

For Paul, to allow a woman to teach or lead is blatantly opposed to her female nature. For this reason, and not for any misogynist motive, he does not permit her to fill such an office in 1 Corinthians 14 or 1 Timothy 2.

Of course this does not mean that women in the early church were condemned to doing nothing. Paul rather 'fully appreciated the effectiveness of women in church service, as long as it corresponded to their female nature and the divine order of creation'.³⁵⁶ In Romans 16:1f. he commends to the church in Rome his co-worker the deaconess Phoebe.³⁵⁷ Obviously when the epistle to the Romans was composed there was already an order of deaconesses in the Pauline churches, for the Greek term *diakonos* describes an office.³⁵⁸ What tasks a deaconess carried out at this time can only be guessed at. It certainly did not involve public proclamation of the word, teaching, or leading the church. Perhaps it involved serving the congregation, by bringing material help to the needy (Rom 16:2),³⁵⁹ in serving women, the sick, and strangers.³⁶⁰ We find one clear clue to the duties of a deaconess in 1 Timothy 5:3-16, where Paul discusses the diaconate of those who were enrolled in the order of widows. These widows clearly had the task of serving the congregation, through intensive intercession (*cf.* v. 5) and visiting from house to house (*cf.* v. 13). Paul sees the particular tasks of women as motherhood (1 Tim 2:15),³⁶¹ showing hospitality to strangers (1 Tim 5:10), and all sorts of acts of loving service (1 Tim 5:10). Women may give instruction, so long as it is not public teaching of the congregation, but takes place among small groups of women (Tit. 2:3-4); Paul also takes it for granted that mothers will instruct their children (*cf.* 2 Tim 3:15; 1:5).

Women's service in the congregation was of great importance for Paul. His letters prove how highly the apostle

regarded women's contributions to spreading the gospel and meeting the needs of the congregation (*cf.* Rom 16:1-4, 6, 12, 13, 15; Phil 4:2-3; 1 Tim 5:5, 10). There is no passage in Paul where he disparages the service given by women. He assigns different tasks to men and women, not because he underrates women, but to preserve the different character of the sexes and their appropriate position in creation. His attitude is in complete agreement with that of Jesus, who in his teaching and actions recognised the differences between men and women. Jesus and Paul agree that creation and redemption do not conflict with each other; rather they constitute an inseparable unity, since both nature and grace are the work of God. For this reason Jesus and Paul do not abrogate the created order of the sexes in the kingdom of God, or the church, but expressly acknowledge it.

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3. The differences between the sexes that are explicit in the

Bible, and their consequent differentiation of tasks within the church, remained uncontested in Christendom (with only a few trivial exceptions) until the twentieth century. This is most obvious in the way that Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christendom followed the New Testament by limiting teaching and leadership functions in the church to men. In the early church this practice was disregarded only by heretical movements such as Montanism,³⁹² Quintillianism³⁹³ and Gnosticism.³⁹⁴ The exclusion of women from the office of preaching and teaching by no means condemned them to inactivity. The early church, following the New Testament (cf. Rom 16:1-2; 1 Tim 5:3-16), created for unmarried women the office of *deaconess*, which comprised a variety of activities such as caring for the sick, social and pastoral care of women, assisting at the baptism of women and preparing them for it.³⁹⁵ With the office of deaconess Christianity opened up a sphere of activity for Christian women which was closed to women both in Judaism and in other religions.³⁹⁶ Indeed the office of deaconess was allowed to continue in the Western church until the fourth century, while it continued in the East until the twelfth century.³⁹⁷ This later exclusion of women from church office was mitigated when the Middle Ages opened up a new large sphere of activity for women, for example in education. The caring work of the deaconesses of the early church was revived in the orders of Catholic women (from the sixteenth century) and in the Protestant order of deaconesses (from the nineteenth century).

We see, then, that Christendom largely retained the distribution of church offices between the sexes according to the guidelines established by the New Testament. This is also true of the prophetesses permitted in the New Testament.³⁹⁸ Whereas there were hardly any prophets in the Catholic church after the second century, the church again and again permitted charismatically endowed women to act as prophetesses. Women such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), the 'Teutonic prophetess', and Catherine of Siena (1347-80) were allowed to act in this way without thereby being allowed to participate directly in the office of

pastor. It was left to our century to break much more extensively with nearly two thousand years of tradition going back to the New Testament by permitting women to take charge of a congregation,³⁹⁹ and more recently to open even the episcopal office to women,⁴⁰⁰ thereby putting in question the distinction of male and female offices within the church. This development of course occurred first in the Protestant churches, whereas the Catholic and Orthodox churches have until now decisively opposed it. This raises the basic question whether and how far the New Testament view of the sexes is still valid and binding for church life.

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