, we now come to the New Testament.

Here we find further evidence of the ways God used women. Women followed Jesus, supported His ministry, served the Church, prayed, prophesied, cared for the needy, opened their homes to believers, and worked alongside men in the Gospel.

There is no biblical basis for saying that women have no place in the work of God. But that is not the question we are asking. The question is: **What place did God give them, and what authority accompanied that place?**

That distinction becomes important because the New Testament speaks both of the valuable service of women and of specific limitations concerning authority over men in the Church.

The Samaritan Woman at the Well

Another passage frequently used in support of women exercising teaching authority is the account of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4.

Jesus met a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well and spoke openly with her. He revealed things about her life that she had not told Him, and the conversation eventually turned to the question of the Messiah. Jesus said:…"I that speak unto thee am he."— John 4:26.

This is a remarkable moment. Jesus openly revealed Himself as the Messiah to a woman.The woman then left her waterpot and returned to the city, and saith to the men, come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" John 4:28–29. This is sometimes presented as evidence that Jesus made the woman a teacher or preacher.

But the text does not say that. Jesus did not appoint her to an office or instruct her to teach the people of Samaria. She returned to the city and testified about her encounter with Him, inviting others to come and see for themselves.

There is an important difference between **witnessing to what you have experienced** and **assuming an appointed teacher with an authority over others**.

Who Did She Speak To?

John does not simply say that she went back and announced the message to the whole village. He specifically says: "and saith to the men," Jesus did not send her back, she left when the disciples returned.

John then records that many Samaritans believed because of her testimony: "And many of the Samaritans of that city believed on him for the saying of the woman, which testified, He told me all that ever I did."— John 4:39.

The passage therefore gives us a powerful example of a woman being used by God without requiring us to turn her into something the text does not call her.

A Witness does not constitute being a preacher or teacher.

This distinction matters: The Samaritan woman was certainly a witness. She testified about what a man claiming to be the Messiah had done. But effectiveness does not establish an office. The fact that people believed because of her testimony does not mean that she was appointed to teach or govern the congregation.

There are no facts established here that she has been given authority to teach men in the assembled Church. This is precisely why the distinction between **service and authority** matters.

The Samaritan woman was a **witness to a man claiming to be the Christ**, not a stated example of a woman appointed to ecclesiastical teaching authority.

What the Passage Does Show

Jesus deliberately crossed several social boundaries. He spoke with a Samaritan. He spoke with a woman publicly. And many came to believe. These are significant facts.

But none of them says that Jesus established her as a teacher or have authority over men. The passage shows something different and equally important: **A person who has encountered Christ can testify about Him.** We must not confuse **being used by God** with **being appointed by God to a particular office**.

The Samaritan woman was used by God. But the text does not call her a teacher, elder, pastor or ruler of the Church, or imply such. We should therefore resist the temptation to give the passage a conclusion that John himself does not give it.

Women Followed Jesus

During His earthly ministry, Jesus did not treat women as unimportant or invisible. Luke tells us that women travelled with Jesus and the twelve and ministered to Him from their possessions.

“And the twelve were with him. And certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities... And Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance.”— Luke 8:1–3. These women were not merely spectators. They were involved in the ministry of Jesus and supported it materially. The Gospels also record women speaking with Jesus, learning from Him,

questioning Him, and responding to Him in faith. One of the clearest examples is Mary of Bethany.

“And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word.”— Luke 10:39. Martha was serving, while Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to His teaching. Jesus did not rebuke Mary for wanting to learn. Instead, He said: “Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”— Luke 10:42. This is important because it establishes something that should never be lost in discussions about the role of women.

Women are not spiritually inferior to men. They are disciples of Christ. They receive His teaching. They belong to Him. They are part of His people and are recipients of the same salvation. The question of Church authority must therefore not be confused with the question of spiritual worth.

A woman was a witness of the Resurrection

The importance of women becomes even more striking after the resurrection. The women came to the tomb and discovered that Jesus had risen. In John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene encountered the risen Christ and was instructed to go and tell the disciples. “Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my

Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God."— John 20:17.

Mary therefore became a witness to the disciples concerning the risen Christ. That is significant. God used a woman to carry the first announcement of the resurrection to the disciples. But notice what this does and does not establish. It establishes that God was willing to entrust a woman with an important message. It does not by itself establish that women were thereby appointed to the governing or teaching office of the Church.

Again, we must distinguish **message from office, service from authority, and witness from ecclesiastical government**. A person can be entrusted with a message without being appointed to rule the congregation. That distinction will become increasingly important as we examine the examples in Paul's writings. Some have said Merry was the first disciple, this may well be true, but a disciple is not an appointed office.

Pentecost and the Gifts of the Spirit

The coming of the Holy Spirit also makes it clear that spiritual gifts were not restricted to men. Peter, explaining what had happened at Pentecost, quoted the prophet Joel: "And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and

your sons and your daughters shall prophesy..."— Acts 2:17.

The New Testament therefore gives us no reason to believe that women were excluded from the spiritual work of God. Paul also acknowledges women praying and prophesying: "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head..."— 1 Corinthians 11:5.

Whatever questions remain concerning the exact circumstances of this passage, one thing is clear: Paul recognised that women could pray and prophesy.

This is important because it prevents us from creating an artificial picture in which women were expected to remain completely silent in every circumstance. The New Testament picture is more carefully defined than that. Women were active participants in the life and service of the Church.

Yet Paul still placed boundaries around authority. That is where we need to look more closely.

The Difference Between Gift and Authority

One of the mistakes often made in this discussion is to assume that if someone has a spiritual gift, that gift

automatically gives the person authority to exercise it in every possible setting.

But Scripture does not work that way. Paul describes the Church as one body with many members and many different gifts. “For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us...”— Romans 12:4–6.

The fact that someone possesses a gift does not tell us, by itself, what office that person holds. Paul makes this distinction even more obvious in 1 Corinthians 12: “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers...”— 1 Corinthians 12:28.

He then asks: “Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers?”— 1 Corinthians 12:29. The answer is obviously no. The body has different members performing different functions.

Therefore, when we encounter a woman who prophesied, served, taught, helped, or carried an important message, we should not automatically assume that she therefore possessed every other form of ministry or authority.

The question remains: **What did God actually give her to do?**

Priscilla and Aquila

One of the examples most frequently raised in this discussion is Priscilla. Luke introduces us to Priscilla and her husband Aquila in Acts 18. They encountered Apollos, a man who was already "mighty in the scriptures" and who was teaching concerning Jesus. But Apollos did not yet understand the whole matter correctly.

Luke records: "Whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly."— Acts 18:26. This is an important passage. Priscilla was certainly involved. She and Aquila together helped Apollos understand the way of God more accurately. There is no reason to diminish her contribution.

But there is also no reason to turn this passage into something it does not say. The text does not say that Priscilla stood before the congregation and exercised teaching authority over men. It says that **Aquila and Priscilla took Apollos unto them** and explained the matter more accurately.

That is a very different situation from a woman being appointed as the pastor or elder of a congregation and

exercising governing teaching authority over men. The passage therefore demonstrates something important: **A woman can possess biblical knowledge and can help instruct a man without the passage establishing that she holds the governing teaching office of the Church.**

This is not an attempt to make Priscilla smaller. Quite the opposite. It allows the passage to say what it actually says. Priscilla was an important servant of Christ. She worked alongside her husband, and her contribution to the instruction of Apollos was real. But we should not manufacture an office from a circumstance.

There is another detail worth noticing. Luke does not isolate Priscilla from Aquila. They are repeatedly presented together. In Acts 18:2, Luke introduces "Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla." Later Paul sends greetings to: "Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus"— Romans 16:3.

Paul continues: "Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles."— Romans 16:4.

This was clearly a remarkable Christian couple. Their house was also used by the Church: "Likewise greet the church that is in their house."— Romans 16:5. There is therefore plenty of evidence that Priscilla was an active and highly valued Christian worker.

But once again, we must distinguish **Christian service from ecclesiastical office**. A person can be a faithful servant without holding the office of elder. A person can be gifted without holding authority over the congregation. A person can teach another person without being appointed as the congregation's teacher. These distinctions matter.

Phoebe

Another passage frequently used in discussions about women and Church authority is Romans 16:1–2.

Paul writes: “I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea: That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also.”— Romans 16:1–2. Phoebe was clearly a respected Christian woman.

Paul personally commended her. He called her a servant of the church at Cenchrea. He also described her as a **succourer**—one who had been a helper or benefactor of many, including Paul himself. There is nothing in this passage that requires us to diminish her importance. Quite the contrary.

Paul wanted the Roman Christians to receive her properly and assist her in whatever business she needed

help with. She had evidently served the people of God in a significant way. But again we come to the same question: **What authority does the passage actually give her?** It tells us that she served the church. It tells us that she was a helper of many. It tells us that Paul commended her. It does not say that she was an elder. It does not say that she was a bishop or overseer. It does not say that she was appointed to teach men in the assembled Church. It does not say that she governed the congregation. We therefore need to be careful with the word **servant**.

The Greek word Paul uses is *diakonos*, a word whose basic sense concerns service or ministry. The word itself does not automatically tell us that the person held the later, developed office that English readers may associate with the word "deacon."

This will become particularly important later in this book, because the history of the word *diakonos* and the development of the female designation *diakonissa* is much more complicated than simply saying: **Phoebe was called a deacon, therefore women were ordained to the same office as male deacons.** That conclusion requires considerably more evidence than Romans 16:1 provides.

Service Is Not the Same as Authority

At this point we can begin to see a pattern. The New Testament gives us women who: followed Jesus;

supported His ministry; learned from Him; witnessed His resurrection; prayed; prophesied; served the Church; helped other believers; instructed individuals; supported missionaries; opened their homes to the Church; and were highly valued by the apostles. None of this should be denied.

But none of these things, by themselves, establish that women were appointed to exercise governing teaching authority over the assembled Church. That is the distinction we must keep in view. The question is not: **“Can a woman serve God?”** The New Testament has already answered that question. Yes.

The question is: **“Can a particular form of service be used as evidence for a particular form of authority?”** That is a different question. And here Paul's direct teaching becomes impossible to ignore.

Paul's Instruction Concerning Authority

Paul writes to Timothy: “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.”—1 Timothy 2:11–12.

Whatever difficulties readers may have with this passage, Paul does not present his instruction as a temporary cultural preference. He immediately gives his reason: “For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam

was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression."— 1 Timothy 2:13–14.

This takes us straight back to the foundation established in Chapter 1. Paul does not appeal to Roman custom. He does not say that men were simply more educated. He does not say that women were culturally unsuitable. He goes back to **Adam and Eve**.

The same creation order we examined earlier is therefore still operating in Paul's understanding of the Church. And this is where the argument becomes much more difficult to dismiss as merely cultural. Paul then moves immediately into the qualifications for the overseer: "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife... apt to teach."— 1 Timothy 3:1–2. The wording matters. Paul does not merely describe a person who is gifted to teach. He describes the qualifications of a particular office. That brings us back to the distinction between **gift and office**.

What About Women Praying and Prophesying?

Some will understandably ask: "If women could pray and prophesy, how can Paul also tell women to be silent?"

This is a legitimate question. The answer cannot simply be that women were never permitted to speak at all, because 1 Corinthians 11:5 clearly refers to women praying and prophesying. The issue therefore requires us to distinguish between different kinds of speaking and different circumstances.

Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 14 occurs in the context of order in the gathered Church. He writes: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.” 1 Corinthians 14:34.

He then says: “And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home.”— 1 Corinthians 14:35. Whatever interpretation one finally gives to every detail of this difficult passage, it cannot simply be ignored.

Paul was concerned with **order, submission and authority within the assembled Church**. This is consistent with what he wrote to Timothy. The answer therefore cannot be that women were incapable of speaking, incapable of understanding Scripture, or incapable of being used by God.

The evidence says otherwise. The issue is the **authority attached to the speaking**. That distinction will become increasingly important as we move through the history of the Church.

The Office of Elder

There is another passage that deserves attention. When Paul instructed Titus to appoint elders, he wrote: “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:

If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly.”— Titus 1:5–6. Paul then continues: “For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God...”— Titus 1:7. Again, the language is not simply about spiritual usefulness. It concerns recognised leadership within the Church.

The elder is entrusted with responsibility. The overseer is a steward of God's household. And Paul connects this responsibility with being the **husband of one wife**. This does not settle every question about every form of ministry that women may undertake.

But it does give us an important starting point when we later examine the historical development of female ministry. We cannot begin with the assumption that every Christian function is identical. The New Testament itself distinguishes between them.

The Pattern We Have Seen

By this point, a pattern is beginning to emerge. God used women. Jesus valued women. Women followed Jesus. Women supported His ministry. Women witnessed His resurrection. Women prayed and prophesied. Women served the Church. Women helped individual believers. Women instructed others. Women were commended by Paul. Women were clearly important members of the body of Christ.

Yet Scripture also establishes distinctions concerning Church authority. Therefore, the biblical argument cannot honestly be reduced to either of two extremes: **"Women should have no part in ministry."** Or **"Because women can minister, there can be no distinction in authority."**

Neither conclusion follows from the evidence. The New Testament presents something more carefully ordered. There is **service**, and there is **authority**. There is **gift**, and there is **office**. There is **personal influence**, and there is **government of the Church**. There is **instruction of an individual**, and there is **authority to teach the congregation**.

These things may overlap, but they are not automatically identical.

A Question We Must Carry Forward

This brings us to an important question. When we read about a woman who served Christ in the early Church, what exactly are we entitled to conclude from the passage? If Scripture says that she served, are we entitled to say that she governed?

If Scripture says that she taught an individual, are we entitled to say that she held the office of teacher over the congregation? If Scripture says that she prophesied, are we entitled to say that she was an elder? If Scripture gives her a title, does that title automatically carry the same meaning and authority that a later Church gives to the same word? These are not merely academic questions.

They become especially important when we begin looking at the history of the Church. Because once we leave the pages of the New Testament, titles begin to develop. Words acquire new meanings. Church offices become more formal. Different traditions establish different rules.

And eventually, the question of women serving the Church becomes connected with the office of the **deaconess**. Before we decide what that office meant, however, we must first examine another woman mentioned by Paul whose name has become central to the modern debate.

Her name is **Junia**. And unlike Priscilla and Phoebe, the argument surrounding Junia reaches directly into the question of apostleship. That deserves a chapter of its own.

Chapter 4

Junia: What Does the Text Actually Say?

Few names in the New Testament have attracted as much attention in the modern discussion of women in the Church as Junia.

Romans 16:7 says: “Salute Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen, and my fellowprisoners, who are of note among the apostles. Who also were in Christ before me.” Romans 16:7 KJV.

This verse is often presented as straightforward proof that women were apostles and therefore that women may teach and exercise authority over men in the Church. But before reaching that conclusion, we need to slow down and ask a more basic question:

What does the verse actually say? There are several separate matters contained within this one verse, and they should not be collapsed into one argument. Who was Junia? What does Paul mean when he calls her his

“kinsman” and “fellowprisoner”? What does the expression “of note among the apostles” mean?

And if Paul does include Junia among the apostles, what does the word *apostle* mean in this particular context? Most importantly, does the verse say that Junia taught men or exercised governing authority over men in the Church?

The answer to that last question is important because Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 2:12 is specific: “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man...” 1 Timothy 2:12. Therefore, if Romans 16:7 is going to be used to overturn or redefine that instruction, the connection must be demonstrated from Scripture. It cannot simply be assumed.

Junia Was a Woman

Let us begin with something that I believe should no longer distract us from the real question. **Junia was a woman.** The Greek name in Romans 16:7 is **Ἰουνίαν** (*Iounian*). Ancient Greek manuscripts did not normally use the later accent marks that distinguish the feminine name **Ἰουνία** from the masculine **Ἰουνίας**. For that reason, there has historically been discussion about whether the person named was Junia or Junias.

But the evidence for the feminine name is strong, and early Christian writers understood Junia as a woman. There is therefore little value in trying to solve the argument by turning Junia into a man. Let us accept what the evidence reasonably supports. **Junia was a woman.** She was a Christian. She had been in Christ before Paul. She had suffered imprisonment. Paul regarded her and Andronicus highly.

The question is not whether Junia was an important Christian woman. She clearly was. The question is: **What does Paul actually say about her ministry and authority?**

Andronicus and Junia

Paul does not mention Junia by herself. He writes: "Salute Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen, and my fellowprisoners..." Romans 16:7. The two are presented together.

Paul calls them his "kinsmen." The Greek word **συγγενεῖς** (*syngeneis*) can mean relatives or fellow countrymen. It does not establish their exact family relationship. He also calls them his "fellowprisoners."

Whatever the precise circumstances, Paul is telling us that these two people had suffered for the Gospel. They were not casual Christians. They had been in Christ

before Paul. And Paul thought sufficiently highly of them to mention them by name. That alone should prevent us from treating Junia as an insignificant person in the early Christian community. But it still does not answer the question of authority.

"Of Note Among the Apostles"

This is where the argument becomes more complicated. The KJV translates the relevant expression: "who are of note among the apostles." The Greek is: **ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις,** "Outstanding / Notable among the apostles"

The important words are: **ἐπίσημοι** (*episēmoi*) — notable, distinguished, prominent, outstanding, **ἐν** (*en*) — in, among, **τοῖς ἀποστόλοις** (*tois apostolois*) — the apostles.

Literally, the expression can be understood as something like: **"distinguished among the apostles."** But there is an important question concerning the construction. Does Paul mean that Andronicus and Junia were themselves among the apostles? Or does he mean that they were well known to the apostles?

Both interpretations have been defended. The first is commonly represented as: **"Outstanding among the apostles."** The second as: **"Well known to the apostles."**

We should not pretend that the grammatical question does not exist. At the same time, we should be equally careful about the alternative translation. The Greek does not contain a separate word that literally means **“to.”**

Paul wrote: **ἐν** — in/among, **τοῖς ἀποστόλοις** — the apostles. Therefore, “well known to the apostles” is an interpretive rendering of the construction rather than a word-for-word translation. That does not automatically make it wrong. Greek constructions cannot always be translated word for word into English.

But it does mean that we need to examine the evidence rather than simply choosing the translation that produces the conclusion we want.

Suppose Junia Was Among the Apostles

For the sake of the argument, let us take the stronger reading for the case being made against us. Suppose Paul really does mean: **“Andronicus and Junia were outstanding among the apostles.”** Would that settle the question? I do not believe it would. It would establish something significant about Junia.

It would mean that Paul regarded her as being associated with the apostolic group in a meaningful way. But we would still have to ask: **What does “apostle” mean here?**

And this is where the rest of Paul's writings become important. The word **ἀπόστολος** (*apostolos*) has a wider range of use than simply "a person who governs the local congregation." Paul himself uses the word in different contexts.

For example, he calls himself an apostle: "Am I not an apostle? am I not free? have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?" 1 Corinthians 9:1. Paul clearly regarded his own apostleship as carrying substantial authority. But he also distinguishes different functions within the Church.

Apostles Are Not Automatically Teachers

One of the most useful passages for understanding this is 1 Corinthians 12. Paul writes: "And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers..." 1 Corinthians 12:28. Then he asks: "Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers?" 1 Corinthians 12:29.

The expected answer is obviously **no**. Why does this matter? Because Paul himself distinguishes these functions. An apostle is not automatically a teacher simply because he is an apostle. A prophet is not automatically an apostle. A teacher is not automatically an apostle.

God establishes different functions within the body. Paul's argument is that the Church is like a body with many members, and each member has its particular function. Earlier he says: “But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.” 1 Corinthians 12:18.

And then: “And God hath set some in the church...” 1 Corinthians 12:28. The repeated emphasis is significant: **God sets.** The ministry is not simply something a person decides to take upon himself or herself. A genuine calling in one area does not automatically create another calling. A gift does not automatically create an office. A recognised ministry does not automatically establish every form of authority.

And a title does not automatically tell us the full extent of the authority attached to it. That principle is important when we return to Junia.

The Apostles Were More Than the Twelve

We should also avoid another mistake. It would be too simple to say that the word *apostle* always means one of the Twelve. Paul himself demonstrates otherwise.

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul speaks of “other apostles” and includes himself and Barnabas within the discussion. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul distinguishes between: “the twelve” and later: “ all the apostles.”

He writes: “And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve...” 1 Corinthians 15:5. Then later: “After that he was seen of James; then of all the apostles.” 1 Corinthians 15:7. And finally Paul says: “And last of all he was seen of me also...” 1 Corinthians 15:8.

So the Twelve did not constitute the entire group described by the word *apostles*. The term could therefore be used more broadly than the original Twelve disciples. This matters because it prevents us from making an argument that is too narrow. If Junia is included among the apostles in Romans 16:7, we should not simply say, “That cannot be because she was not one of the Twelve.” That would not answer the actual question. We must instead ask what kind of apostleship Paul is describing.

Calling, Function and Authority

This brings us to a distinction that is essential to the whole discussion. There are at least four questions we should keep separate: **Calling:** What has God appointed this person to do? **Gifting:** What has God equipped this

person to do? **Function:** What does this person actually do within the body? **Authority:** What authority accompanies that particular function?

These things are related, but they are not automatically identical. A person can be genuinely gifted by God without possessing every office in the Church. A person can be recognised for Christian service without governing the congregation. A person can be sent on a mission without becoming the teacher or elder of the local church. And a person can be highly respected without possessing every form of authority.

Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 12 gives us a biblical basis for keeping these distinctions. He says: “God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers...” 1 Corinthians 12:28. Then: “Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers?” 1 Corinthians 12:29.

God distributes the functions. We should therefore be very careful about taking one statement about a person's ministry and turning it into another ministry that Scripture does not actually mention.

What Does Romans 16:7 Actually Tell Us?

Let us return to Junia. Romans 16:7 tells us that she and Andronicus were: Paul's kinsmen or fellow countrymen; his fellow prisoners; in Christ before Paul; and described in relation to the apostles as distinguished or well known.

If we accept the inclusive reading, then we can say that Paul regarded Junia as being **among the apostles**. I am prepared to grant that possibility. But notice what Romans 16:7 does **not** say.

It does not say: Junia taught the assembled church. It does not say: Junia was an elder. It does not say: Junia was a pastor. It does not say: Junia governed the congregation. It does not say: Junia exercised authority over men. It does not even use the word **teacher** in connection with her.

That absence does not prove that she did none of these things. But neither can we claim that she did them simply because Paul called her an apostle. **The text does not make that connection for us.** And this is where 1 Timothy 2:12 must come back into the discussion.

Paul says: “I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man...” 1 Timothy 2:12. If someone argues that Junia's apostleship proves that Paul therefore permitted women to exercise this particular authority over men, then the burden is to demonstrate that connection from Scripture. Romans 16:7 does not explicitly make it.

Junia Does Not Need to Be Diminished

There is another point worth making. We do not need to diminish Junia in order to maintain this distinction. She was not unimportant. She was not merely a passive observer. She suffered for Christ. She was in Christ before Paul. She was sufficiently respected to be named by Paul in his letter to the Romans. And she may well have been regarded as an apostle in the broader sense.

That is significant. But recognising the significance of Junia does not require us to give her an authority that the text does not actually describe. This is important because there can be a temptation on both sides of the argument. One side may want to make Junia a man because a female apostle creates a problem for its interpretation.

The other may want to make Junia a pastor, preacher, teacher and governing authority because that strengthens its argument for modern female ministry. Both approaches risk making the text say more than it actually says. We should allow Junia to remain what Scripture presents her as.

A highly regarded Christian woman who served Christ faithfully and whom Paul honoured in his letter. Then we can ask what else the text establishes.

Andronicus and Junia: Husband and Wife?

There is another possibility that has sometimes been suggested: that Andronicus and Junia were husband and wife. There is certainly nothing impossible about this. Paul frequently mentions Christian workers together, and Priscilla and Aquila provide an obvious example of a married couple serving together in the Gospel. Early Christian interpretation also sometimes understood Andronicus and Junia as husband and wife. However, **Romans 16:7 does not tell us that they were married.** Therefore, it should not be presented as established fact. It is a possible historical reconstruction.

If they were husband and wife, they could have formed a missionary partnership, suffering imprisonment together and being highly regarded within apostolic circles. That would provide another example of a woman actively involved in Gospel work while working alongside her husband. But because Scripture does not tell us that they were married, we should leave the matter there. It is possible, but possibilities are not proof.

God Uses Women Without Giving Every Office to Women

This brings us back to a principle already established earlier in this book. God has always used women in remarkable ways. Miriam was a prophetess. Deborah was a prophetess and judge. Huldah was a prophetess whose counsel was sought concerning the Book of the Law. Esther was used by God to preserve her people.

The New Testament gives us women who followed Christ, served the churches, supported Gospel workers and suffered for the faith. Therefore, the argument cannot honestly be: **"God never uses women in significant ministry."** The Bible itself disproves that.

The question is whether God's use of a woman in one capacity automatically establishes every other capacity. It does not. God's use of Deborah does not establish that Deborah was an Aaronic priest. God's use of Huldah does not establish that she held the priesthood.

God's use of Junia does not, by itself, establish that she exercised the teaching and governing authority addressed in 1 Timothy 2:12. This is the distinction between **God using someone** and **God establishing someone in a particular office with a particular authority**. Those are not necessarily the same thing.

What Junia Actually Proves

So where does this leave us? We can say several things with confidence. **Junia was a woman. She was a committed Christian. She had suffered for the Gospel. She was highly regarded by Paul. She had been in Christ before Paul.**

And there is a serious and credible reading of Romans 16:7 in which Paul describes her as **distinguished among the apostles**. I do not need to deny any of those things to maintain the argument of this book.

But even accepting the strongest reading, Romans 16:7 does not tell us that Junia taught the assembled church or exercised governing authority over men. That is the important distinction.

The question is therefore not: "Was Junia a woman?"
She was.
Nor is the question: **"Was Junia an important Christian?"**
She clearly was.
Nor even is the question: **"Was Junia an apostle?"**

The Greek wording in Romans 16:7 has been understood in two different ways. It may mean that Junia and Andronicus were **"outstanding among the apostles,"** which would place them within the group described as

apostles. It may also be understood as saying that they were **“well known to the apostles,”** meaning that the apostles knew them well.

The difference comes largely from how the phrase **ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις** is understood. We therefore should not build an argument on the assumption that one interpretation is beyond dispute. **Suppose the inclusive reading is correct and Junia was regarded as an apostle. What would that actually establish?**

The question is: **“What authority does Paul actually say Junia exercised?”** Romans 16:7 does not tell us that she exercised the authority to teach or govern men. And therefore the verse cannot simply be used as a shortcut around Paul's explicit instruction in 1 Timothy 2:12.

The title **apostle** must not automatically be turned into **teacher**, then into **pastor**, then into **governor of the congregation**. Those connections have to be established from Scripture. Paul's own words in 1 Corinthians 12 warn us against making precisely that kind of assumption.

“Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers?” — 1 Corinthians 12:29. The answer is no. God sets different people into different functions. And that brings us to an important question for the chapters that follow:

If women were recognised for particular forms of service in the early Church, what exactly were those services, who appointed them, and what authority did they actually possess?

That is where the word **deacon** becomes particularly important. Before we can understand the later history of the **deaconess**, we need to understand what the New Testament actually means by **diakonos**.

Chapter 5

Phoebe and the Meaning of Deacon

Having looked at Junia, we now come to another woman who is frequently used in the argument that women held positions of authority in the early Church: **Phoebe**. Paul introduces her at the beginning of Romans 16:

"I commend unto you Phoebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea."— Romans 16:1 KJV.

At first sight this seems straightforward. Phoebe was a servant of the church. But there is an important question hidden in the Greek. What exactly does Paul mean by **διάκονος (*diakonos*)**? And perhaps more importantly: **Does being a *diakonos* mean that Phoebe possessed the authority to teach and govern men in the church?**

We need to be careful here, because it is very easy to make the Greek word say more than Paul actually says.

What Does *Diakonos* Mean?

The Greek word **διάκονος (*diakonos*)** is commonly translated as: servant, minister, deacon. It is not, in the first-century Greek language, simply a masculine word meaning "deacon" with a separate feminine equivalent meaning "deaconess."

It is a noun that can refer to either a man or a woman. That is why Romans 16:1 is so interesting. Paul writes: **οὖσαν διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐν Κεγχρεαῖς.**

Literally, this is: **"being a *diakonos* of the church which is at Cenchreae."** Paul uses **διάκονος**. The later Greek word **διακόνισσα (*diakonissa*)** became a specifically feminine designation for a deaconess. But that later terminology should not automatically be read backwards into the first century.

This distinction matters. When somebody says, "Phoebe was a deaconess," we need to ask what they mean. Do they mean: **A.** Paul called Phoebe a *diakonos*, a servant or minister of the church? Or do they mean: **B.** Phoebe held the later institutional office that fourth- and fifth-century churches came to describe as a *diakonissa*?

Those are not necessarily the same question. The first is stated directly by Paul. The second requires historical evidence.

Why Does the KJV Say "Servant"?

The King James Bible translates Romans 16:1: **"I commend unto you Phoebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea."** Yet elsewhere the same Greek word is translated **"deacon."** For example: **"Likewise must the deacons be grave..."** 1 Timothy 3:8 KJV.

So why "servant" for Phoebe and "deacons" in 1 Timothy? Because translation is not simply a matter of finding one English word for every occurrence of a Greek word. The Greek **διάκονος** has a broader meaning than the later English ecclesiastical title "deacon." It can describe someone who serves or ministers.

This is why we should not argue: **Phoebe was called *diakonos*, therefore Phoebe held every authority later associated with the office of deacon.** That conclusion does not follow from the word alone.

Service Is Not the Same as Authority

This is one of the most important distinctions in this whole subject. A person can be given a responsibility without being given authority over everyone else. A person can serve the church without governing the church. A person can be recognised for faithful Christian work without being an elder. A person can minister without being a pastor. And a person can be a servant without being an authoritative teacher over the congregation. We see this distinction within Paul's own writings. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul describes different functions within the body:

“And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers...”— 1 Corinthians 12:28 KJV. Then he asks: **“Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers?”**— 1 Corinthians 12:29 KJV.

Paul does not treat every ministry as though it were the same ministry. The fact that one person serves does not tell us automatically what kind of service they perform. And the fact that someone has a recognised ministry does not automatically tell us what authority accompanies that ministry. This is exactly the question we must ask about Phoebe.

What Does Paul Actually Say About Phoebe?

Paul gives us more information in the following verse: **"That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also."**— Romans 16:2 KJV.

There are several things here that we can say with confidence. Phoebe was: a Christian sister; a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchreae; a woman whom Paul commended to the Roman Christians; someone who had helped many Christians; someone who had also helped Paul himself.

This is not insignificant. Paul clearly respected her. He did not introduce her as an unimportant woman who merely attended church. She had served others, and her service was important enough for Paul to commend her personally.

The KJV describes her as a **"succourer of many, and of myself also."** The Greek word here is **προστάτις (*prostatis*)**, the feminine form of a word that can carry meanings such as patron, benefactor, protector or supporter. Its precise force in this context is debated, but whatever nuance we choose, Paul is clearly describing a woman of recognised standing and substantial service.

There is no reason to diminish Phoebe. But neither should we add something to the text that Paul does not say. Romans 16:1–2 does **not** tell us that Phoebe: was an elder; a pastor; preached to the assembled congregation; or she governed the church at Cenchreae; presided over the Lord's Supper; Or exercised authority over the men of the church.

However, That does not prove that she did none of these things. It simply means that **Romans 16 does not say that she did them.** That distinction is important. What it does say has far more relevance than what it doesn't say.

Phoebe and Paul's Instruction in 1 Timothy

We must also remember that Paul is the same apostle who wrote: **"Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence."** — 1 Timothy 2:11–12 KJV.

And Paul did not stop with the command. He gave a reason: **"For Adam was first formed, then Eve."** — 1 Timothy 2:13 KJV. That takes us straight back to the foundation established in the first chapter of this book. Paul's argument is not simply, or even at all: "Women in

Ephesus are behaving badly." His stated reason goes back to **creation order**. Paul does not want his readers to be drawn from the truth onto culture assumptions, he states: Adam was formed first. Eve was formed afterwards.

Paul then continues into chapter 3, where he describes the qualifications for those holding recognised offices within the church. This is why we cannot take Romans 16:1 in isolation. We have to ask how Paul's different statements fit together.

The Deacon in 1 Timothy 3

Paul writes: **"Likewise must the deacons be grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience."**— 1 Timothy 3:8–9 KJV.

Paul then continues: **"And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless."**— 1 Timothy 3:10 KJV. Notice something important. Paul does not merely use the word *diakonos* as a general description of anybody who happens to help somebody. Here he speaks of those who **"use the office of a deacon."**

So by the time Paul writes 1 Timothy, there is already a recognised form of service associated with particular qualifications and an ecclesiastical function. But we must still ask: **What was the authority of that office?** Paul does not say that a deacon is an elder. He does not say that a deacon is a bishop. He does not say that a deacon is a teacher of the congregation. The offices and functions must not simply be merged together.

What About the Women in 1 Timothy 3:11?

There is another interesting passage: **"Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things."** 1 Timothy 3:11 KJV.

The Greek word translated **"wives"** is **γυναῖκας (*gynaikas*)**, which can mean either **women** or **wives**, depending upon context. This has produced considerable discussion. Some understand Paul to be speaking about the wives of deacons. Others understand him to be speaking about women who themselves held a recognised ministry associated with the diaconate.

The passage alone does not settle the matter beyond dispute. But notice what it does **not** say. Even if verse 11 refers to women serving as deacons or deaconesses, Paul

does not suddenly introduce a female office of authoritative teaching over men. The qualifications concern Christian character: grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things.

The same general principle remains. **A recognised ministry is not automatically identical with governing authority.**

Phoebe Does Not Need to Be Diminished

There is sometimes a danger on the other side of this discussion. Because some people use Phoebe to argue for female pastors or elders, there can be a temptation to minimise what she actually did. We should not do that. Paul commended her. Paul trusted her. Described her as a *diakonos* of the church and as a *prostatis* to many, including himself. Whatever precise duties were involved, she was clearly an important servant of Christ.

That should not trouble us. The question is not: **"Did God use Phoebe?"** it is evident he did. The question is: **"What authority does the biblical text say God gave Phoebe?"** Those are two different questions. And that distinction will become increasingly important when we move into church history.

The Difference Between Calling and Office

There is another distinction worth making before we leave Phoebe. We need to separate four things: **Calling.** What has God appointed a person to do? **Gifting.** What has God equipped that person to do? **Function.** What does that person actually do? **Authority.** What authority has God given that person to exercise?

These four things can be related without being identical. A woman may have a remarkable gift for explaining Scripture. She may have great knowledge. She may encourage believers. She may well evangelise. May help the poor, teach children, teach younger women. She may serve other Christians in countless ways. None of that should be denied.

But the existence of a gift does not, by itself, establish a particular ecclesiastical office. Likewise, a person may believe strongly that God has called them to something. But a personal sense of calling cannot be used as evidence that God has granted an authority which Scripture does not grant. That question will become especially important when we reach the later history of the Church.

From *Diakonos* to "Deaconess"

The biblical word and the later ecclesiastical office must therefore be kept separate. In the New Testament we have **διάκονος — *diakonos*.** Later Greek-speaking churches increasingly used **διακόνισσα — *diakonissa*** as a specifically feminine designation. By the fourth and fifth centuries, we find women being formally recognised in various forms of ecclesiastical service under the designation "deaconess."

But that later development raises a question rather than answering one: **Did the later office simply continue the ministry of Phoebe, or did the Church develop something beyond what we can establish from the New Testament?**

That is a historical question. And it is one that cannot be answered simply by saying: **"Phoebe was a deaconess."** We have to examine what the early Church actually meant by the term. What did these women do? Who appointed them? Were they ordained or blessed? Did they receive the laying on of hands? Who exercised authority over them? What relationship did they have to the bishop, priest and male deacon?

And, most importantly for this book: **Did the Church ever understand the female diaconate to give women the same teaching and governing authority over men that was associated with the male clergy?**

These are not minor details. They are the very things that must be established before we can say that the early Church understood female service to be equivalent to male ecclesiastical authority.

The Historical Evidence

The historical evidence becomes particularly interesting here. Very early Christian writings begin to show women performing recognised ministry among women. This makes practical sense when we remember the world in which the early Church existed. Baptism could involve considerable bodily exposure.

Women were ministering to women. There were concerns about modesty. There were concerns about Christian reputation in a pagan society. And there were practical matters involving women that male clergy could not appropriately undertake.

So the Church developed recognised female servants who could minister to women. But this is where we need to resist the temptation to impose modern categories upon an ancient institution. A woman being appointed to minister to women does not automatically mean that she was appointed to preach to the congregation.

A woman being formally recognised does not automatically mean that she governed the church. A woman receiving a blessing does not automatically mean that she received the same ecclesiastical order as a male deacon. These things must be investigated one by one.

And when we do that, something becomes clear. The historical question is not whether women served. **They clearly did.** The question is whether their recognised service became recognised authority over men. That is the question we will now follow through the historical evidence.

Phoebe and the Question We Must Carry Forward

Romans 16 gives us a woman who was clearly respected, clearly active, clearly useful to the Church, and clearly important enough for Paul to commend personally. There is no need to reduce her to make our argument work.

But neither should we turn her service into an office that the text does not describe. Paul calls her a **διάκονος**. He calls her a **προστάτις**. He tells the church to receive her and assist her. That is what the text gives us. The rest must be demonstrated.

And this gives us a principle that will guide the chapters that follow: **A woman may serve without that service necessarily giving her authority over the congregation.** The early Church recognised women as servants.

The historical evidence will show women being appointed, blessed, and in some traditions receiving the laying on of hands. But before we decide what that means, we need to look at the earliest evidence. The first witness outside the New Testament is particularly interesting because it comes not from a Christian theologian, but from a Roman governor writing to the emperor.

Around the beginning of the second century, **Pliny the Younger** wrote to Emperor Trajan about two Christian women whom he described as *ministrae*. Who were these women? What did Pliny mean by the word? And what can his letter actually tell us about the ministry of women in the earliest Church? That is where the historical investigation begins.

Chapter 6

The First Witnesses Outside the New Testament

We have established the biblical starting point. Paul calls Phoebe a **διάκονος (*diakonos*)** of the church at Cenchreae. He commends her highly and describes her as someone who had helped many Christians, including himself. But what happened after the time of the apostles?

Did the Church continue to recognise women as servants? Did the word *diakonos* develop into a recognised female office? And, perhaps most importantly, did that office give women the authority to teach and govern men? To answer those questions, we need to leave the New Testament for a moment and examine the earliest surviving Christian and non-Christian evidence.

A note of caution here: The further we move from the apostles, the more we are dealing with historical evidence rather than Scripture itself. That means we must distinguish between: **what the document actually says, what it probably means,** and **what later people have concluded from it.**

Our first witness is particularly interesting because it is not Christian. It is a Roman governor writing to the emperor.

Pliny and the Two Christian Women

Around AD 112, **Pliny the Younger**, governor of Bithynia-Pontus in Asia Minor, wrote to Emperor Trajan asking how Christians should be dealt with. Pliny admitted that he had little previous experience with Christians. He had investigated some of them and wanted the emperor's advice concerning the proper legal procedure. During his investigation, Pliny says that he tortured two enslaved women whom the Christians called ***ministrae***.

The Latin is important: *quas ministrae dicebantur*. They were women who were being called *ministrae*. The Latin ***ministra*** is related to the idea of a servant or attendant and is commonly understood in this context as corresponding to the Greek **διάκονος (*diakonos*)**.

Later writers have often translated the term as **"deaconesses."** But we need to be careful. Pliny himself does **not** tell us that these women were "deaconesses" in the fully developed ecclesiastical sense that the word acquired centuries later. He tells us that they were **two female slaves who were called *ministrae*.** That is what the evidence actually gives us.

What Did Pliny Discover?

Pliny interrogated Christians concerning their beliefs and practices. He was looking for evidence that Christianity represented some kind of political or criminal threat.

Instead, he reported that the Christians had been accustomed to meet on a particular day, sing hymns to Christ, and bind themselves by an oath not to commit crimes such as theft, robbery or adultery.

He found nothing that, in his view, amounted to the criminal conspiracy he was investigating. He famously described Christianity as a **"depraved and excessive superstition."** That tells us something important about Pliny.

He was not writing a Christian history. He was not attempting to explain Christian doctrine. He was a Roman official trying to discover what these people were actually doing. And that makes his reference to the two women particularly valuable.

It provides independent evidence that, by the early second century, Christians in Bithynia had women who were recognised by a ministry-related title. But it does **not** tell us precisely what their ministry involved.

What Pliny Does Not Tell Us

This is where historical honesty matters. Pliny does not say: "These women preached." Neither did he say: "These women taught the congregation." Or "These women governed the church." He does not say: "These

women were elders." And he does not say: "These women presided over the Lord's Supper." He does not even give us a description of their duties.

All we know from Pliny is that there were two enslaved Christian women who were called *ministrae* and that they were perhaps important enough in the Christian community for Pliny to interrogate them. That is significant evidence, but it is limited. And limited evidence should not be expanded into something it does not say.

Why Were Women Serving in the Church?

To understand the development of female ministry, we also have to understand the practical circumstances of the early Church. Christianity was spreading through societies where men and women did not always interact publicly in the same way.

There were also concerns about modesty, reputation and accusations against Christians. Women had needs that were most appropriately dealt with by other women. This becomes particularly obvious when we look at baptism. As baptism developed into a more elaborate

ceremony, women preparing for baptism could require assistance from Christian women.

There were also circumstances in which a male minister's involvement with a woman would have been considered inappropriate. The solution was not to remove women from Christian service. It was to recognise women who could minister to women. That distinction becomes much clearer in the next important document.

The *Didascalia Apostolorum*

Our next major witness is the **Didascalia Apostolorum**, a Christian church-order document generally dated to the **third century**, probably around the first half of that century. It was written in Greek and presents itself as instruction from the apostles, although it is not actually a document written by the apostles.

That distinction is important. It belongs to the early history of the Church, but it is not Scripture. The *Didascalia* gives us a much clearer picture of how a structured ministry of women was understood. Here we find the **bishop**, **deacons**, and **deaconesses** functioning within an organised ecclesiastical structure. And the distinction between their responsibilities is particularly interesting.

The Bishop and the Deacons

The *Didascalia* presents the bishop as having responsibility for the Church. The deacons assist the bishop in his work. The Church is therefore not presented as an organisation in which every minister simply acts independently. There is structure. There is appointment. There is responsibility. There is authority. And there is accountability.

That is important because it is very different from the modern idea: “God has called me, therefore I have the right to exercise whatever ministry I believe God has given me.” The early Church documents do not present ministry in that way. Ministry is connected with the order of the Church.

The Deaconess

The *Didascalia* then gives us something especially valuable for our investigation. It describes the role of a woman who serves as a **deaconess**. Her ministry is directed particularly toward women. She is described as helping women and dealing with circumstances in which

it would be inappropriate for a male minister to have direct physical contact with women.

This becomes especially important in connection with baptism. The deaconess assists women undergoing baptism and is involved in the anointing of women. The reason is not that women are spiritually inferior. It is because the Church is dealing with women in a situation where modesty and propriety matter.

This is a very different argument from saying: “Women cannot serve.” The evidence says almost the opposite. **Women were needed to serve women.** The question is not whether women served. The question is what kind of service they were given.

The Deaconess as a Helper

The *Didascalia* uses language of service and righteousness when describing the work of the deaconess. She is not presented as an independent rival to the bishop. She is not establishing her own authority. She is working within the order of the Church.

This gives us an important pattern: The order is, **Bishop, Deacons, Deaconesses and other recognised servants.** The exact terminology and structure should not be forced into a later denominational system. But the

principle is clear enough. There was an organised ministry.

And the ministries had different functions. This fits the principle we saw in 1 Corinthians 12: **“And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers...”**

Paul does not say everyone has the same function. The body has different members. The Church has different ministries. The question is not whether one ministry is more valuable to God than another. The question is: **What did God appoint each person to do?**

What the Deaconess Was Not

This is where we need to be particularly careful. It would be wrong to read the *Didascalia* and conclude that because a woman had an official ministry, she therefore possessed every authority held by male clergy. The document does not say that.

The deaconess is not described as: bishop; priest; elder; ruler of the congregation; or authoritative teacher of men. Her ministry is directed especially toward women.

She helps women. She ministers to women. She assists with baptism. She deals with matters involving women

that would otherwise create difficulties for male ministers. This is genuine ministry.

But it is **defined ministry**. And that distinction is fundamental to this book.

Baptism and the Ministry of Women

The connection between deaconesses and baptism deserves particular attention.

Baptism in the early Church was not always the simple ceremony many Christians know today. As the practice developed, candidates could remove their clothing and enter the water, and anointing formed part of the ceremony in some traditions.

That created an obvious practical problem. How should Christian women be assisted without compromising modesty? The answer was to have Christian women minister to them. The deaconess therefore had an important practical role. She could assist women who were being baptised.

She could anoint women. She could help maintain propriety. And she could minister where a male servant of the Church should not appropriately intervene. This

gives us an important historical connection between **female ministry and the practical needs of women**.

It also helps explain why the female ministry developed in a form that was distinct from the ministry of the male deacon.

Service Does Not Mean Inferiority

We need to stop here for a moment because there is an assumption that can easily distort this whole discussion. If a woman serves women rather than governing men, some people immediately conclude that the woman is being treated as inferior. But that is not the case. Jesus Himself taught that greatness in His kingdom is connected with service.

The issue is therefore not: **“Who is more valuable?”** The issue is: **“Who has been given what responsibility?”** A mother serving her children is not inferior to a father because she serves them. A doctor and a nurse may have different responsibilities without one being worthless.

Different functions do not automatically mean different spiritual value. Paul's analogy of the body makes exactly this point. The hand is not the foot. The eye is not the ear. Yet all belong to the same body.

The Christian argument should therefore never be: **"Women are less important."** The biblical argument is about **order, function and authority**.

The Importance of Appointment

There is another feature of the early evidence that we must not overlook. The woman does not simply announce: **"God has called me to be a deaconess."** She is recognised within the Church. She is appointed to a defined responsibility. She operates within the authority of the Church.

This is important because it gives us a principle that will become increasingly important as we move through history: **Biblical ministry is not simply self-appointed ministry.**

There may be a genuine calling. There may be genuine spiritual gifts. But the New Testament presents ministry within the order of the Church.

Paul tells Timothy: **"And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also."**— 2 Timothy 2:2 KJV. There is transmission. Recognition. Responsibility. And there is accountability. The early

Church did not appear to understand ministry as unlimited personal autonomy.

What Have We Learned So Far?

We now have two important witnesses. The first is **Pliny**, around AD 112. He tells us that two Christian women were called ***ministrae***. That gives us early independent evidence of women carrying a recognised Christian ministry. But Pliny does not tell us what their ministry involved.

The second is the **Didascalia Apostolorum**, probably from the third century. Here the evidence becomes much clearer. Women were recognised as deaconesses. Their ministry was especially directed toward women. They assisted women in circumstances such as baptism. They could perform important practical and religious service.

But they were operating within an established ecclesiastical structure. Nothing in this evidence requires us to conclude that women were exercising the same teaching or governing authority as bishops or male clergy.

The Evidence Is Beginning to Form a Pattern

Something interesting is beginning to emerge. The historical evidence is not showing us a Church in which women were simply excluded from ministry. Nor is it showing us, at this stage, a Church in which women held unrestricted authority over men.

Instead, we see something more structured. Women served, are recognised. have responsibilities. Can hold a defined ministry. And can be involved in important Christian rites. But their ministry has boundaries.

And those boundaries are not necessarily signs of contempt. They may instead reflect the Church's understanding of **function, modesty, order and authority**. Whether every boundary the later Church established was genuinely biblical is another question. We must examine each one.

A Warning About Reading History Backwards

This is where the modern argument can easily become confused. Someone may say: “Phoebe was a deacon.” Then: “Early Christians had deaconesses.” Then:

“Therefore women have always held the same ministry as male clergy.” But that conclusion has skipped several steps.

We must ask: **What did *diakonos* mean in the first century? What did *diakonissa* mean in the third and fourth centuries? What did the woman actually do? Who appointed her? Who had authority over her? Was she ordained? Was she blessed?**

Did she receive the laying on of hands? Was she permitted to teach men? Was she permitted to govern the congregation? Was she regarded as equivalent to a male deacon?

These questions cannot be answered by the word “deaconess” alone. The historical evidence must speak for itself.

The Church Did Not Simply Invent Women

There is another point we must make. The existence of deaconesses was not necessarily a sudden departure from the New Testament. We have already seen Phoebe. Paul calls her a *diakonos* of the church. Therefore, when later Christians recognised women who served the

Church, they were not inventing the idea that women could have recognised Christian ministry.

There was already a biblical precedent for a woman being recognised as a servant of the Church. But the later Church developed the ministry into a more clearly defined institution. And this is where our investigation becomes particularly interesting.

The further we move into the fourth and fifth centuries, the more formal the office becomes. We begin to find: specific qualifications; age requirements; ecclesiastical appointment; particular duties; references to the laying on of hands; church-council legislation; and distinctions between clergy and laity.

At that point we have to ask whether the Church is merely organising the kind of service already seen in Phoebe, or whether it is developing a new ecclesiastical office. That question cannot be answered by assumption. We need to follow the evidence.

From Service to Institution

This is therefore the point at which our investigation changes. The New Testament gives us **Phoebe**. Pliny gives us **two *ministrae***. The *Didascalia* gives us **recognised deaconesses with defined responsibilities**.

The next question is: **What happens when the Church becomes more organised and the office of deaconess becomes institutionalised?** That is where the fourth-century evidence becomes particularly important. The **Apostolic Constitutions** give us a more developed picture of the relationship between bishops, deacons and deaconesses.

Here we will see language concerning appointment and ministry that is much more explicit. The deaconess is not simply a woman who happens to help other Christians. She is formally recognised for a particular service.

But again, the crucial question remains: **What kind of authority does that appointment actually give her?** That is the question we must carry into the next chapter. Because as the Church becomes more organised, the distinction between **service and ecclesiastical office** becomes increasingly important.

And once office appears, another question inevitably follows: **Does office mean authority?** If so, **what authority?** And who gives it? Those questions will take us into the fourth-century Church and the **Apostolic Constitutions**.

Chapter 7

The Apostolic Constitutions and the Ministry of the Deaconess

We have now moved from the New Testament into the earliest surviving evidence outside Scripture. Pliny the Younger gave us our first glimpse of women carrying a recognised Christian ministry. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* then gave us a much clearer picture of deaconesses and their particular ministry among women.

But there is a question that deserves more attention. **Why was there a particular need for women to minister to women?** The answer becomes much clearer when we examine the baptismal practices of the early Church. The early Christians did not invent the idea of washing or immersion in water. They came from a Jewish world in which ritual immersion was already well known. Jewish ritual baths, or **mikva'ot**, were used for ritual purification, and immersion in water was part of Jewish religious practice long before Christianity appeared.

John the Baptist himself baptised in a Jewish environment, and the early Christian practice of baptism developed within that same world. The earliest Christian evidence therefore needs to be understood against this background.

This does not mean that Christian baptism was simply a copy of the Jewish *mikveh*. Christian baptism came to have its own meaning, centred upon repentance, faith in Christ, forgiveness and union with Christ in His death and resurrection.

But the physical practice of immersion had a familiar Jewish background. The *Didache*, one of the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament, recommends baptism in **living water** where possible and then provides for other methods when sufficient water is unavailable. That shows that immersion was an important early form of Christian baptism, while also showing that it was not the only method.

As Christian baptism developed, another feature becomes important. In some early Christian traditions, the person being baptised removed their clothing before entering the water and was anointed with oil. This was not merely a symbolic washing of the hands or face.

The candidate entered the water. The candidate came out of the water. And the body could be anointed as part of the ceremony. That created an obvious practical problem when the person being baptised was a woman. A male minister could not appropriately perform every part of the ceremony upon a naked woman.

This helps explain why a recognised ministry of women developed. The deaconess had a practical purpose. She

could minister to women in circumstances where a man could not appropriately do so. That is the background we need to keep in mind as we turn to the **Apostolic Constitutions**.

The Jewish Background of Immersion

It is worth stopping here because this part of the history can easily become confused. Jewish ritual immersion was not baptism in the Christian sense. The *mikveh* was associated with ritual purity and purification. Christian baptism came to mean something much greater.

The Christian was not simply washing away ceremonial uncleanness. Baptism was associated with repentance and entry into the Christian community. Paul could speak of baptism in terms of union with Christ: **"Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death..."** — Romans 6:4 KJV.

So we should not say: **"Christian baptism was simply Jewish *mikveh*."** It was not. But neither should we imagine that the first Christians suddenly invented full-body immersion without any cultural or religious background. They were Jews, or came from a Jewish religious environment, and ritual immersion was already part of that world.

John's baptism took place in that environment. The earliest Christians continued to baptise in water. And the early Christian writings show that immersion remained an important form of baptism.

Modern historical scholarship likewise recognises the close relationship between early Christian baptismal purification and Jewish ritual washing, while also stressing that Christians developed their own understanding of what baptism meant.

That distinction is important. We are not saying that Christianity simply copied Judaism. We are saying that **the physical practice of immersion had a Jewish background and was taken up into Christian baptism with a new Christian meaning.**

Baptism in the Early Church

As baptism developed, the ceremony could involve considerably more than simply entering a pool of water while fully clothed. Several early Christian sources describe candidates being stripped before baptism.

The fourth-century catechetical writings associated with **Cyril of Jerusalem**, for example, describe the candidate being stripped before entering the water and being

anointed. The baptismal instructions then describe the candidate entering the water and emerging again.

Other historical discussions of early Christian baptism likewise describe candidates being stripped and anointed before the ceremony. This matters because it gives us a practical explanation for something that might otherwise seem strange.

Why did the Church need women specifically appointed to minister to women? Because women were being baptised. And in some traditions they were being baptised in circumstances where their bodies were exposed. A male minister could not simply carry out every part of that ceremony. A woman was needed. The deaconess therefore had an obvious practical role.

The Deaconess and the Need for Modesty

The *Didascalia Apostolorum* gives us remarkably direct evidence. It says that the bishop should appoint: **"a man for the performance of the most things that are required, but a woman for the ministry of women."** It then gives a reason.

There were homes where a male deacon could not appropriately be sent to women because of the presence and suspicions of unbelievers. Then it gives baptism as the first example of the particular need for a female deacon. When women went down into the baptismal water, the *Didascalia* says that they should be anointed by a deaconess.

It then says: **"where there is a woman, and especially a deaconess, it is not fitting that women should be seen by men."** The document therefore gives us the explanation itself.

The woman was needed because women were being ministered to in circumstances where men should not see them. And baptism is given as the first and clearest example.

The Deaconess After the Baptism

The *Didascalia* goes further. It says that when the woman being baptised comes up from the water: **"let the deaconess receive her, and teach and instruct her how the seal of baptism ought to be kept unbroken in purity and holiness."** The deaconess did not simply disappear once the woman entered the water. She had a ministry before baptism. She had a ministry during the baptismal ceremony. And she had a ministry after baptism.

She could teach and instruct women in Christian conduct. The *Didascalia* therefore describes a genuine and recognised female ministry. It also tells us something about its particular sphere. It was a ministry **to women**.

The Apostolic Constitutions

The *Apostolic Constitutions* is a large Christian church-order document generally dated to the **late fourth century**, commonly around AD 375–380. It presents itself as instruction from the apostles. But we must distinguish between what the document claims to be and what it historically is.

It was not written by the apostles. It is a later Christian compilation which incorporates earlier material, including substantial material related to the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. It is therefore not Scripture. Nevertheless, it is an important historical witness to how at least one Christian tradition understood Church order and ministry during the fourth century. And on the subject of deaconesses, it gives us considerably more information than the earlier evidence.

A More Developed Church Structure

By this time the organisation of Church ministry has become much more clearly defined.

The *Apostolic Constitutions* speaks of: bishops; presbyters; deacons; deaconesses; sub-deacons; readers; singers; widows and other recognised servants. The bishop occupies a position of responsibility over the Church. Presbyters have their own defined ministry. Deacons have their own responsibilities. And deaconesses are also recognised.

We are therefore no longer looking simply at individual Christians helping wherever there happens to be a need. We are looking at an increasingly organised Church. That makes the document particularly useful. Instead of asking merely whether women served, we can now ask: **What service were they given? How were they appointed? What responsibilities did they have? And what was the relationship between their ministry and the ministries of men?**

"Ordain Also a Deaconess"

Book III contains a particularly important statement. The bishop is instructed to appoint suitable deacons as fellow-workers. Then the document says: **"Ordain also a deaconess who is faithful and holy, for the ministrations towards women."** That is a significant development in

the historical evidence. The deaconess is not merely mentioned as an informal helper.

She is recognised as someone appointed by the bishop for a particular ministry. And the purpose is stated: **“for the ministrations towards women.”** The document then gives reasons for the appointment. There were circumstances in which a male deacon could not appropriately be sent to women. The deaconess therefore provided a woman who could minister to women. But the baptismal ceremony makes the reason particularly clear.

The Deaconess and Baptism

The *Apostolic Constitutions* says: **“we stand in need of a woman, a deaconess, for many necessities; and first in the baptism of women.”** That is remarkably direct. The baptism of women is listed **first** among the necessities requiring the ministry of a deaconess. The document then explains what she does. The male deacon anoints the forehead of the woman being baptised. After him, the deaconess anoints her. The reason is stated: **“for there is no necessity that the women should be seen by the men.”**

The connection is therefore difficult to miss. Women were being baptised. Their bodies were being anointed.

The Church regarded it as improper for men to see women in this condition. Therefore a woman was appointed to minister to them. This gives us a strong historical explanation for the development of the deaconess.

Why the Female Ministry Was Needed

Now we can put the evidence together. The Jewish world already had a long-established practice of ritual immersion. Christian baptism developed within that environment. The earliest Christian writings show that immersion in water was an important form of baptism.

Later Christian writings give evidence that candidates could be stripped and anointed before entering the water. And the *Didascalia* and *Apostolic Constitutions* explicitly connect the ministry of deaconesses with the baptism of women and the need to preserve modesty.

The conclusion we can draw from the historical evidence is straightforward: **There was a practical reason for women to minister to women.** The deaconess could deal with the woman being baptised without exposing her to male ministers. This was not simply about giving women a title. There was a real need.

Was the Baptismal Nakedness Universal?

It would be too strong to say that every Christian everywhere baptised naked throughout the first four centuries. Christian practice varied. The evidence shows that naked baptism occurred in important early traditions, and some early sources are very explicit.

But other Christian communities may have used different arrangements. The *Didache*, for example, allows baptism by pouring when sufficient water is unavailable. This shows that even in the earliest period there was flexibility concerning the physical method of baptism.

So the historical statement should be: **Early Christian baptism could involve complete bodily immersion and, in some traditions, the candidate was unclothed and anointed before entering the water.** That is strong enough. We do not need to claim more than the evidence gives us.

The White Robe

There is another detail that helps us understand the ceremony. Early Christian baptismal practice developed the use of a white garment after baptism. The symbolism is easy to understand. The person had entered the water

associated with the old life and emerged into the new life in Christ. The white garment therefore became associated with the new Christian life.

But the existence of a white robe after baptism should not be used to assume that the candidate wore that robe during every earlier baptism. The historical sequence matters. In some traditions the candidate was stripped, anointed and immersed, and then clothed afterwards. That is precisely the sort of circumstance in which the presence of a woman assisting a woman becomes understandable.

The Deaconess Was Not the Origin of Baptism

It is important to keep the order of events straight. The Church did not invent baptism because it needed a reason to have deaconesses. Baptism came first. The need for women to assist women arose within the developing baptismal practice. The female ministry therefore developed around an existing Christian practice. This distinction matters because it prevents us from turning the argument upside down.

The historical question is not: **“Why did the Church invent female ministers?”** It is: **“What circumstances**

created the need for women to minister to women?" The baptismal evidence provides part of the answer.

The Ministry Beyond Baptism

The deaconess did not only assist with baptism. The *Didascalia* also gives her other responsibilities. She could enter the homes of unbelievers where a male deacon could not appropriately go. She could visit sick women. She could assist women recovering from illness. She could teach and instruct women.

The ministry therefore extended beyond the baptismal ceremony. Baptism helps explain **why the ministry was needed**, but the office developed into a broader ministry among women.

We should not reduce the deaconess to nothing more than "the woman who helped at baptisms." The historical evidence gives her a wider role.

A More Developed Church Structure

By the time of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, the Church's organisation has become more formal. The document

speaks of: bishops; presbyters; deacons; deaconesses; sub-deacons; readers; singers; widows and other recognised servants. The bishop occupies a position of responsibility over the Church. Presbyters have their own defined ministry. Deacons have their own responsibilities. And deaconesses are also recognised.

We are therefore no longer looking simply at individual Christians helping wherever there happens to be a need. We are looking at an increasingly organised Church.

"Ordain Also a Deaconess 2"

The formal language becomes even more interesting. The *Apostolic Constitutions* says: **"Ordain also a deaconess who is faithful and holy, for the ministrations towards women."** The woman is not merely a volunteer (lay person) any more. She is formally appointed. And the appointment is made by the bishop.

This raises an important historical question. What did the word **"ordain"** mean in this context? We should not answer that question simply by importing a later understanding of ordination. Instead, we should examine what the document actually describes. And this takes us to Book VIII.

The Laying on of Hands

Book VIII gives a prayer for the appointment of the deaconess. It says: **“O bishop, thou shalt lay thy hands upon her...”** The bishop then prays for the woman who is being appointed. This is important evidence. We should not ignore it. The laying on of hands is there. The prayer is there. The appointment is there. But we must still ask what the ceremony meant.

Did it make the woman equivalent to a male deacon in every respect? The document itself does not allow us to assume that. The functions are separately described. Therefore the ceremony and the duties must be considered together.

The Prayer for the Deaconess

The prayer associated with the deaconess is also interesting. It refers to God as the Creator of man and woman. It remembers women such as: Miriam; Deborah; Anna; Huldah.

It also refers to Christ being born of a woman. The prayer therefore does not treat female ministry as something inherently improper. The woman being appointed is

presented as someone who can receive the Holy Spirit and properly perform the work entrusted to her.

This is significant evidence concerning the place of women in the developing ministry of the Church. But it does not by itself answer every question about authority. For that we need to examine the duties.

What Did the Deaconess Actually Do?

The *Apostolic Constitutions* gives us several clues. The deaconess ministers to women. She assists women during baptism. She receives women during the baptismal ceremony. She has responsibilities connected with maintaining propriety. She can be involved in the pastoral care of women.

But the document also gives us an important limitation. It states: **"A deaconess does not bless, nor perform anything belonging to the office of presbyters or deacons..."** Whatever the laying on of hands meant, the document does not treat the deaconess as simply another male deacon. Her ministry is defined. Her responsibilities are real. But they are distinct.

Appointment, Function and Authority

At this point we need to keep three things separate.

Appointment. The deaconess is formally recognised and appointed by the bishop.

Function. Her ministry is directed particularly toward women and includes responsibilities connected with baptism and practical service.

Authority. The document does not present her as a bishop or presbyter, nor does it assign her the same functions as those offices.

These three things should not automatically be treated as identical. A person can be formally appointed without possessing every authority held by another office. A person can have a recognised ministry without being a bishop. A person can receive the laying on of hands without therefore becoming a presbyter.

The historical evidence requires us to examine each question separately.

What Does “Ordination” Mean Here?

This is particularly important because modern readers can easily read their own understanding of ordination back into an ancient document.

When we read:

“the ordination of a deaconess,” we naturally think of a modern denomination's understanding of ordination. But that may not be what the fourth-century writer intended. The document itself gives us the better evidence. It describes the ceremony. The laying on of hands. It gives a prayer. It describes the duties. It identifies the relationship between the various offices.

Therefore we should not settle the question simply by translating one word and then building the entire argument around it. The ceremony and the duties have to be considered together.

The Deaconess Was Not a Presbyter

Another point becomes clear. The deaconess is not placed in the same category of responsibility as the presbyter. The presbyter has responsibilities associated with the instruction and governance of the Church. The deaconess does not receive those responsibilities in this document.

Her ministry remains specifically defined. This matters because the historical question is not: **“Did women have ministry?”** The question is: **“What kind of ministry did women have?”** And then: **“What authority accompanied that ministry?”**

The *Apostolic Constitutions* gives us considerable evidence for answering the first question.It gives us a more limited answer to the second.

A Ministry Created Around Real Needs

The historical evidence therefore gives us a much more understandable picture of the deaconess. The office did not arise in a vacuum. The Church was baptising men and women. Baptism could involve immersion. In some traditions the candidate was unclothed. The body could be anointed. The candidate needed assistance.

Christian modesty meant that women should minister to women. The deaconess therefore had an obvious and practical role. The ministry could then extend into visiting women, caring for the sick, entering homes where male ministers could not appropriately go, and teaching women Christian conduct.

What began as a ministry meeting real needs became increasingly recognised within the structure of the Church.

The Evidence We Now Have

At this point the historical picture has become much clearer. We have evidence that: **Women were recognised as Christian ministers. Women were appointed to serve other women. Jewish ritual immersion provided an important background to the physical practice of immersion in the early Christian world.**

Christian baptism developed its own distinct meaning within that setting. Early Christian sources describe baptism by immersion. Some early Christian sources describe candidates being stripped and anointed before baptism. The *Didascalia* explicitly connects the ministry of deaconesses with the baptism of women.

The *Apostolic Constitutions* likewise connects the deaconess with the baptism of women. The reason given is that women should not be seen by male ministers in circumstances requiring bodily exposure.

The deaconess could assist women before, during and after baptism. The deaconess could teach and instruct

women after baptism. The deaconess could minister to sick women and enter homes where male deacons could not appropriately go.

The deaconess could be formally appointed by the bishop. The *Apostolic Constitutions* describes the laying on of hands in her appointment. Yet the same document distinguishes her functions from those of presbyters and male deacons. These are the pieces of evidence we now have.

What We Should Not Yet Conclude

We have deliberately reached a point where the evidence is becoming substantial. But we should resist the temptation to settle the entire argument here. We cannot simply say: **"Therefore women were ordained exactly like men."**

The evidence does not establish that. Nor should we say: **"Therefore women were never ordained."** The evidence does not support that either. The *Apostolic Constitutions* plainly describes a formal appointment involving the laying on of hands.

What that appointment represented in the developing theology of Church orders is something we need to investigate further. Nor should we conclude that because

the deaconess had a recognised ministry, she therefore possessed authority to teach and govern men.

The document does not give us that conclusion. It gives us a defined ministry directed particularly toward women.

From Baptism to Institution

We can now see a progression. The New Testament gives us **Phoebe**. Pliny gives us **women called *ministrae***. The *Didascalia* gives us **deaconesses with defined responsibilities among women**. The *Apostolic Constitutions* gives us **a more formally appointed female ministry**, including responsibilities associated with baptism and, in Book VIII, a laying on of hands.

The baptismal evidence also helps explain **why such a ministry was needed**. The office was not created simply as a religious title for women. It developed around real circumstances in the life of the Church. But once a practical ministry becomes an established office, questions of status and authority naturally follow.

We Must Follow the Evidence

At this stage we should resist the temptation to impose a modern argument upon the ancient Church. The evidence is more interesting than that.

The early Church did not simply exclude women from ministry. They clearly served. And in at least some traditions, women received the laying on of hands when appointed as deaconesses.

At the same time, the evidence does not show that the deaconess simply possessed every function of the bishop, presbyter or male deacon. The historical record therefore presents us with something more complicated than either extreme. And that is precisely why we need to continue.

What Comes Next?

The fourth century has given us a much clearer picture of the deaconess. We have also discovered something that helps explain **why the office existed at all**.

The baptismal practice of the early Church created a particular need for women to minister to women. The Jewish background of ritual immersion helps us understand the environment in which Christian immersion developed.

The Christian sources then give us direct evidence of baptism involving immersion, anointing and, in some traditions, the removal of clothing. The *Didascalia* and *Apostolic Constitutions* connect these circumstances directly with the work of the deaconess. But now another question arises.

If the deaconess was formally appointed, and if some churches used the laying on of hands, how did other churches understand that appointment? Was it regarded as an ordination? As a blessing? Was the practice the same in East and West?

And what did the Church councils say? These questions take us into the **fourth- and fifth-century councils**, where the historical evidence becomes even more revealing. We will begin with **Nicaea** and then move to **Chalcedon**.

There we will encounter something particularly important: a distinction between women who carried the title of deaconess and women who had actually received the laying on of hands. That distinction will become important as we follow the development of the office through the centuries.

We are still gathering the evidence. The conclusion can wait until we have finished examining it.

Chapter 8

The Councils and the Deaconess

We have now seen the deaconess developing from a recognised ministry among women into a more formally organised position within the Church. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* described her work among women, particularly in connection with baptism.

The *Apostolic Constitutions* went further. It described the formal appointment of a deaconess and even included the laying on of hands. But what did the wider Church make of this developing ministry? Did every church regard the deaconess in the same way? This questions bring us to the councils of the Church.

And here the historical evidence becomes particularly interesting. The councils did not all speak about deaconesses in exactly the same way. Some evidence recognises them. Some regulates them. Some distinguishes them from the male clergy.

And some later Western councils move towards ending the practice altogether. We need therefore to examine the evidence in its historical order.

The Council of Nicaea — AD 325

The first Council of Nicaea is one of the most important councils in Christian history. It met in AD 325, during the reign of Emperor Constantine. The council is famous for its response to the Arian controversy and for the Nicene Creed. But Canon 19 contains something important for our study.

It deals with the **Paulianists** who were being received into the Catholic Church. The term "Paulianists" here refers to followers of **Paul of Samosata**, not to the modern Pentecostal movement sometimes called Oneness or Apostolic.

That distinction is important. The council says that former Paulianist clergy who were found suitable could be received and ordained. It then turns specifically to their deaconesses.

The canon says: **"And we mean by deaconesses such as have assumed the habit, but who, since they have no imposition of hands, are to be numbered only among the laity."**

The council recognises women who were called deaconesses. But it distinguishes between **having the title or habit** and **having received the laying on of hands**.

A Deaconess Could Have the Name Without the Laying on of Hands

At least in the case being dealt with by Nicaea, some women were called deaconesses but had not received the laying on of hands. The council therefore says that they were to be counted among the laity.

That tells us something about how the Church could distinguish between: **a title, a recognised position,** and **a formal ecclesiastical appointment involving the laying on of hands.** The three were not automatically identical.

This is important because we have already seen the *Apostolic Constitutions* describing a deaconess receiving the laying on of hands. Nicaea therefore gives us another piece of the puzzle. The historical evidence does not present one simple universal practice. Different communities could have women called deaconesses without necessarily giving them the same ecclesiastical status.

What Nicaea Does Not Say

We should also notice what Canon 19 does not say. It does not say: **"Women cannot be deaconesses."** Nor does it say: **"There can never be a female ministry."** The

issue is the status of these particular women. The council distinguishes those who had assumed the habit but had received no laying on of hands.

They were counted among the laity. That tells us something about the significance attached to the laying on of hands. But it does not, by itself, tell us exactly what every church meant by the ceremony. That question remains open.

The Importance of the Laying on of Hands

We now have two pieces of evidence which need to be placed alongside one another. The *Apostolic Constitutions* describes a deaconess being appointed by the bishop with the laying on of hands. Nicaea says that women who had not received the laying on of hands were to be counted among the laity.

This suggests that the laying on of hands was significant. But we still need to ask: **What kind of significance?** Was it the same as the ordination of a male deacon? Was it a solemn appointment? Was it a blessing? Was it understood differently in different places?

We cannot answer those questions simply by assuming that the word “ordination” always carried the same meaning. The historical evidence must be followed.

The Council of Laodicea

Another council provides further evidence. The Council of Laodicea is generally dated to the fourth century, although its precise date is disputed. One of its canons refers to women called **presbytides**. The canon says that those called presbytides should not be established in the Church.

The precise identity of these women is disputed. Some have understood the term as referring to women who held a recognised ecclesiastical position. Others have understood it as referring to senior or elderly women rather than female presbyters.

The Greek terminology therefore requires caution. We should not automatically translate every occurrence of a word related to “presbyter” as evidence of women holding the office of presbyter. The evidence is not that simple.

What it does show is that the Church was dealing with questions concerning recognised female positions within

its communities. And those positions were becoming increasingly regulated.

Why Were the Councils Regulating Ministry?

This is an important point in understanding what was happening. The Church was growing. Christianity had moved from a persecuted religion into a religion increasingly organised within the Roman Empire. As congregations became larger and more structured, the Church had to regulate: who could minister; be ordained; who could receive the laying on of hands; what different ministers were permitted to do; who was accountable to whom; and what happened when someone violated the rules.

This affected men as well as women. Nicaea's canons, for example, also regulate the conduct and position of male deacons. The councils were therefore not simply meeting to restrict women. They were attempting to establish order throughout the Church. That distinction matters.

Chalcedon — AD 451

We now come to one of the most important pieces of evidence in the entire history of the deaconess. The **Council of Chalcedon** met in AD 451. Its fifteenth canon specifically concerns deaconesses. It says: **"A woman shall not receive the laying on of hands as a deaconess under forty[a] years of age, and then only after searching examination."**

This tells us something immediately. By the fifth century, there were women who received the laying on of hands as deaconesses. The practice was recognised sufficiently for a major council to regulate it. The council did not simply abolish the office.

Instead, it established a minimum age. Forty. And it required examination before the woman could receive the laying on of hands.

Forty[a] Years of Age

The age requirement is interesting. A woman was not simply appointed because she was young, enthusiastic or claimed a personal calling. The council required her to be at least forty years old. She also had to undergo examination. The historical evidence therefore shows a ministry being placed under ecclesiastical control. The Church wanted to know who the woman was. It wanted to examine her suitability.

And it placed her ministry under recognised authority. This is consistent with the broader pattern we have already seen. Ministry was not simply a matter of individual declaration. The Church recognised and regulated those who served.

The Question of Marriage

Chalcedon then adds another requirement. It says that if a woman has received the laying on of hands and has continued for a time in her ministry, but then gives herself in marriage, she is to be subject to severe ecclesiastical punishment.

The canon states that she is to be anathematized, as is the man who marries her. The language is severe. We should not soften it. But neither should we assume that this was simply a rule against women marrying generally. The canon concerns women who had entered this particular ministry.

The historical context suggests that the office was connected with a state of dedicated service. The same general period saw strong expectations of celibacy or continence among certain categories of Christian ministers and religious women. The important historical fact for us is that **the Church treated the office as a serious and permanent commitment**.

What Does Chalcedon Tell Us?

Chalcedon gives us several pieces of evidence. A woman could be recognised as a deaconess. She could receive the laying on of hands. Her appointment was subject to examination. She had to be at least forty[a] years old. The Church expected her to remain committed to the ministry. Marriage after entering the office could result in severe disciplinary consequences. This is much more than an informal volunteer position. The deaconess had become a recognised ecclesiastical ministry.

But What Kind of Ministry?

There is still a question that Chalcedon does not answer by itself. Did the deaconess possess the same authority as a male deacon? The canon does not say that. It regulates the appointment of deaconesses. It does not list all their duties.

Therefore we must not make the canon say more than it says. It establishes the existence and regulation of the office. It does not establish that women held every function of male clergy.

For that we must look at other sources. This is another example of why individual pieces of evidence must not be stretched beyond their actual content.

A Significant Difference Between Nicaea and Chalcedon

Now something interesting appears. At Nicaea, Canon 19 distinguishes women who had the title or habit of deaconess from those who had received the laying on of hands.Those without the laying on of hands were counted among the laity.

At Chalcedon, more than a century later, the laying on of hands for deaconesses is clearly recognised and regulated. This does not necessarily mean that the Church suddenly invented the practice. The *Apostolic Constitutions* already provides earlier evidence of laying on of hands.

But it does show that the practice had become established enough by Chalcedon to require formal regulation. The office was developing. Its status was becoming more defined.

The East and the West Begin to Look Different

We should now be careful about making a single statement about "the early Church." The Christian world was not one uniform institution operating in exactly the same way everywhere. The Eastern and Western churches developed different practices.

The evidence from the Greek-speaking East continues to show deaconesses for many centuries. In the Latin-speaking West, however, evidence begins to appear that places increasing restrictions on the female diaconate.

This difference will become important. We cannot simply take a Western council that restricts deaconesses and use it to describe what the entire Christian world believed. Nor can we take an Eastern practice and assume that every Western church followed it. The history becomes regional.

The Western Evidence Begins to Change

The Western councils provide some particularly interesting evidence. At the Council of Orange in AD 441, a canon states that women deacons are not to be ordained and that those already existing should receive

the blessing given to the people. This is a significant change in tone.

The office had existed. But the council was now restricting its continuation. A few decades later, the Council of Epaon in AD 517 went further. It stated that the consecration of widows called women deacons was to be abolished in its region.

Again, this does not mean that every Christian church everywhere abolished the office. It tells us that in parts of the Western Church the practice was being restricted.

Why Was the Western Church Restricting the Office?

The historical sources tell us **that** restrictions were introduced. They do not always give us enough information to state with certainty **why** every council took the action it did. We should therefore distinguish the evidence from our explanation.

We can say: The councils restricted or prohibited the appointment of deaconesses. We can ask whether this reflected changing baptismal practices, changing social conditions, changes in the structure of clergy, concerns

about abuses, or changing theological understandings of the office.

But we should not simply assume one explanation without evidence. That question will need to be followed through the later Western history.

The Baptismal Connection Becomes Important Again

There is, however, another historical development worth watching. The ministry of the deaconess had been strongly connected with the baptism of adult women. If baptismal practice changes, the practical need for the deaconess may also change.

As infant baptism became increasingly common in many Western regions, the circumstances that had originally required women to assist adult women at baptism would naturally become less common. Although there were other factors, but mostly the decline of the deaconess was caused by infant baptism.

And this gives us an important historical question. If the original practical need becomes less common, what happens to the ministry that grew around that need?

That question will become increasingly important as we move into the Western Middle Ages.

The Office Was Not Simply One Thing

It is easy to use the word **deaconess** as though it described one identical office from the first century through the Middle Ages. The evidence does not allow that. Phoebe was a *diakonos*. Pliny refers to *ministrae*. The *Didascalia* describes a ministry among women. The *Apostolic Constitutions* describes formal appointment and laying on of hands.

Nicaea distinguishes between deaconesses who had no laying on of hands and those regarded as clergy. Chalcedon regulates women receiving the laying on of hands. Western councils later restrict or prohibit the appointment.

The same word therefore appears within a changing historical environment. We must always ask:

What did the term mean here?

What did the woman actually do here?

How was she appointed here?

What authority did she possess here?

A Pattern Is Beginning to Emerge

The ministry of women was real. It was recognised by the Church. It could be formally organised. It could involve appointment by a bishop. It could involve the laying on of hands. It could be connected with baptism. It could involve teaching and caring for women.

But the historical evidence also repeatedly distinguishes the female ministry from the ministries of bishops and presbyters. And when councils began to regulate the office, they did not simply declare: **"Women are equal to men in every ecclesiastical function."**

Nor did they simply say: **"Women have no place in ministry."** The historical development was more complicated.

We Have to Keep Asking the Right Question

The question throughout this book has never been: **"Did God use women?"** The historical evidence makes that question unnecessary. The more precise question is: **What authority was attached to that ministry?** And

another: **Was that authority the same as the authority given to male clergy?** The councils give us important evidence, but they do not answer every question.

The Evidence Has Become More Complicated

We began with Phoebe. Then came Pliny. Then the *Didascalia*. Then the *Apostolic Constitutions*. Now the councils have added another layer.

Nicaea tells us that some women called deaconesses were still regarded as laity because they had not received the laying on of hands. Chalcedon tells us that women could receive the laying on of hands as deaconesses and that the practice was formally regulated.

Western councils later began to restrict the office. The history is therefore not a straight line. It is a development. Different churches made different decisions. Practices changed. And the meaning attached to the office developed over time.

The Next Stage

We have now reached the point where the Eastern and Western histories need to be followed separately. In the East, the office of deaconess continued for centuries. The requirements became more formal. The age of appointment was regulated.

The relationship between the deaconess and the bishop became clearer. The connection with women, baptism and sacred rites continued.

In the West, the office increasingly came under restriction. Some councils prohibited ordination. Others abolished the consecration of women called deaconesses. Yet the title itself did not simply disappear everywhere.

Women called **diaconissa** continued to appear in historical records. So the next question is not simply: **"Did deaconesses exist?"** The question is: **What happened to them?**

How did the office develop in the East? Why did it decline in the West? And what did the Church mean when it spoke of **ordination**, **consecration**, or **blessing**? Those distinctions will become increasingly important.

The evidence is taking us from the early Church into a period where the difference between **ordination and blessing** becomes much more visible. That is where we go next.

Footnotes:

[a] *While the Bible does not explicitly mention a 50-year age limit for church offices, early church history shows that the age requirement for a deaconess was originally set at 50 or 60 years old before being lowered. The Biblical Root (60 Years Old): In 1 Timothy 5:9, The Didascalia Apostolorum: The* Didascalia*, an early 3rd-century Christian treatise from Syria, officially fixed the minimum entry age for a deaconess at 50 years old. This document altered the strict 60-year requirement to allow slightly younger mature women to serve.*

Chapter 9

Ordination or Blessing?

By the time we reach the early medieval period, the question becomes more difficult. We have already seen women called deaconesses. We have seen their ministry recognised by church authorities. We have also seen women receiving the laying on of hands, particularly in the Eastern Church.

But what exactly did the laying on of hands mean? Was a woman being **ordained to a recognised office**, in the same way that a man was ordained as a deacon? Or was she being **formally blessed and appointed to a particular ministry**, without entering the same kind of church office as a male deacon?

We cannot answer that simply by looking at the word “deaconess” or by pointing to the laying on of hands. We need to look at what the actual ceremonies said.

The Male Deacon

The Western Church provides useful evidence for comparison. When a man was made a deacon, the bishop laid hands on him and prayed for him. The prayer described the man as being received into a **sacred order of ministry** and referred to the **consecration** associated with that office.

In other words, the ceremony was not simply a prayer asking God to bless a man who was going to help the church. He was being formally admitted to a recognised ministry within the Church.

A deacon was not a priest. The early Church recognised different kinds of ministry, and being formally ordained as a deacon did not mean that the man had every authority belonging to a priest or bishop.

That gives us an important principle: **Being ordained does not by itself tell us everything about a person's authority.**

We still have to ask: **Ordained to what?**

The Deaconess

The ceremony for making a deaconess was different. A Western prayer for making a deaconess asks God to give the woman the **Spirit of His blessing**, so that she may receive grace and become an example of Christian living to others.

The emphasis is therefore different from the language used for the male deacon. The woman is being formally recognised and entrusted with ministry, but the prayer places particular emphasis on **God's blessing, holiness and Christian example**.

But we must also be careful not to make too much of one word. It would be wrong to say: “The ceremony uses the word blessing, therefore she was not ordained.” Historical language does not work that simply.

Blessing, consecration and ordination could overlap in the language of the early and medieval Church. What matters is the complete ceremony, what it was intended to accomplish, and what position the woman was given afterwards. So the question remains open.

The Office Did Not Disappear

Deaconesses did not simply disappear from the Western record. Women identified as deaconesses continued to

appear in historical sources, and church service books from the early medieval period preserved prayers and ceremonies for appointing or blessing them. However, the nature of the ministry was changing.

By the ninth and tenth centuries, ceremonies for deaconesses increasingly appear alongside ceremonies for women such as widows and consecrated virgins. This makes it difficult to assume that a medieval deaconess automatically held exactly the same position as a male deacon.

The title continued, but the function and status associated with it were not necessarily unchanged. That is an important warning when looking at church history. A title can survive while the meaning attached to it changes.

East and West

The difference between the Eastern and Western Churches becomes increasingly important. In the East, the evidence we have already examined shows deaconesses receiving the laying on of hands and being formally recognised within the Church's ministry. The Council of Chalcedon, for example, regulated the office and set an age requirement for women receiving it.

The Western Church developed differently. Some Western councils had already restricted or ended the

formal consecration of women as deacons. Yet later Western church books still preserved ceremonies for women called deaconesses.

This tells us that there was no single, unchanging practice across the whole Christian Church. The position developed differently in different places and at different times. That does not make the evidence useless.

Quite the opposite. The differences allow us to see that Christians were asking questions about the nature and limits of the ministry.

What Did the Laying on of Hands Mean?

This is the central question. The laying on of hands is an ancient Christian practice.

In Scripture, it is associated with prayer, blessing, healing, receiving the Holy Spirit, and setting people apart for particular work.

It therefore cannot automatically be assumed to mean exactly what the modern word **ordination** means.

The historical setting matters. When the Church laid hands on a woman and appointed her as a deaconess, What was she expected to do? The laying on of hands establishes that something significant was taking place.

It does not, by itself, tell us the complete extent of the woman's authority.

A Recognised Ministry Does Not Automatically Mean Equal Office

This distinction is easy to lose when looking at the evidence from a modern perspective. We tend to think in terms of two possibilities: Either a woman held a fully ordained office,or she had no recognised ministry at all.

The historical evidence does not fit neatly into those two categories. Women clearly did have recognised ministries. They were entrusted with responsibilities. They were sometimes formally appointed. In some traditions they received the laying on of hands.

But the early Church also had different categories of ministry and different levels of responsibility.

The fact that a woman was formally appointed therefore does not automatically establish that she possessed every authority given to a male deacon, presbyter or bishop. This is why we must resist reading modern ideas back into ancient documents.

Service and Authority

This brings us back to a distinction that has run throughout this study: **Service is not automatically the same thing as authority.** A person can serve without governing. A person can be trusted with an important responsibility without being given authority over everyone else.

A person can teach in one situation without holding the office of teacher over the whole congregation. The early Church itself recognised different ministries.

Therefore, when we encounter a woman serving as a deaconess, the important question is not simply: "Was she a minister?" The evidence already tells us that she was performing recognised ministry.

The more important historical question is: **What was that ministry?**

The Evidence Is Becoming Clearer

By this point in our investigation, several things have become difficult to dispute. Women were not absent from the ministry of the early Church. The ministry of deaconesses was sufficiently recognised for church authorities to regulate it.

In the East, women could receive the laying on of hands as part of their appointment as deaconesses. The Western Church developed differently and, in some

places, restricted or ended the formal consecration of women as deacons.

Yet ceremonies for women called deaconesses continued to appear in Western church sources. The evidence therefore shows development rather than one completely uniform practice. The word **deaconess** does not always mean exactly the same thing in every century. And the laying on of hands does not, by itself, answer the question of exactly what authority a woman received.

The Question We Must Carry Forward

We can now ask a more useful question than simply: **"Were women ordained?"**

The better question is: **"What did the Church believe it was giving a woman when it appointed her as a deaconess?"** Was it a sacred office equivalent to the male diaconate? Was it a recognised ministry with different responsibilities? Was it a formal blessing and appointment rather than entry into the same order of ministry? Did the answer change between East and West, or between different periods?

The evidence suggests that these questions cannot be answered by one word or one ceremony. We must continue to examine what deaconesses actually did. That is where the historical record can tell us more.

The question is no longer simply whether women served in the Church. They clearly did. The question is **where the Church itself drew the boundaries of that service and authority**. And that is the question we will carry into the next stage of our investigation.

Chapter 10

The Western Church Changes Direction

By the fifth century, the position of women called deaconesses was beginning to change in the Western Church. This is an important point in the history because the evidence no longer moves in one direction.

In the East, the office of the deaconess continued to be recognised and regulated. In parts of the West, however, church authorities began to restrict or end the formal appointment of women as deacons.

The Council of Orange

One of the clearest examples comes from the Council of Orange in southern Gaul in AD 441. One of its canons stated: “Altogether no women deacons are to be ordained.” It then dealt with women who already held

that designation, directing them to submit to the blessing given to the ordinary people of the Church.

This is significant because it shows that the Western Church was not simply continuing the earlier Eastern pattern. A church council was now explicitly rejecting the formal ordination of women as deacons. The important point is not to assume that this represented the position of every Christian church everywhere. But it provides clear evidence of a change in direction.

The Council of Epaone

A similar development appears a few decades later. The Council of Epaone, held in Gaul in AD 517, dealt with widows who had been called women deacons. The council abolished the formal consecration of such women. The council was not declaring that women could no longer serve Christians. It was addressing the **formal religious status given to women called deacons**.

Women could still serve the Church in many ways. What was being restricted was the formal ecclesiastical position associated with the title.

What Had Changed?

At this point, we can see that something had changed in the Western understanding of the office. Earlier evidence

had shown women being formally recognised as deaconesses. Now Western councils were saying that women should no longer be ordained or consecrated to that position.

The surviving council canons do not give us a complete explanation. That means we should resist the temptation to invent one. It is possible to suggest reasons based on wider changes in Western Christianity, but suggestion is not the same as evidence.

The safest historical conclusion is simply that the Western Church was changing its practice.

The East Continued Differently

The Eastern tradition continued to recognise deaconesses for considerably longer. The office was regulated by church and imperial legislation. Women could be formally appointed, and the Eastern tradition retained the practice of laying on hands.

This means that Christianity did not develop one universal rule concerning deaconesses. The same basic Christian tradition produced different practices in East and West.

A Gradual Western Decline

The Western change should therefore be understood as a process rather than a single event. The fifth-century councils provide clear evidence that formal female diaconal ordination was being restricted. Yet the name did not immediately disappear.

Women continued to be associated with forms of religious service, and later Western church books still contain prayers for women called deaconesses. The existence of the title therefore continued after the earlier form of the office had begun to disappear.

A woman called a deaconess in the ninth century cannot automatically be assumed to have had exactly the same responsibilities as a woman called a deaconess in the fourth century. The historical period matters.

Why Did the Office Decline?

There are several changes in Western Christianity that may have contributed to the decline of the earlier form of the office. One was the changing practice of baptism. As infant baptism became increasingly dominant, the particular need for women to assist adult women during baptism became less common.

The practical circumstances that had helped make the deaconess ministry important were therefore changing. The decline of the deaconess was not necessarily caused by infant baptism alone. The Church was also developing

its understanding of clergy, religious communities, church authority and the separation between different forms of ministry.

The evidence shows several developments occurring over time. It is therefore better to say that the circumstances surrounding the ministry changed than to claim that one particular event caused its disappearance.

A Different Western Model

As the Western Church developed, women increasingly served God through other recognised forms of Christian life. Widows, virgins, abbesses and women living in religious communities could have considerable responsibilities. Women could possess significant responsibilities without necessarily holding the same ecclesiastical office as men.

What the Councils Tell Us

The Western councils therefore give us something more valuable than a simple answer. They show us a **change in church practice**. The earlier evidence demonstrated that deaconesses could be formally recognised. The Eastern Church continued that practice. But Western councils increasingly restricted it.

The historical record therefore does not support the idea that the Christian Church had one completely uniform position on the matter from the beginning. Nor does it support the opposite claim that women were simply excluded from ministry.

The Importance of Timing

When someone says: “The early Church allowed women to be deacons,” we should ask: **Which century?**

When someone says: “The Church never allowed women to be deacons,” we should ask the same question. The historical evidence gives us examples of both recognition and restriction. The Eastern and Western Churches also followed different paths. This is why historical claims about women in the Church must be tied to a particular time and place.

Chapter 11

When the Deaconess Became Something Else

By the eighth century, the Western evidence for deaconesses had become much less common, but the name had not completely disappeared. At Rome, women called deaconesses were still known towards the end of

the eighth century. Around this period, a collection of church services and prayers sent from Rome to Charlemagne included a prayer for making a deaconess.

At first this sounds as though the earlier office was continuing. But the ceremony is important. The woman was being formally blessed and appointed, rather than receiving the same form of ordination used for a male deacon. The title remained, but we are now looking at a different stage in its history.

The Carolingian Period

The reign of Charlemagne brought a major effort to organise and standardise Western Christian life. During this period, references to deaconesses increasingly appear alongside other forms of dedicated female religious life, particularly abbesses, widows and consecrated virgins.

The old ministry was therefore becoming part of a wider pattern of women's religious service.This distinction matters because a title does not necessarily tell us the exact duties or authority attached to it at a particular time.

The Council of Paris

In AD 829, the Council of Paris further restricted women from performing certain formal liturgical functions. This was a Western council, not a ruling for the whole Christian world. Nevertheless, it provides another clear indication of the direction Western practice was taking.

The formal ministry of the Church was becoming increasingly associated with the male clergy, while women's religious service developed along other lines.

The Tenth Century

The story is not completely straightforward. A tenth-century Western church service book again contains a ceremony for making a deaconess.

The ceremony, however, appears among those for women such as abbesses, widows and consecrated virgins. It is concerned with formally dedicating the woman to a religious life rather than simply reproducing the ordination ceremony used for a male deacon.

This gives us an important historical lesson. We cannot take the word **deaconess** from one century and assume that it carried exactly the same meaning in another. The title survived, but its use had developed.

Women Still Served

None of this means that women ceased to have important Christian responsibilities. Far from it.

Women cared for the sick and poor, taught other women, founded and maintained religious communities, administered property and charitable work, and exercised considerable influence within those communities.

The rise of the **abbess** is particularly important. An abbess could be responsible for an entire community of women. She could oversee its daily life, property and religious activities.

Such a position could involve considerable practical authority. But this was authority within a particular religious community. It should not automatically be equated with holding one of the ordained offices of bishop, priest or deacon.

By the Later Middle Ages

By the later Middle Ages, the earlier Western ministry of the deaconess had largely disappeared. The Eastern Church followed a different and longer path, but there too the traditional office eventually declined.

One factor sometimes associated with this decline was the widespread practice of infant baptism. As adult baptism became less common, one of the important

practical circumstances that had originally required women to assist women at baptism was reduced.

That was not necessarily the only reason. The organisation of the Church was also changing, and different forms of clergy and religious life were becoming more clearly defined.

The important point to note is that the old deaconess ministry was no longer a normal feature of Western Christian life. The question is what those ministries authorised them to do.

The Next Development

By the end of the late middle ages, the old deaconess office had largely disappeared from the normal structure of the Western Church. But something else was developing. The medieval Church produced women who were not merely servants within religious communities. Some became writers, teachers, mystics, founders and influential Christian voices.

Some claimed that they had received a special calling from God. That introduces a different question from the one we have been asking about deaconesses. It is one thing for the Church to **appoint a woman to a recognised ministry**.

It is another for a woman to say: **“God has called me to do this.”** Who decides whether such a calling carries authority? Does a personal sense of divine calling establish a ministry? Must the Church recognise it?

And what happens when a claimed calling appears to conflict with an established biblical order? Those questions will take us into the later medieval Church and, eventually, into the Reformation and the English-speaking world.That is where the story begins to move from the history of a particular office to the much larger question of **women claiming a calling and authority in the Church**.

Chapter 12

From Calling to Equality

The story of women in the Church now takes another turn. We have already seen women serving the Church, women recognised as deaconesses, and women exercising considerable influence without holding the formal offices of the clergy.

We have also seen women who believed that God had given them a particular calling. But another development was taking place outside the Church. The idea of **equality between men and women** was becoming increasingly important in the wider non Christian society.

Eventually, these two developments would meet. That meeting would have a profound effect upon the Church.

The Question of Calling

In the medieval period, women such as Hildegard of Bingen and Catherine of Siena believed that God had given them particular messages and responsibilities. Their influence could be considerable.

Yet their authority was not simply based upon the statement: **“God has called me, therefore I have the authority to do whatever I believe God has called me to do.”**

Their claims were examined within the existing Church. They could be recognised as spiritually gifted without being made bishops or priests. This distinction is important.

The idea of a personal calling existed long before the modern movement for women's equality. But it was not yet the same argument we encounter in later centuries. Something else was developing.

Equality Outside the Church

As European society moved towards the modern period, the position of women became an increasingly important

social question. Women began to challenge restrictions placed upon them in education, property, employment, marriage, politics and public life.

The argument was increasingly expressed in terms of **equality**. If men and women were equal as human beings, why should women be denied opportunities that were available to men?

This was not originally a theological argument. It was a social and political argument. Women were seeking greater equality in the world around them. The Church should of remained completely isolated from those changes, but in some it was not to be.

Two Different Arguments

There were now two different arguments. The first was: **"God has called me."**

The second was: **"Men and women are equal, therefore women should have the same opportunities as men."**

These arguments are not identical. A woman could believe that God had called her without believing that women should hold every position held by men. Likewise, someone could argue for equality in civil society without making any argument about Christian ministry. But over time the two arguments began to meet.

Equality Enters the Church

Once equality between men and women became an accepted principle in wider society, questions about the Church's own treatment of women became increasingly under pressure.

If women could become educated, own property, enter professions, vote and participate in public life, why should they be excluded from particular roles in the Church? That question sounds straightforward. But it introduces a Biblical problem. The Church is not simply another human institution.

Its structure is claimed to come from Scripture. Therefore the question cannot be settled simply by asking: **"What does modern society consider equal?"** The further question must be: **"What does Scripture establish?"** That is where the earlier chapters of this book become important.

The Earlier Argument Comes Back

We began this study by looking at the biblical foundation. Examining creation, and Adam and Eve. We considered the order in which God gave the command. We covered Paul's teaching concerning men and women, looked at the distinction between service and authority.

We then followed the historical evidence. We saw women serving the Church, deaconesses, women exercising influence. We saw women being recognised for particular gifts. But we also saw that these things did not automatically mean that women were placed into every office held by men.

The question therefore remained: **Where does authority come from?** That question becomes increasingly important once equality becomes the main argument.

A Change in the Question

Earlier, the question might have been: **"Has God called this woman?"** Later, the question increasingly became: **"Why should a woman be prevented from doing what a man can do?"**

Those questions sound similar, but they are not the same. The first asks about **calling**. The second asks about **equality**.

And once the equality argument entered the discussion, the traditional restrictions on women in the Church could increasingly be viewed not as matters of biblical order, but as discrimination. That was a significant change.

Theological Interpretations Followed

The change did not remain outside the Church.

Christian theologians and church leaders began to reconsider how particular biblical passages should be understood.

Texts that had traditionally been interpreted as establishing distinctions between male and female roles were reconsidered. The debate increasingly centred upon questions such as: What did Paul mean by “authority”? What did Paul mean by “teach”? Was his instruction limited to the culture of his own time? Does creation order remain relevant? Does equality in Christ remove distinctions of authority? Can women exercise every ministry if they possess the necessary gifts? Is a person's calling sufficient evidence that God has authorised the ministry?

These were not merely questions about historical practice. They were questions about how Scripture itself should be interpreted.

The Turning Point

This is where the story begins to move towards the world we know today. The movement for equality did not suddenly create women who wanted to serve God. Women had been serving God for centuries. Nor did the equality movement suddenly create women who believed they had a calling.

Women had claimed divine callings long before the modern period. What changed was the **framework through which those claims were understood**. A woman could now look at the opportunities available to men in society and ask why the Church should be different.

She could look at the biblical passages traditionally used to restrict women's authority and ask whether those passages had been interpreted correctly. She could believe that God had called her and, at the same time, understand equality as evidence that there should be no male-only ministry. These ideas could reinforce one another.

From Equality to the Church

This development is therefore one of the most important turning points in the history we are following. The argument gradually moved from: **“Women can serve.”** to: **“Women can be called.”**

and then towards: **“If women in the Church consider they are equal to men, why should their calling be restricted?”** That is a very different argument from the one we encountered in the early Church. The early evidence was concerned with **what ministry a woman was appointed to perform**.

The later argument increasingly concerned **whether a woman should be restricted from an office simply**

because of the order of creation. The question of ministry had become a question of equality.

The Road to the Modern Church

From here the story accelerates. The Reformation challenged established Church authority.

The rise of Protestantism created new questions about Scripture, ministry and the authority of the individual believer. Later came the growth of education, political rights, women's movements and campaigns for civil equality, (liberty).

Circumstances gave rise to women increasingly entering professions (otherwise occupied by men) and public life. Eventually the same question was directed towards the Church: **If society recognises equality between men and women, should the Church do the same?**

Different Christian traditions answered that question differently. Some retained traditional distinctions between male and female offices. Others reconsidered their interpretation of Scripture and began opening offices previously reserved for men.

Still others developed positions somewhere between the two. The result is the divided Christian landscape we see today.

But There Is a Question We Must Not Avoid

It would be easy to look at this history and simply say: **"The Church changed because society changed."** The Church did not merely copy society. Some Christian theologians under preasure, developed biblical arguments to support the changes. They re-examined Scripture. They offered new interpretations.

They argued that equality in Christ, spiritual gifts, baptism, calling and the examples of women in Scripture should be understood differently. Those arguments must therefore be examined on their own terms. That is what we will do. We have reached the point where history and theology come together.

The Turning Point 2

The development we have followed can now be seen as a progression. First, women served within recognised boundaries. Then women claimed particular spiritual gifts and callings. Then wider society increasingly demanded equality between men and women.

Then Christians began asking whether those demands for equality should also change the way Scripture was understood. Eventually, women began entering

ministries and offices that had traditionally been Biblically restricted to men.

But somewhere along that road, the central question changed. It was no longer simply: **"What ministry has God established for women?"** It increasingly became: **"Why should women be prevented from having the same ministry as men?"**

That question lies much closer to the Church we see today. We now need to examine how these ideas developed in the **Reformation, Protestant churches and eventually the English-speaking world**, where the modern argument for women in church leadership would take a much more recognisable form.

Chapter 13

When Equality Entered the Church

We have now followed the history of women in the Church from the New Testament through the early centuries and into the medieval period. We have seen women serving God. We have seen women recognised for particular ministries. We have examined the deaconess and the different ways that office developed.

We have also seen women exercising influence without necessarily holding the same offices as men. The biblical

women were not hidden and they were not leaders in the Church.

So what changed? The major change came when a new idea entered the Church from the wider world: **equality.**

The Demand for Equality

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women in Britain were increasingly demanding equality with men in society. They wanted greater opportunities in education, employment and public life. Most visibly, they demanded the right to vote.

The suffrage movement became a powerful force in British society. There were different organisations and different methods. Some pursued constitutional reform; others, particularly the suffragettes, used much more militant methods.

But beneath the differences was a common demand: **women should have the same political rights as men.** This was not originally a question about Church ministry. But it did not remain outside the Church.

Equality Enters Anglicanism

Anglican women were themselves part of the suffrage movement. In 1909, the **Church League for Women's**

Suffrage was formed. It was specifically Anglican and brought the women's movement into the life of the Church.

The League campaigned for the parliamentary vote, but it also created a place where the wider meaning of the women's movement could be discussed in Christian terms.

The argument for equality was no longer simply being made **outside** the Church. It was now being discussed **inside** the Church by Christian women.

The League eventually campaigned for equality for women in Church councils and assemblies. By 1915 it was petitioning for greater female participation in the Church's governing structures. The boundary between political equality and equality within the Church was beginning to disappear.

The Biblical Women Were Reconsidered

There was also a ready supply of biblical examples. Women had already appeared throughout the history of Scripture. Previously, the existence of these women could be understood alongside a distinction between **service and authority**.

Now another question was being asked: **If God used these women, why should women today be restricted**

from doing what men do? That was a significant change in the argument.

From Service to Equality

The issue was no longer simply: **"Can a woman serve God?"** The question became: **"Why should a woman have a different position from a man?"**

Once equality became the principle, restrictions on women could be viewed not as an established biblical order, but as an inequality that needed to be removed. The argument was beginning to move from: **women can serve**

to: **women should have equal opportunity to serve** and eventually to: **women should have equal access to Church office.**

Maude Royden

One woman demonstrates this development particularly well. **Maude Royden** was an Anglican and an active participant in the women's suffrage movement. She served on the executive committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and edited its newspaper, *Common Cause*.

She also became a secretary of the Church League for Women's Suffrage. Later she became one of the most prominent campaigners for the ordination of women. Her life therefore brings together the two movements we are examining. **Women's equality in society. Women's equality in the Church.**

The connection is not merely theoretical. It can be seen in the life of an actual woman who moved from one campaign into the other.

The Church League Moves Further

The development was gradual. The Church League for Women's Suffrage did not begin simply as a campaign for female priests. Indeed, some of its members were initially cautious about that question.

The evidence shows that even Maude Royden regarded support for women priests as an extreme position in the early years. But the argument continued to develop. By the later years of the movement, organisations emerging from the Church League were openly challenging the exclusion of women from the priesthood.

In 1918, the **League of the Church Militant** emerged from the earlier suffrage organisation and campaigned for the ordination of women.

The progression is therefore visible: **suffrage, equality in Church participation, equality in ministry and equality in ordination.**

Something Fundamental Had Changed

The women of the Bible had not changed. Paul's writings had not changed. The early Church's history had not changed. What had changed was the **principle by which the evidence was being examined**. Equality had become the starting point.

Once equality became the starting point, the traditional distinction between male and female authority had to be reconsidered. If men could preach, why not women? If men could govern a congregation, why not women? If men could be ordained, why not women?

And if the answer was simply **"because they are men and women are women,"** that answer increasingly appeared unacceptable within the new understanding of equality. The Church was therefore being asked to reconsider not merely its practice, but its interpretation of Scripture.

Equality and Biblical Hierarchy

This brings us directly back to the foundation of this book.

Does equality of worth require equality of ecclesiastical authority? That is the question that the modern movement would increasingly answer **yes**. But that answer required a change in the way certain biblical passages were understood.

The Turning Point

This is therefore the turning point in the history we are tracing. For centuries the question had largely been: **What ministry has the Church recognised for women?** Now the question became: **Why should women be excluded from any ministry available to men?**

The argument was no longer beginning with Church order and asking what place women occupied within it. It was beginning with equality and asking whether the Church's order should be changed to reflect it.

The suffrage movement provided a powerful social framework for that argument. Christian women took the language of equality into the Church. Biblical examples of women were reconsidered within that new framework.

And the demand gradually moved from political equality to equality within Church life and, eventually, equality of ordained ministry.

Where This Leads

We have now reached the point where the historical question becomes a theological one.

The question is: **“Did the biblical order of male and female authority change because Scripture was reinterpreted, or because the Church increasingly accepted a new principle of equality?”** That is the question we need to follow next.

Because once equality became the driving principle, the biblical texts that had traditionally been understood as establishing a distinction between male and female authority could no longer be left untouched. The battle had moved from **women's place in the Church** to **the interpretation of Scripture itself**. And that is where the modern argument truly begins.

Chapter 14

What Has Changed?

What happened when equality became the principle by which the traditional understanding of Scripture was judged?

The New Interpretation

As the campaign for equality entered the Church, passages that had traditionally been understood as restricting women's authority began to be interpreted differently.

If we deliberately ignore what God has written because it conflicts with what we believe equality requires, we cannot call that spiritual progress. Whatever else it may be, it is a movement away from submission to God's Word. It certainly is not an upward spiral.

Paul wrote:“I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.”— 1 Timothy 2:12. The modern response has often been to ask what was happening in Paul's particular situation.

Where does Paul say that his instruction can be disregarded when the culture changes?

Paul Takes Us Back to Creation

He does not finish his reasoning by referring to Ephesus. He goes back to Genesis: “For Adam was first formed, then Eve.”— 1 Timothy 2:13. And then: “And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.” — 1 Timothy 2:14.

Paul therefore grounds his argument in events that took place at creation and the Fall. Genesis records that God gave Adam the command concerning the tree before Eve

was created: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:
But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it.”
— Genesis 2:16–17

The order is clear: Adam was created first, the command was given to Adam, and Eve was subsequently created. Paul deliberately brings that order into his instruction to the Church.

That raises an obvious question: **What has changed since creation?**

The Creation Order Has Not Changed

When God created Adam in His image, and Adam later fathered Seth “in his own likeness, after his image,” this is not about making the woman a lesser person. That is not the point. The point is the order established in creation. There is a line running through the account: God, Adam, and then the generations that come through Adam. Eve was created by God and given to Adam, and the two were to become one flesh, but they were not created in an identical order or function. There is a hierarchy in creation, whether modern thinking is comfortable with that word or not. Hierarchy does not mean that one person has greater value than another, but a greater responsibility. It means that God has

established an order, and that order carries meaning. We may not always like what God has established, but we cannot change the truth of creation simply because the modern world prefers equality of position to the order God has given.

It is also important to understand what headship means. Being the federal head of creation was not a privilege that placed Adam above everyone else; it was a great responsibility before God. Adam was the one to whom God gave the command, and when he disobeyed, the consequences reached far beyond himself. The same principle applies to headship in the home and in the Church. Biblical headship is not a licence to dominate or a badge of superiority. It is a responsibility to God for those placed under that headship. The greater the responsibility, the greater the accountability. This is why the question of authority cannot simply be reduced to ability or equality. God establishes order, and with that order comes responsibility.

Nothing in Scripture says that the order established in creation was temporary.

This does not mean that men and women have different value before God. Scripture is equally clear that both did bear God's image: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” — Genesis 1:27.

And in Christ: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”— Galatians 3:28.

But being one in Christ does not mean that every distinction of function or responsibility disappears. The same Paul who wrote Galatians 3:28 also taught that the Church contains different gifts and different functions: “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers...”— 1 Corinthians 12:28.

Equality before God is therefore not automatically the same thing as equality of office.

Equality Becomes the Test

This is where the fundamental change can be seen. The question can move from: **“What does Scripture establish?”** to: **“How can Scripture be understood so that equality is maintained?”**

Instead of allowing Scripture to establish the boundary, equality becomes the principle by which Scripture is interpreted. Once that happens, any biblical distinction between male and female authority becomes something that needs to be explained. Culture then becomes an important part of the explanation.

If Paul's instruction can be confined to his culture, the modern Church is free to move beyond it. But as Paul's reasoning is rooted in creation, the argument becomes much more difficult.

What Has Equality Changed?

Equality has certainly changed society. It has changed education, employment, politics, marriage and the relationship between men and women.

But has it changed **God's order in creation?** Society can change. Church practice can/have change. Interpretations have always been up for debate changes. But no changes, by themselves, demonstrate that God has changed what He established.

This is why we must distinguish between: **what society permits, what the Church permits,** and **what God has commanded.** They are not necessarily the same thing.

Then Why Does God Allow It?

If God has established an order, why does He allow people to depart from it? Why does He allow churches to reinterpret Scripture? Why does He allow practices to develop that may not agree with His revealed order?

The Bible shows repeatedly that God's permission is not necessarily His approval. Israel provides an example. The people demanded a king because they wanted to be like the nations around them: “Nay; but we will have a king over us; That we also may be like all the nations.” — 1 Samuel 8:19–20.

God told Samuel: “They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.” — 1 Samuel 8:7. Yet God still permitted Israel to have a king. The fact that He allowed it did not mean that their motive was right. Permission is not the same as approval.

God's Permissive Will

This is what is often described as God's **permissive will**. God may allow something to happen without establishing it as the standard He has commanded. Scripture also shows that God allows human beings to make real choices, while those choices still have consequences.

Paul describes the seriousness of turning away from what God has revealed: “Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator.” — Romans 1:25. God may permit a course of action without endorsing it. His patience should never be mistaken for a change in His standard.

Permission Is Not Proof

This distinction matters when looking at the modern Church. The fact that women have eventually been permitted to occupy offices historically restricted to men does not, by itself, prove that God has changed His command. It proves that the Church has changed its practice.

Whether that change is faithful to Scripture is a separate question. Nor does the fact that God has allowed the change to continue prove that He authorised it. The Bible contains many examples of God allowing human beings to make choices that bring consequences.

“Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”
— Galatians 6:7

Consequences Are Not Always Immediate

If a biblical order is rejected, the consequences may not appear immediately. A church may prosper. People may be sincere. Women may serve faithfully. Men may support the change. The congregation may even grow.

But none of these things, by themselves, proves that the underlying interpretation is correct.

Success is not the test of truth. The test remains the Word of God.

Isaiah gives us a simple principle: “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.”— Isaiah 8:20.

The question therefore remains: **What did God say?**

The Foundation Is at Stake

This is why the issue is larger than women becoming priests, pastors or bishops. The deeper question concerns the foundation upon which authority rests. If God established an order in creation, and that order is later rejected because equality has become the controlling principle, then the issue is no longer simply about women.

It becomes a question of whether God's revealed order can be altered by changing cultural expectations. That brings us back to where this book began: **Creation.** The order established by God.

The Question We Must Now Ask

Has Scripture actually changed its teaching, or have we changed the way we read it? Scripture itself gives us a warning about placing human tradition above God's

Word: “Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition.”— Mark 7:13.

The issue is therefore not whether society has changed. The issue is not whether women have abilities, gifts, intelligence or value. The issue is whether God's revealed order can be changed simply because the culture around the Church has changed.

And that brings us back to the only question that finally matters: **What did God actually say?**

Chapter 15

When God's Word Is No Longer the Final Word

There is a danger that is greater than simply changing one Church practice. It is what happens when the Church changes the way it decides what is true.

If we deliberately set aside something God has written because it no longer agrees with the values of the age, then the problem is no longer just the particular command we have rejected.

The problem is who has the final word.

The Question Behind the Question

The argument over women teaching and exercising authority can appear to be about women, but that is not really the question. The question is the order God established in creation. Scripture does not begin with a judgment about a woman's ability, intelligence, character, or usefulness. Paul takes the matter back to the beginning: “For Adam was first formed, then Eve” (1 Timothy 2:13). Likewise, 1 Corinthians 11:8–9 says that “the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man,” and that “the woman was created for the man.” Whatever we may think about those verses, Paul clearly grounds his instruction in something that existed before the Church, before culture, and before the Fall. The issue, therefore, is not whether a particular woman can teach, preach, lead, or do a particular job. She may be perfectly capable of doing so. The question is whether ability gives authority. If God has established an order, then ability does not cancel that order. The question behind the question is therefore simple: Who established the order, and does His Word still have the authority to define it?

And underneath all this is another question: Who decides what the Church is permitted to do?

If the answer is God, then Scripture must determine the matter. If the answer is the Church, then Scripture becomes something that the Church interprets according

to its own decisions. And if the answer is the culture, then the Church becomes a reflection of the society around it.

That is a very different Church from the one we see in the New Testament. Jesus said: “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed.”— John 8:31.

Notice the direction. Jesus did not say that His disciples were those who changed His word to fit the times. He said they were those who **continued in His word**.

The Word Is Not Ours to Rewrite

There is an important difference between **understanding Scripture** and **changing Scripture**. We may struggle with a passage. We may need to examine its language, its context and its meaning. We may discover that something we have believed for years was mistaken.

That is not the problem. The problem comes when we already know what Scripture says and then search for a way around it because we do not like the result. That is something quite different. Paul warned Timothy: “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season.”— 2 Timothy 4:2.

Why would Paul tell Timothy to preach the Word both when it was convenient and when it was inconvenient? Because God's Word does not become true only when

society agrees with it. The Church is not called to preach what people want to hear.

Paul immediately adds: “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears.”— 2 Timothy 4:3. That warning is worth taking seriously.

People can begin choosing teaching according to what they want to hear rather than according to what God has said.

When the Culture Becomes the Teacher

This is where equality becomes particularly powerful. Equality is a good thing when we are speaking about the equal worth of human beings before God. Man was made in God's image. But when equality becomes the principle that determines what Scripture **must** mean, something has changed. The question is no longer: **“What does God's Word teach?”** It becomes: **“How can God's Word be understood without offending the principle of equality?”**

That sounds like a small change. It is not. The first question puts Scripture above us. The second puts our principle above Scripture.

A Dangerous Reversal

Once this reversal takes place, the process can become remarkably simple. A biblical command is encountered. The command creates a difficulty. The culture has already decided that the command is unacceptable. An explanation is then found for why the command does not really apply.

The explanation is repeated. Eventually the new interpretation becomes accepted as obvious. And after a while, people may no longer realise that anything has changed. They simply say: **“Of course women can do this. Why wouldn't they?”** But the original question has disappeared.

What did God say? That is the question we must keep bringing back.

Jesus and the Word of God

Jesus Himself treated the written Word of God as authoritative. When Satan tempted Him, Jesus repeatedly answered: “It is written...”— Matthew 4:4, 7, 10. He did not answer: **“That was true in Moses' day, but things have changed.”** He answered with Scripture. When challenged by the religious leaders, Jesus also asked: “Have ye not read...?”— Matthew 19:4.

Again and again, He brought people back to what God had said. That should tell us something about the attitude of the Church. We may need wisdom to understand Scripture. We may need humility to admit that we have misunderstood it. But we should never approach Scripture as though we have the authority to decide which parts God was entitled to say.

What Happens When We Do?

The consequences may not be immediately obvious. This is another reason the danger can be difficult to see. A church can continue to grow. People can worship sincerely. The music can be excellent. The preaching can be impressive. People can be helped. The church can become popular.

None of these things proves that every decision made by the church is according to God's Word. Jesus gave a sobering warning: “Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.”—Matthew 7:21.

Calling Jesus Lord is not the same thing as doing the Father's will. That distinction should make every Christian stop and think.

It Is Not About Women Being Less

At this point, someone may object: “Surely this makes women inferior.” But that conclusion does not follow. Scripture does not teach that a woman is less valuable because she has a different role. The Son is not less divine because He submits to the Father.

Christ willingly submitted Himself to the Father's will: “Not my will, but thine, be done.” — Luke 22:42. Submission and inferiority are not automatically the same thing. That distinction is important.

The question of biblical order should therefore not be reduced to the question of whether one sex is more valuable than the other. It is a question of **God-established function and authority**.

The Modern Question

The modern Church is therefore faced with a choice. Do we begin with Scripture and allow Scripture to determine our practice? Or do we begin with what society now considers acceptable and then reinterpret Scripture accordingly? Those two approaches may sometimes arrive at the same conclusion.

But they are not the same thing. One submits to Scripture. The other asks Scripture to submit to the conclusion we have already reached. That is the danger.

Not Every Change Is Progress

We live in an age where change is often assumed to mean progress. But change and progress are not synonyms. Something can change for the better. Something can change for the worse. Something can simply change.

The Christian therefore cannot use the fact that something is modern as evidence that it is right. Isaiah gives us a warning that remains relevant: “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness.” — Isaiah 5:20.

The standard is not whether something is old or new. The standard is whether it agrees with God's truth.

The Upward Spiral?

This brings us back to something very simple. If a Church discovers that its practice conflicts with Scripture, there is an obvious path forward. Return to the Word. But what happens if the Church instead changes its interpretation so that the practice can continue? That is not an upward spiral.

If we deliberately ignore what God has written because it conflicts with what we want to do, we cannot call that spiritual progress. Whatever else it may be, it is a movement away from submission to God's Word.

The prophet Jeremiah recorded God's complaint against those who claimed wisdom while rejecting His Word: “Lo, they have rejected the word of the LORD; and what wisdom is in them?”— Jeremiah 8:9. That is a sobering question.

What wisdom is there in changing God's instruction simply because we find it difficult?

Where Does This Leave Us?

The issue is now much clearer. The question is not whether women can serve God. It is not whether women can testify about Christ. It is not whether women can possess gifts, wisdom, courage, faith or understanding. The question is whether those things automatically give a woman authority to teach and govern men in the Church. They do not.

Authority or equality is not established by ability. It is not established by popularity. It is not established by cultural approval. And it is not established simply because a pastor says, **“She can do it, therefore why not?”** The Christian question remains the same: **What has God said?**

And if we believe that God's Word is truly His Word, then the next question should follow naturally: **What are we going to do about what He has said?**

Chapter 16

When We Forget Who God Is

We have now travelled a long way. We have looked at Scripture, at the creation of Adam and Eve, at the words of Paul, at women whom God clearly used, and at the historical development of women's ministry in the Church. We have seen that women were never excluded from serving God. They prayed, served, helped, supported, cared for others, and in many different ways contributed greatly to the life of the Church.

We have also seen something else. There is a difference between being useful to God and being given authority by God. That distinction is important because much of the modern argument has moved away from the question of authority and towards ability: **If a woman is gifted enough to do something, why should she not do it?**

It sounds reasonable. But ability and authority are not the same thing. A person may be perfectly capable of doing something without having been authorised to do it. Being able to do something does not automatically give us permission to do it. That principle applies throughout life. Why should the Church be different?

“But I Believe God Has Called Me”

This is perhaps the most difficult argument because we are dealing with a person's personal conviction. A woman may sincerely say: “I believe God has called me to preach.” We should not automatically assume that she is dishonest. She may be completely sincere and genuinely believe that God has called her.

But sincerity does not establish truth. We are all capable of misunderstanding Scripture and misunderstanding God's will. That is why personal conviction must be tested against the Word of God. If Scripture has already established a boundary concerning women teaching or exercising authority over men, then a personal sense of calling cannot simply remove that boundary.

This creates an important distinction between **calling and authorisation**. A person may have a strong desire to serve God. She may have considerable gifts. She may feel a deep burden to preach. None of those things, by themselves, establish an office or authority that Scripture does not give.

If our understanding of God's calling requires us to set aside something He has already written, then something needs to be examined. Perhaps we have misunderstood Scripture. Perhaps we have misunderstood the calling. But the written Word cannot simply be overruled by personal conviction.

When “I” Becomes the Authority

This takes us to something much deeper than the question of women in the Church. It takes us to the question of **self**. The Christian life is not simply about changing our behaviour. We can change our habits and still remain firmly in control of our own lives. We can stop certain sins, become more disciplined and become more religious, while the old “I” remains firmly on the throne.

Jesus did not call us merely to improve ourselves. He called us to deny ourselves. Paul put it even more strongly: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.”— Galatians 2:20.

There is something here that modern Christianity can easily overlook. **Dying to self is not a suggestion. It is a command.** The Christian life is not built around what **I** want to do for God. It is built around what God wants me to do. That changes the whole question of calling.

If my understanding of God's calling requires me to disregard His Word, then perhaps the problem is not that God has failed to make His will clear. Perhaps I have placed my own desire above His instruction. That is a sobering thought.

When the World Changes the Question

Something else happened during the period we have been examining. The world around the Church changed, evolved and continues in the same vain hope. Ideas about equality, rights, education, employment and the position of women changed dramatically. Those changes affected society, and the Church did not exist in isolation from society.

Pressure from outside the Church inevitably creates pressure within the Church that has not put off the old man. Gradually, questions that had once been answered from Scripture began to be approached according to another standard.

The question became: **“Why should a woman not do what a man does?”** That sounds like a question about fairness. But fairness is not the same thing as God's order. If God has established an order, our responsibility is not to alter it to fit the standards of the world. Our responsibility is to understand it and obey it. This is where compromise can become difficult to recognise.

It rarely begins with someone openly declaring that they are rejecting God's Word. A difficult passage is questioned. An explanation is offered. The explanation makes the passage more acceptable to the culture around us. It is repeated until it becomes familiar, then accepted, and eventually defended.

By the end of the process, people may no longer realise that anything has changed. The progression is simple: **God said → God's Word is questioned → another explanation is offered → the explanation becomes acceptable → the acceptable becomes normal → the normal becomes defended.**

That is how a command can gradually become something that people feel they need to explain away.

The Danger of "Why Not?"

There is a question I have heard many times in different forms: **"If she can do it, why not?"** It is powerful because it appeals to common sense. But notice what has happened. The question has moved from **whether God has authorised something** to **whether we can find a reason to permit it**. The first begins with God. The second begins with us.

Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 2 is especially important here because his argument does not rest upon the customs of Ephesus. He goes back to creation: "For Adam was first formed, then Eve." — 1 Timothy 2:13. Paul does not present his instruction simply as a temporary cultural arrangement. He grounds his argument in the order of creation.

That means the issue cannot be dismissed simply by saying that society has changed. If Paul's reasoning is

correct, then changing society does not change the foundation on which his instruction rests.

Why Now?

I do not mean that nobody in earlier centuries ever questioned Paul's teaching. They did. I mean something more specific.

Why, particularly from the seventeenth century onward and increasingly into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, did the challenge to the traditional understanding of women's role become so persistent and eventually become part of a much wider movement for equality?

Why did the question become so urgent? Was Scripture suddenly unclear? Had God's order changed? Or had the world around the Church changed? These are not accusations. They are questions worth considering, especially by anyone who believes that God has personally called them into a ministry that appears to conflict with Scripture.

If a personal calling requires Scripture to be reinterpreted before that calling can be followed, that deserves serious examination.

Success Is Not the Same as Authorisation

There is another trap here. Something may appear to work. People may come. Lives may appear to be changed. A church may grow. A preacher may be sincere. A ministry may appear fruitful. None of these things, by themselves, prove that everything being done has been authorised by God. Jesus warned us: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.” — Matthew 7:21. The important words are: **“the will of my Father.”**

Christian service is not ultimately measured by popularity, success or visible results. It must be measured against the will of God and that brings us to something much more fundamental.

Who Is God?

Perhaps we have made the discussion too complicated. Perhaps we have become so concerned with defending our position that we have forgotten something much more basic. **God is God.**

He is not required to justify His commands to us before we obey them. When God gave instructions to His servants in the Old Testament, the servant's responsibility was not to negotiate those instructions. God gave the command. His servants we expected to obey.

Aaron provides a useful picture of this. God gave Aaron instructions concerning the priesthood, the tabernacle, the sacrifices and the way Israel was to approach Him. The important principle is not that Aaron was perfect. He was not.

The principle is that **God determined how He was to be worshipped and served.** The servant did not invent his own form of service and then ask God to accept it. There was an order established by God, what has changed?

And when Nadab and Abihu offered "strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not," the seriousness of approaching God according to our own ideas was revealed in the strongest possible way. "And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD."— Leviticus 10:2. It brings consequences.

We should be careful not to make this a direct one-to-one comparison with the question of women preaching. It is not. But it does reveal something about God. **God does not leave the matter of His worship and service to human preference.**

There is such a thing as divine instruction. There is such a thing as obedience. And there is such a thing as doing what God has commanded rather than what we think ought to be acceptable to Him.

God Still Speaks

God does not normally speak to His Church today in the same way He spoke to Aaron. We do not wait for a voice from heaven to tell us whether a particular command applies. We have His Word. That is why Scripture matters so much.

A personal conviction cannot be allowed to become a second authority alongside Scripture. If God has already spoken through His Word, our responsibility is to bring our convictions under that Word, not to make the Word conform to our convictions. This is particularly important when someone says, “I know God has called me.”

The strength of the conviction does not establish its source, but it can cause a spontaneous emotional reaction. The calling must agree with what God has already revealed.

The “Oh No” Moment

Perhaps this is where the reader should stop for a moment. Spiritual revelation and reflection brings us to a point of conviction, an uncomfortable conviction. It asks us to look at ourselves.

Suppose a woman genuinely believes that God has called her to preach. Suppose she is gifted. Suppose people are

blessed by her ministry. Suppose she sincerely believes that she is obeying God. There is still one matter that cannot be settled by sincerity, ability or apparent success: **Has God actually given her that authority?**

If Scripture says otherwise, the issue is no longer about ability. It becomes a question of obedience. And that is where this subject changes from a discussion about women into a discussion about **our attitude toward God**.

The issue is no longer primarily, “Why shouldn't she?” It is the question we should have been asking from the beginning: **“What has God said?”** If we truly believe that God is God, His Word cannot simply be placed on the shelf whenever it becomes inconvenient.

We cannot put God on the shelf as an ornament and then make our own decisions about how His Church should operate. The servant of God does not begin with: **“What do I want to do for God?”** The servant begins with: **“Lord, what do You want me to do?”**

And perhaps the most important thing any Christian can learn is this: **God does not call us to obey Him by disobeying what He has already said.**

What Has God Said?

Chapter 17

When the Truth Is Revealed

Perhaps the most important thing I can say at the end of this book is something I have learned over many years of walking with Christ. **Do not reject something simply because it does not fit what you already believe.** That may sound obvious, but it is not always easy.

And once something has become part of the way we see Christianity, it can be very difficult to examine it honestly. Sometimes the hardest thing is not discovering the truth. It is accepting the truth when it requires us to change our understanding.

Weigh Everything

Paul gave the Thessalonians a simple instruction: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” — 1 Thessalonians 5:21. That is good advice for every Christian. And we should be willing to follow the truth wherever it leads.

John gives us a similar warning: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God.”— 1 John 4:1. That means we cannot simply accept every claim of spiritual revelation. Nor can we dismiss everything that challenges our understanding.

Both responses can be wrong. The answer is to **test it**.

Do Not Trust the Flesh

“Over the years I have also learned something else. We cannot safely trust our own natural understanding. The flesh has a remarkable ability to defend what we already want to believe.”

If something agrees with us, we readily accept it. If something challenges us, we can suddenly discover many reasons why it cannot possibly be right. That is why Scripture tells us not to place our confidence in ourselves.

Jeremiah says: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”— Jeremiah 17:9. Philippians 3:3: The Apostle Paul writes that true believers "worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh".

The danger is not only that we might deliberately reject truth. We may reject it without even realising that we are doing so. Our reasoning can become a defence mechanism. Our traditions can become a shield. Our pride can make us resistant to correction.

And sometimes the very thing we call “discernment” is simply our unwillingness to reconsider what we already believe. That is why I have learned to be careful.

Weigh everything. Trust not in the flesh. Seek the truth.

The Spirit of Truth

Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Truth. “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth.”— John 16:13. That does not mean that every thought that enters our minds comes from the Holy Spirit.

It does not mean that every strong conviction is divine revelation. It means that the Christian is not left entirely to human reasoning. The Spirit of God works in us and leads us into truth. But the Spirit of Truth will never need to contradict the truth God has already given us.

If I believe I have received some new understanding, I do not throw away Scripture to make room for it. I test the understanding against Scripture. If it survives that examination, I continue to examine it. If it does not, then it is my understanding that must change.

That is not rejection of revelation. It is respect for truth.

When Revelation Does Not Fit

There have been times in my own Christian life when something I have come to understand did not fit comfortably with what I had previously believed. Sometimes God brings something to our understanding that forces us to look again at what we thought we knew.

The right response is not to accept it blindly. Neither is it to reject it because it is uncomfortable. The right response is to **weigh it**. Search the Scriptures. Pray.

The Humility to Change

There is a kind of humility that says: "I may have been wrong, or I was told wrongly but I believed" That is not weakness. It is one of the safeguards against being trapped by our own understanding.

A Christian should never be so committed to a position that truth becomes the enemy. If the Word of God corrects me, I need to be corrected. If I discover that something I have believed for years cannot be supported by Scripture, then the fact that I have believed it for years is not a reason to keep believing it.

It is a reason to thank God for showing me. That is part of dying to self. The old "I" says: **"I believe this, therefore it must be right."**

The surrendered Christian says: **"Lord, show me what is true, even if it means changing what I believe."** That is a very different attitude.

Bringing This Back to Women in the Church

This brings us back to the subject with which we began. A woman may sincerely believe that God has called her to preach. Another Christian may sincerely believe that Scripture permits it. A church may have accepted it. A denomination may have formally approved it.

None of those things settles the question. But neither should we reject the question simply because it challenges what we have been taught. We must weigh the matter. We must return to Scripture. We must examine Paul's words. We must consider his reason for giving them.

We must look at the creation order to which he appeals. We must examine the historical development of the Church. And then we must be willing to follow the truth, even if the truth is uncomfortable.

That applies equally to the woman who believes she has been called and to the man who tells her that she has. Neither should trust simply in personal conviction. Neither should trust simply in tradition. Neither should trust simply in human reasoning. Both must come back to the Word of God.

What If the Truth Costs Us Something?

This is where Christianity becomes real. It is relatively easy to accept truth when it agrees with us. The real test comes when truth costs us something. It may cost us our

reputation. It may cost us our position. It may cost us the approval of others. It may mean admitting that something we have defended for years was wrong. It may even mean walking away from something we genuinely wanted to do for God.

That is where dying to self becomes more than a Christian expression. It becomes obedience.

Jesus said: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”—Matthew 16:24. Denying self means that Christ must have the final word, not you. Christ.

A Final Thought

I began this book looking at women in the Church. I have ended up looking at something much deeper. The question of women preaching and exercising authority is an important issue, because underneath it lies another question: **How do we respond when God's Word confronts what we believe?**

That is where conviction becomes important. When something is revealed to us, we should not immediately embrace it simply because it feels spiritual. But neither should we reject it simply because it does not fit comfortably into what we already believe. We weigh it, we pray and we listen, not to our own thoughts, but the

word of god. And when the truth becomes clear, we obey it. That has been one of the lessons of my Christian life.

Weigh everything. Trust not in the flesh. Trust in the Spirit of Truth. Not the spirit of our age. Not the spirit of tradition. Not the spirit of personal ambition. But the **Spirit of Truth**.

And if He reveals something that requires us to change, then perhaps that is not something to fear. Perhaps it is grace. Because the purpose of truth is not to make us comfortable. It is to make us free.

Jesus said: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”— John 8:32. Perhaps, then, the final question is not whether this book has proved my argument. It is whether we have been willing to let God examine ours.

If we have come to this point and discovered something that does not fit comfortably with what we previously believed, do not dismiss it simply because it is uncomfortable.

Take it to God. Open His Word. Ask Him for wisdom. And then be prepared to obey whatever the truth reveals. Because in the end, this book was never really about what **I** think women should be allowed to do. It is about something much more important: **What has God said?**

And when God has spoken, our responsibility is not to negotiate with Him. It is to listen. It is to obey. And above all, it is to **reverence God**.

It takes one wrong ambition to sink a ship.

God's Use of a Person Does Not Establish Their Authority

One may say, “I have no disagreement with women teachers, preachers, or pastors. I was saved through one.”

Another may say, “If a woman is not permitted to preach or teach, or to have authority over a man, am I not then saved through that woman while she is in disobedience?”

These are concepts that are sometimes used to justify accepting women preaching, teaching, or exercising authority over men in the Church. But are they actually relevant to the question?

Is the argument that if that woman pastor had not been there at that particular time, that person would not have been saved? I do not believe that follows.

A person's salvation does not determine whether another person's disobedience is thereby overruled. Nor does the fact that God has used someone to bring

another person to salvation establish that everything that person was doing was authorised by God.

Every person who is saved has been brought to the Gospel through imperfect people. It is God who chooses whom He will use, and He does so in His own time and according to His own purpose.

Paul gives us a very simple example: “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.” — 1 Corinthians 3:6 Paul planted. Apollos watered. But it was God who gave the increase.

The same principle applies to salvation. God may use a particular person as the means by which we hear the Gospel, but that does not make that person the author of our salvation, nor does it automatically establish the authority of everything that person does in the Church.

Salvation is of the hand of God, not man.

We must not confuse **the means God chooses to use** with **the authority God has given**.

A faithful look at church history, the Bible, and why the creation order matters.

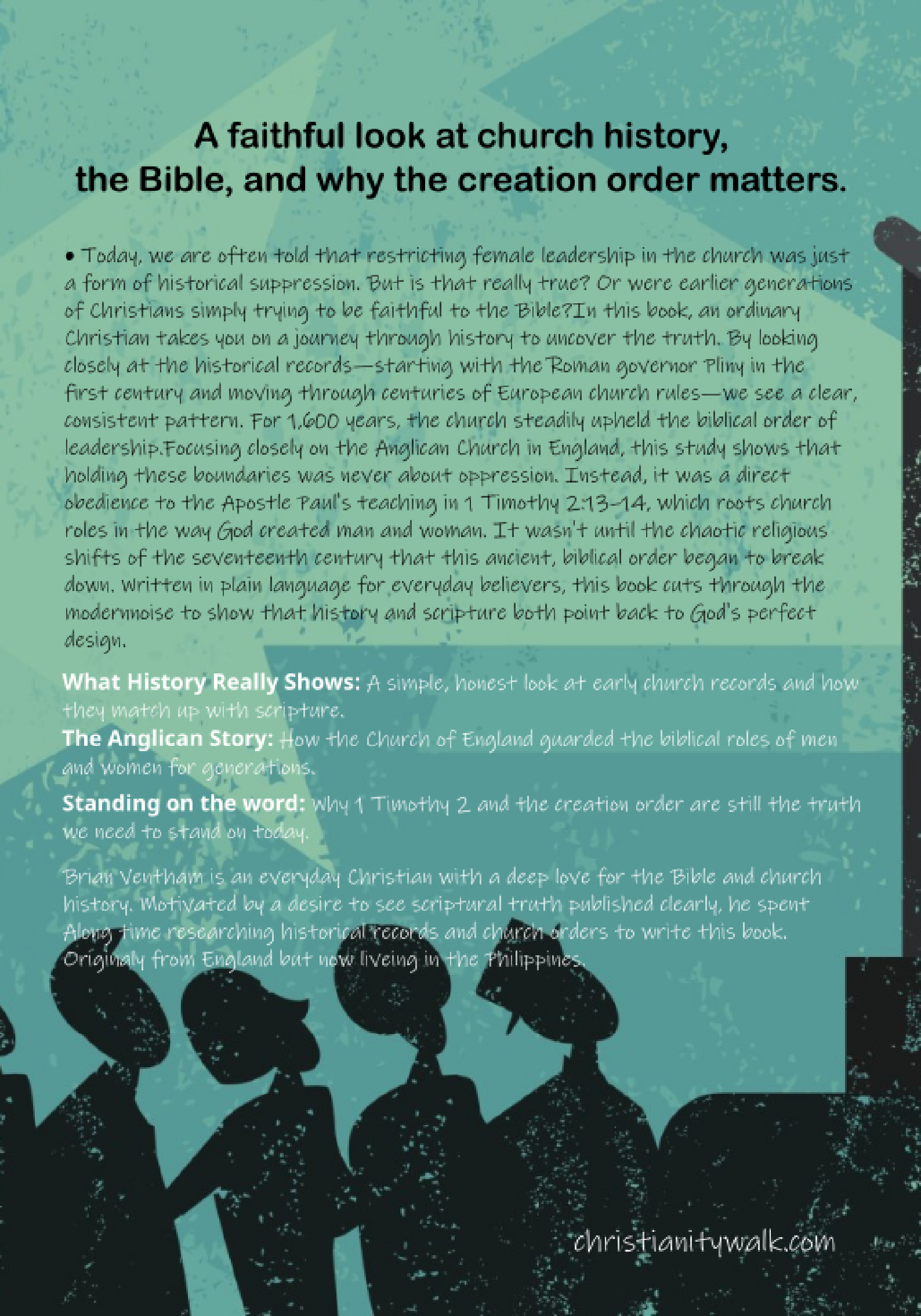
• Today, we are often told that restricting female leadership in the church was just a form of historical suppression. But is that really true? Or were earlier generations of Christians simply trying to be faithful to the Bible?In this book, an ordinary Christian takes you on a journey through history to uncover the truth. By looking closely at the historical records—starting with the Roman governor Pliny in the first century and moving through centuries of European church rules—we see a clear, consistent pattern. For 1,600 years, the church steadily upheld the biblical order of leadership.Focusing closely on the Anglican Church in England, this study shows that holding these boundaries was never about oppression. Instead, it was a direct obedience to the Apostle Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 2:13–14, which roots church roles in the way God created man and woman. It wasn't until the chaotic religious shifts of the seventeenth century that this ancient, biblical order began to break down. Written in plain language for everyday believers, this book cuts through the modernnoise to show that history and scripture both point back to God's perfect design.

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Brian Ventham is an everyday Christian with a deep love for the Bible and church history. Motivated by a desire to see scriptural truth published clearly, he spent Along time researching historical records and church orders to write this book. Originaly from England but now liveing in the Philippines.



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