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THE EARLY CHURCH OFFICE OF WIDOW

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As debates about women in church office continue to dominate social discourse and publishing space, one does not have to look far to find assertions that the ordination of women or the practice of women holding leadership office in the church are rooted in something other than Scripture and history. Here are three examples:

> The practice of ordaining women for Christian ministry has occurred at the same time as a growing concern to ensure equality and rights in today's liberal and so-called progressive society. Are we to follow the politically-correct agenda of the 21st century, or the clear teachings of the entirely trustworthy and final authoritative Word of the Living God?[1]

> The role of women in church ministry was simply not a burning question until it asserted itself in recent decades in conjunction with the modern women's movement.[2]

> The New Testament presents a consistent, though perhaps not completely uniform, pattern of church leadership. One of the offices was variously called "elders," "overseers," or "pastors" (all three of these terms refer to the same group and were used interchangeably in the New Testament). These leaders were charged to lead, shepherd, teach, and equip the flock entrusted to them. The other office, that of deacon, was intended to serve the needs of the flock and to enable the elders to carry out their responsibilities. Other offices mentioned in the New Testament either refer to a foundational role (apostle, prophet) or a role not tied to an individual congregation (apostle, evangelist).[3]

The latter author goes on to present church office as being synonymous with male leadership.

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[1]Barry J. Shucksmith, "Should Women Hold Office as Pastors, Teachers, or Bishops?," *Banner of Truth* (2/8/2011), https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2011/should-women-hold-office-as-pastors-teachers-or-bishops/.

[2]Robert L. Saucy and Judith K. TenElshof, eds., *Women and Men in Ministry: A Complementary Perspective* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2001), 20.

[3]Benjamin Merkle, "The Organization of the Church: An Essay by Benjamin L. Merkle," The Gospel Coalition, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-organization-of-the-church/.

Closely related to this is the question of power or authority. Indeed, one reason for ongoing confusion across denominations about leadership structure in the church is that Paul appears to have purposely chosen labels that are as devoid as possible of power: *guardian* (ἐπίσκοπον; 1 Tim 3:2), *servant* (διακόνους; vv. 8, 12), and, it will be argued, the most vulnerable woman possible, *widow* (χήρα; 5:9). In fact Paul seems to have gone out of his way to avoid the kinds of titles a gentile might use, such as *leader* (e.g., ἡγεμών) or *maste*r (e.g., δεσπότης), and only rarely does he resort to power-packed verbs such as *rule* (ἄρχω).

The word *office* does not appear in the NT.[4] So, Edmund Clowney asks, "How do we define 'office' if not as a function that requires public recognition for its proper exercise?"[5] Harold Hoehner explores the difference between spiritual gifts and office, noting that—unlike with spiritual gifts—one is appointed or elected to office based on qualifications.[6] Thus, as used in this essay, *office* will refer to a position of recognized service in the church that carries with it prerequisites or qualifications of Christian experience and character or maturity. Unlike spiritual gifts, bestowed by the Holy Spirit on all believers, offices require vetting.

The duties of those holding office, how ordination intersects with office, and even what the word "ordination" meant in different centuries or locales throughout the centuries, lie beyond the scope of this essay.[7] Here the focus will be on whether women held positions of recognized service in the early church that carried with them prerequisites or qualifications—with specific emphasis on the institution, or office, of widow.

To understand what Paul meant by the word "widow" requires a close look at his instruction about such women as given to his protégé, Timothy. Then, seeing how the church in practice has interpreted Paul's instructions about widows will require a look at how the church in different eras and locations has sought to live out the apostle's words. Tools of analysis will include statements by church fathers, church records, epigraphic evidence, and occasionally art. All of this will demonstrate that the phenomenon of

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[4]Peter instructs shepherds, "And do not lord it over those entrusted to you, but be examples to the flock (1 Pet 5:3, NET; κατακυριεύοντες τῶν κλήρων ἀλλὰ τύποι). One might argue that the form of κλῆρος translated in this verse as "entrusted" points to spiritual care as a stewardship, but the word itself is not a synonym for office.

[5]Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1995), 232.

[6]Harold W. Hoehner, "Can a Woman Be a Pastor-Teacher?," *JETS* 50.4 (December 2007): 761–71 (p. 761).

[7]As noted in Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008): 19: "[Dorothea] Reininger's study detailed the growing awareness among scholars that since the understanding of ordination changed significantly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the West, any judgment about ordinations in earlier centuries was, at best, problematic."

women serving in vetted offices of church leadership began not in the West in recent times, but with the words of Paul in 1 Tim 5.

I. WIDOWS, ACCORDING TO PAUL

In the apostle Paul's first epistle to Timothy, he lays out instructions about widows that read as follows:

> 5:1 Do not rebuke an older man (πρεσβυτέρῳ) harshly, but exhort
> him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as
> brothers, 2 older women (πρεσβυτέρας) as mothers, and younger
> women as sisters, with absolute purity.
>
> 3 Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in
> need. 4 But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should
> learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their
> own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for
> this is pleasing to God. 5 The widow who is really in need and left
> all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to
> pray and to ask God for help. 6 But the widow who lives for
> pleasure is dead even while she lives. 7 Give the people these
> instructions, so that no one may be open to blame. 8 Anyone who
> does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own
> household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.
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> 9 No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over
> sixty, has been faithful to her husband, 10 and is well known
> for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing
> hospitality, washing the feet of the Lord's people, helping those in
> trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.
>
> 11 As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when
> their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want
> to marry. 12 Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they
> have broken their first pledge. 13 Besides, they get into the habit of
> being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do
> they become idlers, but also busybodies who talk nonsense, saying
> things they ought not to. 14 So I counsel younger widows to
> marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the
> enemy no opportunity for slander. 15 Some have in fact already
> turned away to follow Satan.
>
> 16 If any woman who is a believer has widows in her care, she
> should continue to help them and not let the church be burdened
> with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really
> in need. (1 Tim 5:1–16, NIV)

A. "Actual" Widows

In the context where the above passage appears, Paul has begun his pericope with one of his favorite metaphors for the church—a household, or family. He describes this family as having fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers (vv. 1–2). Having laid out this vision, Paul commands that "honor" (τίμα, v. 3) be given to certain widows. "Honor" is repeated fourteen verses later when describing the "double honor" (διπλῆς τιμῆς) due to elders (πρεσβύτεροι) who lead well, especially in word and in teaching (v. 17). There, "double honor" suggests financial compensation for service rendered (v. 18).

The widows whom Paul sees as worthy of honor (v. 3) are those who are "real" or "actual" widows. Scholars have long acknowledged that rather than referring only to a woman whose husband had died, the term "widow" in its broader sense sometimes meant "any woman living without a husband."[8] They cite Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE–50 CE), who writes of a priest's daughter left widowed and childless, describing her as in effect "now also a virgin,"[9] an unlikely image unless, in his world, such an association of "widow" with "virgin" was natural. But more to the point, Ignatius of Antioch (108–140 CE) writes, "I salute the families of my brethren, with their wives and children, and the virgins who are called widows."[10] Apparently, no word existed in Koine Greek to describe a mature never-married woman, so such a female could be referred to as a "without-a-man woman" or a "widow." Bonnie Thurston notes that the word "widow" used in 1 Timothy could have this meaning or perhaps refer to "a celibate woman."[11]

Paul's instruction relating to such women in the church is to urge Christian children and grandchildren to provide for their own families' older and vulnerable women (v. 4). Twelve verses later he specifically assigns the care of such widows to Christian women (v. 16). Next, Paul emphasizes the duty of family members to care for the widows in their midst. Strangely, many Christian leaders use v. 8 as their basis for the teaching that it is the man's job to provide financially for his family. Here's an example:

> In American society, the belief that a husband is called to provide for his wife is quickly becoming an ideal of the past. With the rise of the new feminism movement, women are throwing off the "shackles" of expecting their spouses to take care of them and are

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[8]Gustav Stählin, "χήρα," *TDNT* 9:440–65.

[9]Philo of Alexandria, *The Special Laws 1,* 129–30, trans. Peter Kirby, "Early Jewish Writings" website, http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/.

[10]Ignatius, *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans* 13.1, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0109.htm.

[11]Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church (*Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 9.

> stepping into the role previously held by men. With the backlash that comes with this supposedly antiquated view, people have begun to rethink this belief, even some within the church…. In the midst of such serious debate, how can we discern what the Bible actually says about men providing for their wives, if anything?… When we see standards given to Christian men in Scripture, it is easy to be tempted to despair. Many recognize just how far short they've fallen in this area. We're called to provide for our wives' physical needs (1 Tim 5:8).[12]

Here are Paul's words to which this writer is referring, as rendered by the ESV translators: "But if anyone does not provide for *his* relatives, and especially for members of *his* household, *he* has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim 5:8, emphasis mine).

The reader will note that this translation, like many others, contains male pronouns—in this case, three. Yet a look at the Greek reveals that 1 Tim 5:8 contains wording that actually allows for the presence of females. A wooden translation might go more like this: "If someone (τις) does not provide for one's own (τῶν ἰδίων), especially one's own household (οἰκείων), that person has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

The broader context, as has been shown, is actually not weighted toward men.[13] Nor is the context describing marriage, manhood, or leadership, but rather caring for widows (vv. 5, 6, 9). Their care is specifically laid on children, grandchildren (v. 4), and women (v. 16). As mentioned, at the end of the pericope, Paul specifies: "If a believing *woman* has widows …" (v. 16, emphasis mine). So, if Paul intended to weight his application toward one sex, the scales tip toward women. That women would be charged with caring for widows makes good sense in Paul's cultural setting. In a world with no nurses or nursing homes, the most natural person to bathe and feed an infirm matron would be her daughter, granddaughter, and/or daughter-in-law.

B. Enrolled Widows

Widows without such family members, "actual" widows, Paul says, should be put on "the list," or "enrolled" (v. 9). So, what does it mean to "enroll" (καταλέγω, v. 9) widows? Extrabiblical usage of the imperative of this verb sheds a bit of light. The word *enroll* was used sometimes to refer to enlistment and service, as Gustav Stählin's entry in BDAG notes of its use in reference to widow:

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[12]Anthony English, "Worse Than an Unbeliever: Provision in 1 Timothy 5:8," *Modern Reformation* (August 6, 2018), https://modernreformation.org/resourcelibrary/web-exclusive-articles/the-mod-worse-than-an-unbeliever-provision-in-1-timothy-58/.

[13]Daniel B. Wallace, email message to author, August 30, 2004. Wallace wrote, "Greek uses the masculine singular as a default gender, as a generic singular."

> Here and elsewhere καταλέγω means "to be adopted into a fellowship by election." The term itself makes it likely that congregational widows already formed a "semi-clerical" corporation. The antonym is παραιτέομαί τινα, "to vote down someone." We see from verse 11 [concerning younger widows] that this negative decision was made by the church leader, who made a choice among available candidates, while the passive καταλέγομαι in verse 9 ["Let a widow be enrolled if …"] denotes selection by the congregation.[14]

So "enroll" can mean to "select for a position," implying some form of official church responsibility. Douglas Mangum and Tod Twist note that the discussion of widows "suggests that either older widows could participate in deacon-like service, or church support was limited to godly widows (1 Tim 5:9–10)."[15]

Yet rather than looking only to the lexicon to ascertain what "enroll" means, Paul Trebilco observes, "It is the context rather than simply the verb itself which suggests enrollment in a reasonably formal group is in view here."[16] He sees the author not as setting up a new order but "seeking to regulate and limit an existing order."[17]

The pairing of "enroll" with the reference to "honor" (v. 3) and the explanation later in the same chapter about "honoring" or compensating elders (vv. 17–18) suggests that these widows' enrollment was to be financial compensation rather than exclusively an expression of charity. Additionally, in Paul's other writings about feeding the poor, he adds no reference to vetting recipients to verify their Christian maturity. He told the Galatians that the Jerusalem Council asked "that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along" (Gal 2:10). To the Romans he wrote, "Share with the Lord's people who are in need" without qualification (Rom 12:13). And his counsel is consistent with that of Jesus himself, who said, "Give to the one who begs from you" (Matt 5:42).

Adding to Paul's use of "honor" to clarify how he is using the word "enroll," one notes that the apostle lays out character qualifications that the enrolled widows must meet in order to receive such honor. This is not to suggest the qualifications are a strict checklist requiring all enrollees to have raised children any more than the qualification for males to be "the husband of one wife" requires marriage before one can serve. Nevertheless, the guidelines for vetting are present. And Paul's description of exemplary

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[14]Gustav Stählin, "χήρα," BDAG, 456.

[15]Douglas Mangum and E. Tod Twist, *1 Timothy*, ed. Douglas Mangum and Derek R. Brown, Lexham Research Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013), 1 Tim 5:1–25.

[16]Trebilco notes that BDAG defines καταλεγω as "to make a selection for membership in a group." But for him context provides the stronger clues (Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 524n77).

[17]Trebilco, *Early Christians*, 523.

character for enrolled widows has significant overlap with the character required for elders outlined two chapters earlier (3:2–7). Such character is also linked to "honor" as is true for elders, especially those who teach, which Paul describes directly after discussing widows.

Comparing what Paul envisions for elders with what he wants Timothy to look for in "actual" widows, one sees that both elders and widows are assumed to be of advanced age (3:2; 5:9). Both are to be or to have been faithful spouses—the elder being the husband of one wife (3:2), and the widow having been the wife of one husband (5:9). Both are to have a good reputation (3:7; 5:10); both are to have raised children (3:4; 5:10); both are to have practiced hospitality (3:2; 5:10); and both are to be known for other forms of good character (3:2–3; 5:10). It would be odd for Paul to limit food distribution to females whose character so closely aligned with that of male elders. On the other hand, these qualifications are fitting if recipients are serving the church in some official capacity.

Paul goes on to add that he wants younger widows to marry and have children (5:14). In writing to Timothy, Paul is writing to a protégé in Ephesus (1:3), where Acts reveals that Artemis-worship is rampant (see Acts 19). The Ephesian Artemis in Paul's time—and long after his departure—was a goddess known for virginity in the strictest sense. And considering that, as Timothy Tennent has observed, people "become like what we worship,"[18] one wonders if the influence of Artemis of Ephesus might account for why the church in which Timothy is serving has so many single women and a "don't marry" mentality (see 1 Tim 4:3).[19]

In a letter Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he instructed the widows to consider remaining single (1 Cor 7:8). But for the widows in Ephesus, where there are apparently so many that the congregation is burdened by their care, the apostle gives quite different instructions. The younger women in Ephesus—including widows—are to marry and have children (1 Tim 5:14), whereas the older widows are either to receive support from their families or, if qualified, these widows are to be "enrolled."

Paul's reasons for telling Timothy to exclude younger widows from the list include passions that might lead them to desire to marry, thus incurring judgment for breaking their "former faith" (πρώτην πίστιν, v. 12). The NASB and NLT translators render the phrase as πρώτην πίστιν as "previous pledge," the NIV as " first pledge," and the CSB as their "original pledge." A possible meaning in BAGD is listed as "solemn promise, oath, troth."[20]

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[18]Timothy Tennent, "We Become Like What We Worship: Psalm 115," Seedbed website (11/10/2018), https://seedbed.com/we-become-like-what-we-worship-psalm-115/.

[19]Documentation for Ephesus's emphasis on virginity rooted in the Artemis cult is explored in detail in Sandra L. Glahn, *Nobody's Mother: Artemis of the Ephesians in Antiquity and the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023).

[20]BDAG, 662.

So, what was this "faith," pledge, or promise? One can rule out one option before making a determination. Paul is probably not referring to the marriage vow made to her spouse before he died, because in this same pericope he tells Timothy that he wants the young widows to remarry (v. 14). Paul would not counsel a widow to remarry if he felt her doing so would require breaking a marital vow and thus incurring judgment.[21] More likely, then, the apostle has in view a vow of celibate consecration made by a woman committing her life to serving Christ's church.[22] Women making such a vow must have the maturity and tenacity to remain committed, something less mature women might abandon (vv. 11–12). So, it appears that, as part of being enrolled, widows made a pledge of faithfulness to Christ, the breaking of which brought condemnation.

C. Widows as Teachers

In addition to the risk of vow-breaking, Paul has another reason for keeping young widows off the list: He has concerns about some of them being false teachers. At the beginning of his letter, Paul wrote to Timothy about the task he had left his protégé in Ephesus to accomplish (1 Tim 1:3). Here is how the NASB renders it:

> As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain *men* not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith. (emphasis mine)

English-speaking evangelicals tend to use "man" to refer to the human race more often than does the general population.[23] And doing so can lead to misunderstanding. We saw an instance above in

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[21]Further, Paul revealed his support for remarriage after a spouse's death in his statement to the Romans that "by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law that binds her to him. So then, if she has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man" (Rom 7:2–3).

[22]For a more complete listing of options for interpreting the "pledge" referenced here, see William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 (Nashville: Nelson, 2000), 291–92.

[23]See Douglas J. Moo, "We Still Don't Get It: Evangelicals and Bible Translation Fifty Years After James Barr," https://www.thenivbible.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/We-Still-Dont-Get-It.pdf,9. The "CBT [Committee on Bible Translation] commissioned Collins dictionaries to pose some key questions to its database of English—the largest in the world, with over 4.4 billion words, gathered from several English-speaking countries and including both spoken and written English" (7). "The Collins data revealed that over 90% of English speakers and writers were using plural or neutral pronouns to refer back to 'someone': mainly the pronoun 'they'" (8). But as noted above, the same report revealed that evangelicals used 'man' to refer to the human race far more often than did the general population."

reference to a "man" providing for his family (5:8). And 1 Tim 1:3 serves as another example. One may think males were the ones doing all the teaching, including falsehood, in Ephesus. Yet the word rendered as "men" in 1 Tim 1:3 is τισίν, which carries no requirement that those Paul has in mind are male—as the NET Bible's translating the word as "people," suggests. Timothy is in Ephesus to teach *certain people* not to teach strange doctrines.

Many bring to the NT the assumption that women do not speak in the gathered church.[24] Thus, the assumption is made that Paul cannot be talking about women when he refers to such false teaching. And because people tend to think of gossip as a vice especially engaged in by females, the stereotype of women as gossips, which some see later in the passage, affects both translation and interpretative options. Yet, if one sees women included among the false teachers, such a possibility sheds light on interpretive options for 1 Tim 5:13: "And besides that, going around from house to house they learn to be lazy, and they are not only lazy, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things they should not." In reading that young widows were "going from house to house," one might envision women gathering in each other's living rooms. But "house to house" here is similar to how Luke writing in Acts describes how the church gathers (Acts 2:46; 5:42). And if one understands "house" here as a congregational setting, such an understanding may also shed light on Paul's reference elsewhere to Ephesian heretics worming their way "into homes" (2 Tim 3:6).

The consensus of contemporary translators (HCSB, ESV, NASB, NKJV, NRS, CEB, GNT, LEB, RSV) has been to describe the house-to-house-going women as the stereotypically charged "gossips and busybodies" (v. 13), suggesting that the content of their speech was people's personal business that was none of their own.[25] But Lloyd Pietersen, noting the context of magic in Ephesus and nuances relating to magic in Paul's word choice understands the apostle as saying some women are "engaging in magical practices, uttering things they should not, probably including meaningless phrases."[26]

Two details in the text support such a reading. First, Paul's follow-up epistle to Timothy actually mentions two magicians by name: "Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these

[24]Cyprian of Carthage, *Three Books of Testimonies against the Jews*, Book III, no. 46; Charles Ryrie, *The Role of Women in the Church* (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 124; James W. Scott, "May Women Speak in Church?," The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, repr. from *New Horizons* (January 1996), https://opc.org/new_horizons/9601a.html.

[25]Lloyd Pietersen, "Women as Gossips and Busybodies? Another Look at 1 Timothy 5:13," *LTQ* 42.1 (Spring 2007): 19–35, cites Jerome, Chrysostom, Calvin, and Luther from centuries past. For more current adherents to such an interpretation, he cites I. Howard Marshall in his ICC commentary and Luke Timothy Johnson in his Anchor Bible Commentary. See especially pp. 19–20.

[26]Pietersen, "Women as Gossips," 31. The author notes, "On this reading, the writer, far from engaging in vicious stereotyping of women, is exercising pastoral care in seeking to warn his congregation concerning the dangers of falling back into magical practices from which they have escaped."

teachers oppose the truth. They are people of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected" (2 Tim 3:8). The Scriptures never mention Jannes and Jambres elsewhere. But one or both appear in extrabiblical works, where they are counted among the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses.[27]

The second reason for seeing the words as relating to magic rather than gossip is that such an interpretation better fits the cultural context of 1 Timothy. Magic had a strong hold on Asia Minor. Bruce Metzger describes Ephesus as the "Center for Magical Arts"[28] and "the ancient center for magical technique,"[29] the metropolis "being the most hospitable to magicians, sorcerers, and charlatans of all kinds of all the Greco-Roman cities."[30] Trebilco similarly describes Ephesus as "a centre of magical arts" and notes that the city gave its name to the magical Ephesian Letters.[31]

Elsewhere, the NT affirms that magic had a hold on Ephesus. Acts 19 includes a story about Ephesian magicians who convert to Christianity. After trusting in Christ, they bring out their expensive magic books and create a conflagration. The word rendered "sorcery" (NIV) or "magic" (CSV, ESV, NET) in v. 19 is περίεργα. Compare this with the word in 1 Tim 5:13 sometimes rendered as "busybodies" (NIV, CSB, ESV, NET), which is περίεργοι, thereby strengthening the case that magic, not gossip, is the problem confronting Timothy.

Magic was actually looked down on in general in the empire—so much so that in 16 BC Rome expelled all magicians.[32] Years later, Vespasian (who ruled AD 69–79) outlawed astrology, too. Yet because of his friendship with a famous Ephesian astrologer named Balbillus, Vespasian let Ephesus continue holding "sacred" games in Balbillus's honor.[33] Apparently one place where Rome was lax on laws prohibiting magic was Ephesus.

One can see why Paul might be warning Timothy about young widows going from house-church to house-church talking about magic, worthless nonsense they should not even be discussing. For all the reasons he has given, Paul wants younger women to marry, to raise children, and οἰκοδεσποτεῖν, translated as "to keep house" in the NASB and "to manage a household" in the NET (1 Tim 5:14).[34] In

[27]See, for example, Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* (XXX, II, 11).

[28]Bruce Metzger, "St. Paul and the Magicians," *PSB* 38.1 (1944): 27–30 (p. 27).

[29]Metzger, "St. Paul and the Magicians," 28.

[30]Metzger, "St. Paul and the Magicians," 27.

[31]Trebilco, *Early Christians*, 150.

[32]See Clyde Pharr, "The Interdiction of Magic in Roman Law," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 63 (1932): 269–95, on the disapproval of magic, https://doi.org/10.2307/283219.

[33]Willer Laale, *Ephesus (Ephesos): An Abbreviated History from Androclus to Constantine XI* (Nashville: Westbow Press, 2021), 250.

[34]Incidentally, the term *οἰκοδεσποτεῖν* is a compound word made by combining *oikos* (οἶκος), or house, and *despōtēs* (δεσπότης), or master. The latter is rendered as "master" in the NET Bible in the following places: 1 Tim 6:1–2; 2 Tim 2:21; Titus 2:9; 1 Pet 2:18; "lord" in Luke 2:29; Acts 4:24; 2 Pet 2:1; Jude 4; and Rev 6:10.

Paul's thinking, if the young false-teaching widows married and mastered their households, they would eliminate the adversary's opportunity to vilify the gospel (v. 14).

So, putting this all together, apparently, the church in Ephesus had numerous single women. The young widows were to marry, and older widows with available family members were to receive help from them. Having laid out his plan for these two groups, Paul has turned his attention to the third group: actual widows who need financial assistance (1 Tim 5:13–16).

Earlier in 1 Timothy, Paul began his description of those who serve the church in official capacities by saying that if someone/anyone (τις) aspires to be an overseer or elder (ἐπισκοπῆς), that person (subject inflected in verb; unmarked for gender) aspires to a good thing (3:1). Paul then outlines qualifications for elders—including that they be the husband of one wife. Then he lists qualifications for deacons and women—probably both male and female deacons.[35]

In 1 Tim 3, he devotes seven verses to the character of elders (3:1–7); a total of five verses to deacons (vv. 8–10, 11–12); and one to women (deacons; 3:11). Seeing an office of widow in the discussion of qualifications in 1 Tim 5 helps explain why, in describing offices in the church in 1 Tim 3, Paul has provided no female pairing for the elders as he has done with the male deacons (3:11). In 1 Tim 5, he returns to the subject and fills in the gap. There he devotes twelve verses to widows (5:3–15)—whose qualifications closely parallel those of male elders.

When he reaches 1 Tim 5, Paul demonstrates that he still has leadership on his mind. He begins with a reference to overall church structure—that of a family with elder men (πρεσβυτέρῳ) as fathers (v. 1) and elder women (πρεσβυτέρας) as mothers (v. 2), as well as sisters and brothers. With the vision of a family in mind, he introduces the qualifications for widows. In the section immediately following, he writes of granting double honor to the well-ruling πρεσβύτεροι (5:17–18), punctuated with exhortations about rebuking and disciplining elders guilty of wrongdoing (vv. 19–20). Thus, he ends the pericope with more general instructions about honor and elders (vv. 17–22).

Between these bookends, he both solves a problem in the church (too many "widows" needing financial assistance) and describes the female counterpart to the male elder, namely, the widow. This church is a family with fathers (elders) and mothers (widows), sisters and brothers.

[35]When Paul writes 1 Timothy, the word "deacon" has only a masculine ending. The word "deaconess" does not yet exist. So he differentiates between male and female servants of the church bearing the same title.

II. THE OFFICE OF WIDOW: THE HISTORICAL RECORD

Having concluded that Paul wants elders and widows to serve as fathers and mothers in the church, one might think we would turn to consider how developments in the fields of archaeology,[36] epigraphy,[37] and papyrology[38] are offering new clues as to how the church through the centuries has applied its understanding of the apostle's instructions. Certainly, in the past half-century alone tremendous growth has taken place in the number and availability of sources that have become more accessible through the internet and allowed for collaborations.[39] An influx of women into the academy has also yielded more dissertations on historical backgrounds as they relate to everyday life.[40] One historian writes,

> In drawing our attention to the world beyond high politics, women's historians were part of a broader group of "social historians" who argued that the social and cultural practices we take for granted in fact have a history, and one which we need to understand.[41]

Yet seeing "widow" as a church office is not a comparatively recent development. The 1971 edition of NIDNTTE makes mention of the widows as an order, although only briefly. S. Solle's entry mentions the parousia being near and notes, "In the meantime an order of widows had emerged."[42] Elsewhere, TDNT has long listed "widows as an institution" as one of the word's meanings:

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[36]For example, *Internet Archaeology*, published since 2000, is an open-access journal with peer-reviewed content from across the world.

[37]For example, Przemysław Siekeirka, Krystyna Stebnicka, and Alexsander Wolicki's two-volume work, *Women and the Polis: Public Honorific Inscriptions for Women in the Greek Cities from the Late Classical to the Roman Period* (Boston: DeGruyter, 2021), makes available inscriptions about women from the 5th c. BCE to the 3rd c. CE for the first time in English.

[38]For example, multispectral imaging allows organizations such as the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts to read previously inaccessible writing in ancient manuscripts. See Laura Bandy, "Digitizing in 20 Colors," CSNTM.org (April 2021), https://www.csntm.org/2021/05/20/digitizing-in-twenty-colors/.

[39]One example is the Packard Humanities Institute's "Searchable Greek Inscriptions" tool, produced in collaboration with Cornell University and Ohio State University, https://inscriptions.packhum.org/.

[40]Judith P. Zinser, *Feminism and History: A Glass Half Full* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1992). The historian traces the growing impact of women on history departments and historical professions. Sarah Pomeroy is an example of one such historian. Her seminal work, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken, 1976), was among the first works in English on women's history of any kind, and its title serves as an example of the social-history emphases that female historians brought into the academy.

[41]Nicole Bourbonnais, "A Brief History of Women's History," *Engenderings Blog*, London School of Economics (March 29, 2016), https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2016/03/29/a-brief-history-of-womens-history/.

[42]S. Solle, "Woman, Widow, Χήρα," NIDNTT, 1075.

> 4. Widows as an Institution. An institution of widows develops, although whether they are ranked as ordained ministers is debatable. To be accepted widows must go through a time of testing, must have been married only once, must have led blameless lives and cared well for their families, and must be of a certain (variable) age. When appointed church widows, they take a vow not to remarry and are accountable to God for keeping it. In later orders there are to be only three church widows in a congregation. Some references group them with the bishops, presbyters, and deacons; others not. Ignatius *Smyrneans* 13.1 mentions virgins who are called widows, perhaps because there are not enough real widows. Women deacons, or deaconesses, have some precedence over widows because they have functions of supervision and direction, but they are often selected from among virgins or widows. We thus read of widows who are deaconesses, although even later the two groups are not identical. The tasks of widows include prayer, caring for the sick, visiting prisoners, showing hospitality to traveling preachers, and teaching women catechumens and Christian girls. Because of their work in the church they are highly honored, have a special place at worship on the left behind the presbyters (as deacons are on the right behind the bishop), receive communion after the deacons and before subdeacons, etc. Yet by the end of the early period the order disappears. It perhaps finds a new form in the monastic orders for women, for nuns take up many of the duties that widows originally discharge.[43]

And the online version of BDAG (2000 ed.) briefly discusses this meaning of "widow," giving the interpretive option as "a special class in the Christian communities, to which only widows meeting certain requirements could belong."[44]

A look at history reveals that much was said in the more distant past about female clergy. At various times and in differing places the offices of widow and woman deacon are separate; at other times and/or places they are conflated. Here is a sampling of references to them, starting with more recent evidence[45]:

> **Pope Paschal I** (Rome—West, AD 822) had a mosaic made of his mother, Theodora, labeled in Greek with her title as "*episcopa*" (bishop). One can still see it in the Cappella di San Zenone (Chapel of Saint Zeno) in Rome's Basilica of Santa Prassede. Another

[43]Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 1316.

[44]"Χήρα," BDAG 1084.

[45]See also my discussion of this historical evidence in Glahn, *Nobody's Mother*, 18–14.

inscription added at the same time in the same basilica also describes Theodora as "*episcopa*."[46]

Council of Trullo, Constantinople (Turkey—East, AD 692), canon 14: "In like manner let no deacon be ordained before he is twenty-five, nor a deaconess before she is forty."[47] Here the Council speaks of "ordination" [Gk: *cheirotonia*] for women deacons using the same term elsewhere used for ordination of priests and male deacons.[48]

Synod of Orleans (France—West, AD 533), canon 17: "Women who have so far received the ordination to the diaconate against the prohibitions of the canons, if it can be proved that they have returned to matrimony, should be banned from communion."[49]

St. Remigius of Reims (France, AD 533) makes mention of his daughter, the female deacon Helaria, in his will.[50]

Synod of Epaone (France, AD 517), canon 21: "We abrogate the consecration of widows whom they call 'deaconesses' completely from our region."[51]

St. Patrick, *The Confession of St. Patrick,* Section 42 (West, c. AD 451–496)

The sons and daughters of the leaders of the Irish are seen to be monks and virgins of Christ! An example is this. There was a blessed Irish woman of noble birth, a most beautiful adult whom I baptised. She came to us a few days later for this reason. She told us that she had received word from a messenger of God, who advised her that she should become a virgin of Christ, and that she should come close to God. Thanks be to God, six days later, enthusiastically and well, she took on the life that all virgins of God do.

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[46]One can view an image of this mosaic online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Episcopa_Theodora#/media/File:Zenonkapelle_links_-_Episcopa_Teodora_-_Paschalis_I._Mutter.jpg.

[47]Canon 14, *in Pitra, Iuris ecclesiastici*, 2:21–23, trans. Henry Percival, *NPNF*^{2}, vol. 14, rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3814.htm.

[48]Council in Trullo (AD 692), canon 14, trans. Henry Percival, *NPNF*^{2}, vol. 14, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1900), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, http://www. newadvent.org/fathers/3814.htm.

[49]Synod of Orleans, Canon 17, trans. Henry Percival, *NPNF*^{2}, vol. 14, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1900), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3806.htm.

[50]Ed. B. Krusch, CCL 117 (1957), 477. Cf. E. Dekkers, *Clavis Patrum Latinorium,* no. 1072, as cited in A. Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 199n11.

[51]Synod of Epaone, canon 21, trans. Henry Percival, *NPNF*^{2}, Vol. 14, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1900), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3806.htm.

> Their fathers don't like this, of course. These women suffer persecution and false accusations from their parents, and yet their number grows! We do not know the number of our people who were born there. In addition, there are the widows and the celibates. Of all these, those held in slavery work hardest—they bear even terror and threats, but the Lord gives grace to so many of the women who serve him. Even when it is forbidden, they bravely follow his example.[52]

Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (East—Turkey, AD 451) canon 15: An earlier minimal age of 60 years for women deacons was relaxed to 40 years. The rationale given is that the earlier practice was based on 1 Timothy 5:9: "Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age."[53]

Synod of Orange (first of two) (West—France, AD 441), canon 26: Attended by seventeen male bishops. "Altogether no women deacons are to be ordained. If some already exist, let them bend their heads to the blessing given to the (lay) people."[54]

The Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi. Probably from Syria [East], and dated to the fourth or fifth century, possibly to c. 390 CE, but perhaps a few decades after that. An ordination prayer for a widow appears in *TD 1.41* under the heading "Prayer of the widows who sit in front." The prayer appears in the book *Ordained Women in the Early Church,* which introduces it this way: "The *TD* includes prayers for clergy ordinations, including women clergy. Here are the instructions for the ordination of a widow and the prayer the bishop says in ordaining her." This prayer of consecration follows:

> Prayer of the Widows Who Sit in Front
>
> The ordination (*ordinatio*) of the widow should occur like this. While she is praying at the entrance to the altar and looking downward, let the bishop say quietly, so that only the priests may hear:

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[52]Francis of Ireland, *The Confession of St. Patrick*, translation from Latin by Pádraig McCarthy, 2011, https://confessio.ie/etexts/confessio_english#undefined.

[53]Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, canon 15, trans. Henry Percival, NPNF^2, vol. 14, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1900), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3811.htm.

[54]Synod of Orange (441), Canon 26, trans. John Wijngaards, "Canons of the Council of Orange," Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research, https://www.womendeacons.org/minwest-canons-synod-orange/. The wording is as follows: "Diaconae omnimodis non ordinandae: si quae iam sunt, benedictioni quae populo impenditur, capita submittant." The translator cites "Mansi VI, 440," adding, "Note that the woman deacon is called 'diacona,' using the ancient term rather than just 'diaconissa.'"

> Holy and lofty God, who sees humble women, who has chosen the infirm and the powerful, who has created, O honored one, even these who are scorned, impart, O Lord, a spirit of power upon this your servant, and in your truth strengthen her so that, fulfilling your commandment and laboring in your sanctuary, she may be for you an honored vessel and may give glory on the day, O Lord, on which you will glorify your poor ones. Give to her power of happily practicing the teachings prescribed by you in the rule of your handmaiden. Give to her, O Lord, a spirit of humility, of power and patience and kindness, so that she might, bearing your burden with ineffable joy, sustain her labors. Truly, Lord God, who knows our infirmity, perfect your handmaiden for the glory of your house; strengthen her for edification and as a shining example. God, sanctify her, make her wise and comfort her, because God our father, your kingdom is blessed and glorious.
>
> The people: Amen.[55]

Standardization of a prayer for ordination to office for a female as seen here further substantiates that females served in clergy roles.

First Council of Nicea (East—Turkey, AD 325) canon 19: Deacon(esse)s are mentioned in passing in a canon referring to the reconciliation of ex-members of the sect of Paul of Samosata (AD 260–272). Paul, patriarch of Antioch, denied the three Persons of the Trinity: "In this way one must also deal with the deaconesses or with anyone in an ecclesiastical office."[56]

Tertullian [b. AD 160, N. Africa] ranked the widows among the clergy, and spoke of seats being reserved for them. In his work titled *De virginibus velandis* (9:2–3) he wrote with displeasure, "I know plainly that in a certain place a virgin less than twenty years old has been placed in the order of widows (*in viduatu*)!"[57]

The evidence above draws only from the written record. The visual record includes women holding shepherd's staffs,[58] and

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[55]Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 155; *Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, ed. and trans. Ignatius Ephraem II Rahmani (Mainz: F. Kirchheim, 1988), 99, https://archive.org/details/testamentumdomi00ephr goog/page/n158/mode/2up.

[56]First Council of Nicea, canon 19, trans. Henry Percival, NPNF^2, vol. 14, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1900), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3801.htm.

[57]Tertullian *On the Veiling of Virgins* (9.2–3), trans. S. Thelwall, *ANF*, vol. 4, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0403.htm.

[58]For example 5th to 7th century women have been honored in sacred spaces for hundreds of years, such as Hilda in England's Chester cathedral; Bridge(t) in Stratford upon Avon's Holy Trinity Church, and Æthelburg in Canterbury at St. Martin's—all of whom are depicted holding croziers.

handling communion elements.[59] All this demonstrates that the assertion that women held public office in the church, and did so early on, is historically verifiable.

III. WIDOWS: A HISTORIOGRAPHY

In the past fifty years, a number of secondary sources have explored the written record as presented above in addition to other evidence. What follows is a brief historiography. In 1976, Roger Gryson, a Benedictine scholar in Belgium published *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*.[60] Gryson traces the offices of widow and female deacon through the early centuries of the church, and concludes,

> Up to the end of the nineteenth century, historians of the early Church often identified deaconesses and widows as if these two different titles corresponded, for those who held them, to the same function.

In other words, historians conflated the offices of female deacon and widow. Gryson notes that "deaconesses and widows obviously corresponded to quite different institutions," and concludes "one can only wonder, after a close study of all the evidence, at the persistence of such an error."[61]

In more recent years, historians have expanded their tools of analysis beyond church fathers' manuscripts and pronouncements by councils to include liturgies and tombstones that mention women officeholders in the early church.[62] Ute E. Eisen documents the contrast between East and West that the epigraphic evidence reveals: "In light of the sparse epigraphical evidence for women deacons in the West, the wide distribution of those few examples is surprising," as women deacons are found "in Gaul, Italy, and Dalmatia."[63] In the

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[59]Theodora (c. 540) holds the communion wine across from her husband, who holds the bread basket, in the mosaics over the altar in Ravenna's San Vitale dating to c. 550. The c. 440 Capsella Samagher ivory reliquary in Venice National Archaeological Museum depicts men and women in the altar area of Old St Peter's Basilica in Rome. One of the pairs is jointly officiating the Eucharist.

[60]Roger Gryson, *Le ministère des femmes dans l'Église ancienne* (Recherches et synthèses, Section d'histoire, 4), J. Duculot, S.A. (Belgium: Gembloux); *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, trans. Jean Laporte and Mary Louise Hall (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1976).

[61]Gryson, *The Ministry of Women*, 110.

[62]Clint Burnett, author of *Studying the New Testament through Inscriptions* (2020), in a privately offered online course, "Bibl.e.pigraphy" (May 8, 2021 lecture), on the topic noted that the one million or so inscriptions relevant to the context of the NT have yet to be incorporated into standard Greek-English lexica, which rely instead on Greek literature. See also Ute Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies,* trans. Linda Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000). Eisen observes that "inscriptions and papyri have scarcely been brought into the discussion as sources for the history of Christian women officeholders" (21).

[63]Eisen, *Officeholders*, 185.

East, however, Eisen notes, "The abundant epigraphic evidence suggests the continuity of an office of women deacons in Asia Minor from the very beginning."[64] Yet the epigraphic evidence for widows still awaits documentation. While Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek's map of epigraphical and literary sources for female presbyters includes a sparse nine pieces of evidence ranging from Hippo to Cappadocia,[65] the authors do not even include in their study an exploration of epigraphic evidence for "widows." One wonders if the relative absence of female deacons in the West could be attributed to the existence of a different and earlier office—that of widow.

Thurston examined the ministry of widows through the third century. Her consideration of patristic-era documents includes discussion of the cultural influences behind changes in ecclesial structures. She concludes the order of widow reached its height in the third century, especially but not exclusively in the Eastern church. She argues that the order of widows was ultimately replaced by the rise of deaconesses as the church institutionalized and moved away from charismatic ministry forms to clerical offices.[66]

In this Thurston's findings align with those of Gryson, who noted that historians of the past had not been looking for references to the office of "widow." Perhaps for this reason, in the absence of references to female deacons, some researchers concluded that women's membership in the clergy was a late development. Up to a certain point, if a researcher was thinking the word "widow" referred only to a woman bereft of a husband rather than also including an office rooted in 1 Tim 5, the same researcher could see a tombstone that read "a widow of the church of X location" and miss seeing the very evidence sought.

Gryson summarizes: "One thing is undeniable: there were in the early Church women who occupied an official position, who were invested with a ministry, and who, at least at certain times and places, appeared as part of the clergy. These women were called 'deaconesses' and at times 'widows.'"[67]

Nine years after Gryson published his book, A. Georges Martimort published *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*.[68] The work did not look at widow as an office, but what he added that other researchers had excluded provides another tool of analysis: deaconess's ordination prayers and liturgies. Although he did not include "widows" in his research, his work continued the process of uncovering evidence that females held public office.

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[64]Eisen, *Officeholders*, 174.

[65]Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, O*rdained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 211.

[66]Thurston, *Widows*, 116.

[67]Gryson, *The Ministry of Women*, xi.

[68]Martimort, *Deaconesses.*

In *The Widows*, Thurston did trace the office of "widow" through the NT and patristic eras. Susanna Elm built on Thurston's now classic book with *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*.[69] Elm laid out evidence that the office of widow dwindled by the middle of the third century with the rise of virginity as the ideal and the rise of the deaconess.

All this data reveals that in parts of the empire, at least, older women held ordained office. Scholars are concluding that the term "widow" denoted more than needy women bereft of husbands based on the following: (1) the high standards for widows to be enrolled; (2) the implied exchange of "enrollment" for service; (3) the existence of ordination prayers; and (4) epigraphic and artistic evidence of presbytera connected with specific churches. Additionally, (5) some such officeholders received "honor," and they did so in the early church as mothers whose ministry complemented that of the elders, or fathers, with the church being a household of God (1 Tim 3:15).

In the East, female deacons evangelized women, assisted at baptisms for female converts,[70] and visited the poor.[71] It is said of the fourth-century deaconess Theosebia, sister of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Peter, Bishop of Sebaste, that she "served the Holy Church as a deaconess, caring for the sick, distributing food to vagrants, raising orphans and preparing women for holy Baptism."[72] In some places "the widow is explicitly said to be ordained to her office'" and "'ordained' in precisely the same way as other major clerics."[73] By the third century in the West, the office of widow was described as a thing of the past. Gryson notes that whenever the Alexandrians (i.e., Egypt, or West) mentioned women deacons or widows, they referred to these as offices no longer active.

Thurston explores references made to widows by Clement of Rome,[74] Ignatius of Antioch,[75] Polycarp,[76] The Shepherd of Hermas,[77] Tertullian,[78] and Origen.[79] In the fifth century, the *Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, devoted four long chapters to widows. It referred to the "ordination of widows," in two instances using the same word (*ordinatio*) employed for clerics in major orders.

After this historical survey, Thurston concludes,

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[69]Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 176–83.
[70]Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 183; Thurston, *Widows*, 114.
[71]Thurston, *Widows,* 114.
[72]"Blessed Theosebia the Deaconess, sister of Saints Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa," Orthodox Church in America, https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2023/01/10/100145-blessed-theosebia-the-deaconess-sister-of-saints-basil-the-great.
[73]Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women* (2011), 154.
[74]Thurston, *Widows,* 59; I Clement VIII.4.
[75]Ignatius. See n. 10.
[76]Thurston, *Widows*, 66–67.
[77]Shepherd of Hermas, Vision IV.2–3.
[78]Thurston, *Widows,* 76–91.
[79]Thurston, *Widows,* 95.

> In the Christian literature of the third-century church, the widows hold a prominent place. They are consistently listed with the clergy. As members of the church hierarchy, the widows are targets of the persecutions of the age, as Eusebius reports. Clement of Alexandria and Origen give instructions for the widows similar to those in the pastoral epistles. Origen allows the widows a teaching function, although he strictly limits the privilege.[80]

Later in the East, the relationship between widows and female deacons makes a reversal, such that widows, who once supervised female deacons, become subject to them. Thurston summarizes: "The influence of the widows is curbed by the rise of the deaconesses, who are close associates of the bishop in pastoral work."[81]

Eventually, offices in the East bore the same labels as those in the West, but in the West they were merely honorary. The East was actually more conservative and segregated, and perhaps that is why researchers have found more mentions of female officeholders doing ministry focused exclusively on women. For men to catechize and baptize women might have been considered an encroachment beyond their boundaries. But with infant baptism increasingly replacing adult baptism, the need for someone to assist with adult females being baptized vanished (especially if catechumens were baptized in the nude to symbolize rebirth[82]).

Multiple factors appear to have led to the demise of the office, though the existence of nuns suggests it continued in some form. In addition to the trend toward infant baptism was the rise of an all-male priesthood as part of "increasing institutionalism and its likeness to Old Testament practices."[83] A return to such practices—especially after the emperor Theodosius made Nicene Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire (380 CE)—came with church buildings having special divisions for men and women and more of a clergy/laity divide. Menstruating women were at times barred from worship as part of this reversion to OT institutions.[84] Anthropology also played a role, as some of the church fathers and deeply influential "doctors of the church" held views of woman's

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[80]Thurston, *Widows,* 104.

[81]Thurston, *Widows,* 105.

[82]A source on nude baptism is Hippolytus, "The Apostolic Tradition" 21.1–5: "At the hour in which the cock crows, they shall first pray over the water. When they come to the water, the water shall be pure and flowing, that is, the water of a spring or a flowing body of water. Then they shall take off all their clothes. The children shall be baptized first. All of the children who can answer for themselves, let them answer. If there are any children who cannot answer for themselves, let their parents answer for them, or someone else from their family. After this, the men will be baptized. Finally, the women, after they have unbound their hair, and removed their jewelry. No one shall take any foreign object with themselves down into the water."

[83]Saucy and TenElshof, *Women and Men*, 180.

[84]Saucy and TenElshof, *Women and Men*, 181; Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women* (2011), 139.

deficient nature that would be largely denounced today. Here is a sampling:

> John Chrysostom (347–407 CE) wrote, "The woman taught once, and ruined all. On this account therefore he [Paul] says, 'let her not teach.' But what is it to other women, that she suffered this? It certainly concerns them; for the sex is weak and fickle."[85]

> Augustine (354–430 CE) wrote, "[Satan made] his assault upon the weaker part of that human alliance, that he might gradually gain the whole, and not supposing the man would readily give ear to him or be deceived."[86]

Such views continued into the Medieval Christianity.

> Bonaventure (c. 1217–1274 CE) argued that only males could serve at the altar because women lacked the image of God, "but man by reason of his sex is 'imago Dei.'"[87]

> Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 CE) held views on male and female that were deeply influenced by those of Aristotle, who saw woman as "defective and misbegotten."[88]

And these ideas endured through the Renaissance.

> Erasmus (1466–1536 CE) said that that while woman was deceived by the serpent, man was impervious to such beguilement: "The man could not have been taken in either way by the serpent's promises or by the allure of this fruit."[89]

Of the Protestant Reformers, Martin Luther (1483–1546) believed that "by divine and human right, Adam is the master of the woman.… There was a greater wisdom in Adam than in the woman."[90] In the next generation of Reformers, some taught similarly. John Knox (c. 1514–1572 CE), described women as "weak, frail, impatient, feeble and foolish" as well as "inconstant, variable, cruel and lacking the

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[85]John Chrysostom, "Homily 9 on 1 Timothy," in Homilies on the Epistles to the Galatians; Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; Thessalonians; Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, ed. and trans. Philip Schaff, *NPNF* 1.13.

[86]Augustine, *The City of God and Christian Doctrine*, trans. Philip Schaff, *NPNF* 1.2.

[87]"Bonaventure," *Commentaria in IV Libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi*, Opera omnia, answer C, https://womenpriests.org/theology/bonav1-bonaventure/.

[88]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd ed. (1920), First Part, Question 92, Reply to Objection 1, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1092.htm.

[89]Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus: Paraphrases on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon, the Epistles of Peter and Jude, the Epistle of James, the Epistles of John, and the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. John J. Bateman, ed. R. D. Sider (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 44:17.

[90]Martin Luther, "Lectures on 1 Timothy," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973), 28:278–79.

spirit of counsel and regiment."[91] We can conclude, "This is no random sampling of obscure theologians. Some tremendously influential leaders whom the church has revered through the centuries (and still does) held unbiblical views of women."[92]

Cultural views of women endured as influential scholars saw them as weak, fickle, lightheaded, of mediocre intelligence, and "the weaker part of the human alliance"[93]—none of which sounds much like Jesus's view of them nor accounts for the female ministry partners Paul mentions in Rom 16.

IV. CONCLUSION

The verses about enrolled widows are often read only as instructions about care for the poor. But a closer look at Scripture and studies of early church practice lead one to conclude that Paul was doing more than giving instructions for husbandless women in need of financial aid. He was outlining qualifications for an office that involved mother-figures of the church. Their list included much overlap with those required of the male elders (1 Tim 5:1).

Regardless of what conclusions one draws about which of today's practices should build on early traditions, credible scholarship shows that "today's liberal and so-called progressive society" following "the politically-correct agenda" did not inaugurate the practice of women serving in church office. Primary documents reveal that the question about women in public ministry in the church has been burning since the beginning. That women hold office in the church is not a development that resulted from capitulating to radical feminists, but rather one going all the way back to the apostle Paul and his instruction outlining the office of widow. The evidence from Scripture and history supports the conclusion that "widow" in the early church was both a label assigned to marital status and a title of office.

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[91]John Knox, "Section Two: The First Blast to Awake Women Degenerate," in *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558; repr., London: 1878), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9660/9660-h/9660-h.htm.

[92]Summarized from Glahn, *Nobody's Mother,* 19–20.

[93]Augustine, *The City of God* and *Christian Doctrine*, NPNF series 1, vol. 2, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, trans. Philip Schaff, https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.

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