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Sub-Ordination: Mary Magdalene, the Church, and the Ordination of Women

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ABSTRACT

The Roman Catholic Church maintains that it cannot ordain women to the priesthood due to a lack of biblical warrant. The Church therefore relies upon the traditional concept of a Bridegroom-Bride relationship (read: Christ and His Church), which they say can only be maintained if a male priest serves as the representative of the invisible Christ for his Bride during the Eucharist. In this essay, we shall explore the role and treatment of Mary Magdalene and women in early texts and show that they actually did have prominent positions within at least some early Christian communities. Texts were altered, and selected for reasons that did not always have to do with doctrine. Therefore, the tradition of the Bridegroom-Bride relationship ought to be reconsidered as the later development it was, and the Church should reconsider not only its presentation of Mary Magdalene but also the possibility of women within the ordained priesthood.
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Introduction

In 2003, Dan Brown first published his novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. His book, and the subsequent film based on it, added momentum to the recent media fascination with early Christian figures and reintroduced Mary Magdalene to the public. However, this focus on her has been short-lived. Intrigue in the fictional paramour of Jesus and the elusive character of the New Testament and early Christianity quickly shifted to the new questions this perspective raised about Jesus—his humanity (as opposed to his divinity), his sexuality, and the scandal of his having heirs. As a result, Mary Magdalene faded back into obscurity.

It is my assertion that there exists a deposit within the bedrock of Christianity the possibility of a Roman Catholic Church that allows for the ordination of women in a manner that is faithful to its tenets, and that the way forward can be found by viewing the treatment of Mary Magdalene by the first Christian communities. Although the Roman Catholic Church maintains that there is no clear biblical prohibition against the ordination of women, it claims that traditional concept of a Bridegroom-Bride relationship (read: Christ and His Church) can only be maintained if a male priest serves as the representative of the invisible Christ for his Bride during the Eucharist. However, if early texts can show that Mary Magdalene and other women did have prominent positions
within early Christian communities, then the tradition of the Bridegroom-Bride relationship ought to be reconsidered as the later development it was.

In the following chapters, we shall summarize the current position of the Roman Catholic Church, examine the social context in which the Christian orthodoxy developed, and analyze the role of women in New Testament and non-Canonical scriptures. What we shall see, I believe, is that what the Catholic Church maintains as tradition did not just emerge, but was constructed after centuries of disagreement finally gave way to an orthodox position that could suppress or remove any challenge to the leadership of men, especially through the Apostle Peter. If the Catholic Church engages in a careful re-examination of the New Testament scriptures, non-Canonical texts and the social context in which these works developed, then I believe their traditions must also be reconsidered. More specifically, if taken seriously, Mary Magdalene and other women, as portrayed in the Christian scriptures and the extra-canonical literature of the early Christian era, challenge traditional understandings of women’s leadership roles within the earliest Jesus movement and, thereby, call into question the refusal, as in the Roman Catholic Church, to allow for the ordination of women.
Chapter One: The Roman Catholic Church’s Stance on the Ordination of Women

In December 2007, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the “General Decree Regarding the Delict of Attempted Sacred Ordination of a Woman.” According to the decree, “Without prejudice to the prescript of can. 1378 of the Code of Canon Law, both the one who attempts to confer a sacred order on a woman, and the woman who attempts to receive a sacred order, incur an excommunication latae sententiae reserved to the Apostolic See.”¹ The decree is intended to end, once and for all, the debate over the ordination of women within the Catholic Church. Whether or not it will ultimately succeed remains to be seen.

Contemporary questions over the Catholic Church’s stance regarding the ordination of women, at least in ways relevant for the treatment of this work, began in the 1960s. The lay and ordained members of the Church, both men and women, who began to question the position of the Vatican came from around the world: from Switzerland to Peru, from India to America. Although their support came for different reasons, they all

argued in favor of the possibility of women priests.\(^2\) The debate continued to grow throughout the rest of the century. In 1968, the World Congress of the Lay Apostolate requested a study of the role of women in the sacramental order and the church. In 1969, 1971, 1974 and 1975, the national synods of Holland, the Canadian delegates to the third synod of bishops in Rome, the national synods of Austria and the synods of three Swiss dioceses, respectively, followed suit.

Finally, the Pontifical Biblical Commission was tasked with conducting the requested study. However, the Commission acknowledged that any analysis would be limited, citing the foreignness of the contemporary concept of priesthood to the earliest Christians as well as little attention in the New Testament to Eucharistic ministry.\(^3\) Ultimately, the members of the commission declared that their findings were inconclusive. All seventeen members on the Commission agreed that the New Testament alone could not settle the issue. However, twelve of the seventeen reportedly wondered if “the Church hierarchy, entrusted with the sacramental economy, would be able to entrust the ministries of Eucharist and reconciliation to women in the light of circumstances, without going against Christ’s original intention.”\(^4\)

\(^2\) Swidler, Arlene and Leonard Swidler, eds. *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 5-6. Swidler and Swidler have compiled an extensive and invaluable list of essays written in response to *Inter Insigniores* and will be instrumental in my efforts at establishing the current state of the debate in the Roman Catholic Church.

\(^3\) Field-Bibb, Jacqueline. *Women Towards Priesthood: Ministerial Politics and Feminist Praxis* (New York: Cambridge, 1991), 180. In this book, Field-Bibb has added her powerful voice to the debate over the ordination of women. She has documented the progression of the debate not only in the Roman Catholic Church, but also in the Methodist Church and the Church of England.

\(^4\) Field-Bibb, 182.
The findings of the Commission were passed on to the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which on October 15, 1976 issued its Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood (Inter Insigniores). Although there is not room here to go through the document point by point, its importance requires a quick look. In two decisive strokes, the authors of Inter Insigniores took a firm stand against the possibility of ordaining women. First, the authors appealed to tradition, claiming that the Church does not have the authority to ordain women while still acting “in fidelity to the example of the Lord.” Inter Insigniores states that: “By calling only men to the priestly Order and ministry in its true sense, the Church intends to remain faithful to the type of ordained ministry willed by the Lord Jesus Christ and carefully maintained by the Apostles.” Furthermore, the authors state that:

It is the Church, through the voice of her Magisterium, that, in these various domains, decides what can change and what must remain immutable. When she judges that she cannot accept certain changes, it is because she knows that she is bound by Christ’s manner of acting. Her attitude, despite appearances, is therefore not one of archaism but of fidelity: it can be truly understood only in this light.

In Inter Insigniores, it is asserted that Jesus’ decision to not call any woman to become part of the twelve apostles should not be seen as merely conforming to the cultural milieu. According to the authors, “if he acted in this way, it was not in order to conform to the customs of his time, for his attitude towards women was quite different

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5 Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Inter Insigniores (Oct 15, 1976), 4. This document is also known in English as the Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood. In Swidler and Swidler, 38.

6 Inter Insigniores, 6. In Swidler and Swidler, 38.

7 Ibid., 28-30. In Swidler and Swidler, 42-43.
from that of his milieu, and he deliberately and courageously broke with it. According to Louis Bouyer, Jesus’ refusal to use the model of female priesthodonts of surrounding cultures was to protect women: “By ‘taking care not to crush her femininity’ in conferring on her an unsuitable ministry, the way will be clear to uncover the ‘unique beauty of her femininity,’ her ‘mystery’ will be revealed.” Similarly, Albert Descamps argued in February 1977, as Jacqueline Field-Bibb notes, that “if Jesus never exercised ministry alone and was so original in this, ‘how is it possible to suppose he chose men only out of mere conformism?’ This was a sufficiently precise plan in which women have been called ‘to help’. This divine plan, revealed in a certain historical period, ‘is marked by it for ever.’”

As the document continues, it states: “The apostolic community remained faithful to the attitude of Jesus towards women. Although Mary [the mother of Jesus] occupied a privileged place…it was not she who was called to enter the College of the Twelve.” Instead, they note that “those who were put forward were two disciples whom the Gospels do not even mention.” To support their claim of tradition, the authors of Inter Insigniores argue that the apostle Paul upheld Jesus’ wish in his own decisions, reserving a special title and position, “God’s fellow workers,” for Apollos, Timothy and himself, as

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8 Inter Insigniores, 10-11. In Swidler and Swidler, 39.


11 Inter Insigniores, 16-17. In Swidler, 40.

12 Ibid., 16-17. In Swidler, 40.
men, specifically and “directly set apart for the apostolic ministry and the preaching of the Word of God.”

In order to argue a consistent stance, the authors needed to separate the actions of the “orthodox” Christians of the first few centuries from those deemed “heretics.” According to Inter Insigniores, “The Catholic Church has never felt that priestly or Episcopal ordination can be validly conferred on women. A few heretical sects in the first centuries, especially Gnostic ones, entrusted the exercise of the priestly ministry to women: this innovation was immediately noted and condemned by the Fathers, who considered it as unacceptable in the Church.”

For their second reason, the authors cite the need to maintain the Bridegroom-Bride relationship (Christ and His Church), specifically through the priest’s representation during the Eucharist, “the moment of complete communication between the Bridegroom and the Bride…the climax of the espousals of the whole Church with her Lord.” According to Gustave Martelet, “Since Christ, having become invisible for [his Bride, the Church], can no longer appear personally to affirm his irreplaceable presence and action, there will be in the Church a visible and efficacious reminder of her absolute and vital dependency on her irreplaceable Bridegroom. The ministerial priesthood is this sign.” Martelet concludes, saying “Man is, therefore, better suited than woman to

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13 Inter Insigniores, 17. In Swidler, 41.

14 Ibid., 4. In Swidler, 38.

15 Field-Bibb, 191.

symbolize in the new conjugality that defines the communion of the New Covenant, the Bridegroom from whom the Bride knows she receives both Love and Life.”¹⁷

According to Jacqueline Field-Bibb, “Christian thought has taken ‘in persona Christi’ to mean that the priest is firstly an image of Christ and secondly the presence of Christ- from which is derived the ‘natural resemblance’ argument whereby Aquinas held that women were unable to receive holy orders.”¹⁸ *Inter Insigniores* reiterates this view, saying that a bishop or priest represents Christ, who is believed to act through him, and that “the Christian priesthood is therefore of a sacramental nature: the priest is a sign, the supernatural effectiveness of which comes from the ordination received, but a sign that must be perceptible and which the faithful must be able to recognize with ease.”¹⁹

*Inter Insigniores* continues by claiming that the natural resemblance between the priest and Christ would not exist if the minister of the Eucharist were not a man, “for Christ himself was and remains a man.”²⁰ In agreement with *Inter Insigniores*, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin wrote a letter in 1977, in which he asserted that “the ministerial priest acts not ‘in masculinitate Christi’ but ‘in persona Christi.’ If he is to be an effective sign, especially if he is to lead and inspire others, particularly women, in the apostolate, then he must display the virtues and the godlike qualities of the man Christ.”²¹ In addition, Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote that same year, claiming that “the redemptive mystery of

¹⁷ Field-Bibb, 191.

¹⁸ Ibid., 190.

¹⁹ *Inter Insigniores*, 33-34. In Swidler, 43.

²⁰ Ibid., 33-38. In Swidler, 43-44.

‘Christ-Church’ is the superabundant fulfillment of the mystery of the Creation between man and woman’, in which analogy the ‘natural sexual difference is charged, as difference, with a supernatural emphasis.’

In 1994, Pope John Paul II declared the debate over the ordination of women closed. In his letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, Pope John Paul II proclaimed: "Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church’s divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.”  

Although *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* was not issued as an *ex cathedra* statement, and thus is not meant to be considered infallible in itself, its contents have been considered infallible by the Church due to the fact that the doctrine was "founded on the written Word of God, and from the beginning constantly preserved and applied in the Tradition of the Church, it has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal magisterium.”

Although *Inter Insigniores* was intended to settle any debate, it failed. Unfortunately, a full consideration of the arguments and counter-arguments are beyond the scope of this paper. What is important to note, however, is that there is no consensus,

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23 Although Pope John Paul II did not permit the ordination of women, he did maintain a personal devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and maintained a tradition within the Catholic Church of viewing as (unofficial) Co-Redemptrix because of her unique role in the life and death of Jesus and the salvation of mankind.

even within the ranks of the Catholic Church leaders, as to whether or not it is
permissible and in accordance with the example of Jesus Christ to ordain women.
Chapter 2: Early Church Practice and the Construction of Orthodoxy

In the centuries after the death of Jesus, those who followed him and believed his message were forced to undergo a dramatic shift in organization. What had been a community of like-minded individuals under a single charismatic leader was forced to make decisions that would determine the best way forward. One of the first acts of Jesus’ followers was the appointment of an apostle to replace Judas. Apparently using Jesus’ selection of twelve male apostles as an example, they likewise chose a man. By drawing lots, it was decided that the replacement was to be Matthias (Acts 1:15-26). However, the followers of Jesus Christ expected his return to be soon, so there would have been no reason they would be planning for the future of a religion.

Should the appointment of the twelve apostles by Jesus and the later replacement of Judas with Matthias be seen as the establishment, as the Catholic Church would argue, of an ordained, male priesthood? J.L. McKenzie argues that there was no sense of ordination in the New Testament, but only a call and commission for mission and ministry. He asserts that, if anything, there should not today be any ordained woman, or any ordained man: “One cannot adduce any New Testament text in support of the ordination of women. One cannot adduce any New Testament text in support of the

ordination of men. Officers named *heireus*, priest, are not mentioned in the New Testament. The apostles were all men; the office expired with the first generation of the church.”26

As it became evident that Christ’s return was not coming as soon as expected, the community was forced to organize in such a way as to perpetuate the truth for future generations. This included a re-examination of everything they had learned from Jesus to make theological and practical decisions and thus establish proper doctrine, rituals and leadership positions. What ended up developing, however, was not a singular entity that spoke with one voice, but a plurality of Christianities, sharing rather general characteristics but of incredible diversity. Over the following centuries, groups developed which would only later be deemed and rejected as heresies by the orthodox leadership. These groups, often named after a founder or theological position, included the likes of Docetism, Adoptionism, Arianism and, as we discussed earlier, certain groups of Gnostics. Had things occurred differently, perhaps another of them could have become the orthodox position.

Using Paul’s Pastoral Epistles as a guide, Clement writes his *Epistle to the Corinthians*, as early as the first century CE, in order to set out the proper order of church leadership: “These things therefore being manifest to us, and since we look into the depths of the divine knowledge, it behoves us to do all things in [their proper] order…[the Lord’s] own peculiar services are assigned to the high priest, and their own proper place is prescribed to the priests, and their own special ministrations devolve on

26 Swidler, 213.
the Levites.” Similarly, the Didache, written in either the first or second century C.E., advises Christians to “appoint…for yourselves, bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men meek, and not lovers of money, and truthful and proved; for they also render to you the service of prophets and teachers.”

Before continuing, we should recognize that women did, at least at first, have active and prominent roles in certain early Christian communities. Recent scholarship of inscriptions and writings has shown that there were women missionaries, prophets, deacons, theologians, teachers, writers, consecrated widows, stewards, priests and bishops in the church until at least the fourth century. Indeed, if we take the early Christian bishop Hippolytus at his word, there were even female apostles. However, while Claudia Setzer asserts that “women’s presence and testimony as witnesses to the empty tomb and Jesus’ appearance after death seems an early and firmly entrenched piece of the tradition,” she also claims that “equally early and entrenched is the embarrassment of that fact.” All of the Catholic Church Fathers, from Ignatius (35-107)

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27 Clement, First Epistle to the Corinthians 40. (ANF01). This and later citations are from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL), including the Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF), the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF) collection. This unparalleled public-domain collection includes the works of early Christian leaders translated into English. www.ccel.org/fathers.html (accessed April 22, 2009).


29 De Boer, Esther. “Should We All Turn and Listen to Her?” In Marvin Meyer, The Gospels of Mary: The Secret Tradition of Mary Magdalene, the Companion of Jesus (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 77. See also the bibliography for two other very informative works by Esther De Boer.

30 Brock, Ann Graham. Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority (Cambridge MA: Harvard, 2003) 1-2. Brock’s impressive examination of Mary Magdalene and women (and how they were treated in contrast to Peter) in early text has been of great value.

to John of Damascus (675-749) may be guilty of this. However, as we shall see, there is a more demonstrable reason for their recorded opposition to any ordination of women.

If Augustine would later represent the pinnacle of Latin ecclesiastical literature, then it was Tertullian, born around 160 CE in Carthage to a Roman officer and possessing a profound knowledge of Roman law, who was one of its first representatives. Tertullian, although he maintains a prominent position within the history of the Roman Catholic Church, would likely find himself ill-fitted for a position in today’s Church. Around 200 CE, Tertullian was ordained to the priesthood even though he was married, and he engaged in a battle of minds against pagans and those he considered heretics.

Like Clement, Tertullian used Paul’s epistles to deny unequivocally women any chance of a teaching or priestly role: “It is not permitted to a woman to speak in the church; but neither (is it permitted her) to teach, nor to baptize, nor to offer, nor to claim to herself a lot in any manly function, not to say (in any) sacerdotal office.” Furthermore, he judges any women who do such things to be beyond repute. In Prescription Against Heretics, he laments “the very women of these heretics, how wanton they are! For they are bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures – it may be even to baptize!” The reference to the “sacerdotal office,”


33 In another example of the development of doctrine and tradition, celibacy was a divisive issue throughout the early history of Christianity, and not the standard within the Catholic Church until later.

34 Tixeront, 110.


36 Tertullian, “Prescription Against Heretics,” 41 (ANF03).
that of an official priestly figure, is a significant development from the community of believers in the New Testament. Before this, one had to do little more than convince others of their upright character and ability to perform God’s will. Now, however, the position of the priest was part of a holy order, an institutional office.

In 213, Tertullian broke away from the Church in Rome. According to Tixeront, “the cause of this rupture was the condemnation by Rome of Montanism and, more particularly, the papal authorization to contract a second marriage, which practice was denounced by Montanists.”

Somewhat like today’s Pentecostalists, the Montanists were, to a much larger degree than the Church in Rome, more open to movements of the Spirit, including continuing revelation and prophecy. Although Tertullian then wrote against the Church in Rome as a Montanist, after a few years he had a falling out with them as well and became the leader of his own sect. The movement between groups, at this point, shows clearly that the Church in Rome had not yet established itself as the dominant voice regarding the mission of Christ. In contrast to Montanism, the Church in Rome would, over the course of time, find its path leading away from continued revelation, choosing to favor scriptural warrant, uniformity and tradition. In *Beyond Fear and Silence: A Feminist-Literary Reading of Mark*, Joan Mitchell recounts a story of three lay ministry women who were granted an audience with the local cardinal. They took with them letters from eighty women who felt discounted, unwelcome or ignored in their communities and wanted a greater role in the Catholic Church. After listening

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37 Tixeront, 110.

38 Ibid., 110.
cordially, the cardinal told the women “it’s not about experience; it’s about revelation. Our culture is influencing you. We are not an enlightenment people. We are a people of revelation, which was closed with the death of the last apostle.”\footnote{Mitchell, Joan. \textit{Beyond Fear and Silence: A Feminist-Literary Reading of Mark} (New York: Continuum, 2001) 6-7.} It is hard (if not impossible) to imagine how different things would be today if Montanism had become the orthodox stance, but it is doubtful that women would be in the position they are now if it had. If the Roman Catholic Church remained more receptive to revelation, perhaps there would be a greater ability to change.\footnote{There is still some room for revelation, especially in certain Papal statements of dogma, but for the most part, tradition and texts are emphasized.}

Within a century, the Didascalia Apostolorum was written. The Didascalia is a treatise presenting itself as a work of the Apostles at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-29), although it was likely composed in the third century, and deals with the practice of early “orthodox” Christians. Among other practices, it specifies the place of women. First, it reiterates Paul’s claim that women should not teach:

\begin{quote}
It is not required nor necessary that women should be teachers, especially about the name of the Christ, and about salvation by His Passion, for women were not appointed to teach...Jesus the Christ, our Teacher, sent us the Twelve to make disciples of the people and the nations. There were with us female disciples, Mary Magdalene and another Mary, and He did not send [them] to make disciples with us of the people. For if it were required that women should teach, our Teacher would have commanded them to make disciples with us.\footnote{\textit{Didascalia Apostolorum}, 16. Translated in Gibson, M.D., \textit{The Didascalia in English} (London: Cambridge, 1903), 72.}
\end{quote}
Shortly after, there is also a warning against the practice of baptism by women. “There is
great danger to her who baptizeth and also to him who is baptized,” says the author of the
Didascalia, “for if it were lawful to be baptized by a woman, our Lord and Teacher would
have been baptized by Mary His mother; but He was baptized by John…Therefore do not
bring danger on yourselves, brothers and sisters, acting beyond the law of the Gospel.”\textsuperscript{42}
Similarly, in the \textit{Constitutions of the Holy Apostles}, a set of works that builds on the
Didascalia, but composed no later than the fourth century, similarly advocates the
prohibition against the teaching and preaching by women. It gives the same Scriptural
reasoning as the Didascalia and concludes by stating “we do not allow women to
teach…for it is ignorant heathen ungodliness that leads to the ordination of priestesses for
female deities, but not the command of Christ.”\textsuperscript{43}

What we see, then, is that at this time, there existed many different ways to be a
Christian and each group is competing for dominance (or at least the ability to maintain
its beliefs and actions). Although each group may consider itself the true believers, none
has the power to enforce its views as “orthodox.” Tertullian, one of the most outspoken
leaders of what became the Roman Catholic Church, had apparently little or no trouble
disassociating himself with that group and join the Montanists when he disagreed with
the decisions of his peers. However, the co-existence of multiple Christianities was soon
to be affected by the rise of the Roman Catholic Church as the orthodox form of
Christianity. Although there would continue to be isolated groups of heretics in Europe,
western Asia and northern Africa, the authority of the Roman Catholic Church faced no

\textsuperscript{42} Gibson, 75.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Apostolic Constitutions}, 3:6-9 (ANF07).
or few challenges as the true and proper form of Christianity until the Protestant Reformation.

At the end of the third century, Emperor Diocletian consolidated power over his part of the Roman Empire. During his reign, Christians faced persecution from those faithful to the traditional pantheon and ways of their fathers. Although Diocletian served as the voice of prudence against his counterpart Emperor Galerius, who was zealous in his support of the old ways, for most of his reign, he eventually gave into pressure. According to Eusebius, the fourth century began with Diocletian consulting the Oracle of Apollo at Didyma. Diocletian’s court concluded that the Oracle’s message meant that Christians were at fault for hindering Apollo’s ability to speak truthfully, and convinced Diocletian to engage in mass persecutions:

   About that time it is said that Apollo spoke from a deep and gloomy cavern, and through the medium of no human voice, and declared that the righteous men on earth were a bar to his speaking the truth…I heard him who at that time was chief among the Roman emperors, unhappy, truly unhappy as he was, and laboring under mental delusion, make earnest enquiry of his attendants as to who these righteous ones on earth were, and that one of the Pagan priests then present replied that they were doubtless the Christians. This answer he eagerly received, like some honeyed draught, and unsheathed the sword which was ordained for the punishment of crime, against those whose holiness was beyond reproach.  

In what would become an infamous operation, Diocletian proceeded to issue edicts ordering the razing of churches and the burning of scriptures as well as the humiliation, torture and execution of Christians.  

44 Eusebius. Life of Constantine, 2.50-2.51 (NPNF. Series 2, vol. 01).

45 Eusebius. Ecclesiastical History, 8.2.4 (NPNF. Series 2, vol. 01).
process, he would alter the position of the Church from persecuted minority cult to state-favored religion.

The first step towards the Church’s elevated status within the Roman Empire was the government’s shift towards neutrality regarding religion. As Constantine was rising to power, a number of edicts were issued that proclaimed tolerance, especially for Christians. Of utmost importance for us is the Edict of Milan, which was issued in 313 CE. Promulgated on the heels of intense persecution under the previous emperor, Diocletian, it declared the cessation of hostilities towards Christians, guaranteed all Roman citizens the freedom to worship without persecution, and directed that any property that had been confiscated from Christians would be unconditionally returned:

> It has pleased us to remove all conditions whatsoever…concerning the Christians and now any one of these who wishes to observe Christian religion may do so freely and openly, without molestation…We have also conceded to other religions the right of open and free observance of their worship… Moreover, in the case of the Christians especially we esteemed it best to order that if it happens anyone heretofore has bought from our treasury from anyone whatsoever, those places where they were previously accustomed to assemble…the same shall be restored to the Christians without payment or any claim of recompense and without any kind of fraud or deception.46

However, the edicts did not declare that paganism, which had been the dominant religion, was illegal or that pagans were to be persecuted.

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This neutrality was not long-lived and was followed by what has been perceived as the strong favoritism for Christianity.\textsuperscript{47} After this, Constantine ordered the government-funded repair, enlargement and reconstruction of Christian buildings damaged or neglected during Diocletian’s persecution, the bestowal of gifts upon the church and its leaders, the inscription of more copies of writings that had been destroyed, and the punishment of those who had persecuted the Christians.\textsuperscript{48} Rather than being seen as a threat by a pagan government, the church and state were now acting in accord.

During his rule as emperor, Constantine maintained a very influential position within the early Church and was very involved with its internal workings. Constantine’s approach toward religion enabled the majority within the Church to establish itself as the final judge on textual authority, orthodoxy and orthopraxis. With Constantine, the Church became Christianity and entered a new era. However, Constantine’s approach to affairs of religion appears to be much more of a pragmatic nature than of a doctrinal conviction. As Lee MacDonald notes, “a study of the Life of Constantine shows that unity and peace were more important to [Constantine] than what he called the ‘trifling’ matter of doctrine that dealt with the person of Christ…The theology he favored was held by most of the churches and he expected all others to conform to them.”\textsuperscript{49} In a letter to the bishop of Alexandria, Constantine states:

\textsuperscript{47} In fact, Ramsay MacMullen argues that outright hostility towards pagans may have been stronger than we have previously believed. MacMullen describes how Christians undertook an increasingly urgent and harsh stance against a vital, not hollow, pagan society. See MacMullen, Ramsay. Christianity & Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries (New Haven: Yale, 1997), 12-31.

\textsuperscript{48} Eusebius, Life of Constantine. 2.46, 3.1 and 3.16 (NPNF. Series 2, vol. 01).

My design then was, first, to bring the diverse judgments formed by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition, as it were, of settled uniformity; and, secondly, to restore to health the system of the world, then suffering under the malignant power of a grievous distemper. Keeping these objects in view, I sought to accomplish the one by the secret eye of thought, while the other I tried to rectify by the power of military authority. For I was aware that, if I should succeed in establishing, according to my hopes, a common harmony of sentiment among all the servants of God, the general course of affairs would also experience a change correspondent to the pious desires of them all.  

Orthodoxy, in Constantine’s view, was not as much about correctly interpreting the will of God and correctly ordering one’s life so as to ensure entry into heaven as it was about establishing the proper, uniform practices that would ensure peace and harmony in the Roman Empire.

It can, therefore, be argued that Christianity, as a more coherent religion, actually began under Constantine’s rule. Before this, Church leaders wrote about proper beliefs and practices, but there was no central, unifying power that could maintain one doctrine. Constantine’s support for the growing Christian majority has a significant effect on the ultimate determination of which texts would later be included in the Christian canon. However, Constantine also had a more direct role in its determination. According to MacDonald,

[Constantine] also asked Eusebius to supervise the production of fifty copies of the scriptures (presumably the NT) for use in the new capital city of Constantinople. One can surmise from Eusebius’ comments in H.E. (3.25.1-7; ca 325) that the matter of which books belonged in the Christian Bible was at that time uncertain. However, it was somewhat settled, at

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50 Eusebius, Life of Constantine, 2.65 (NPNF. Series 2, vol. 01).
least for Eusebius, by the time he finalized the fifty copies of the Christian scriptures (ca. 334-336).51

MacDonald adds that Eusebius used a “disputed” category for certain texts, but that this category ceased to be used after the fourth century, leaving only “recognized” and “rejected” options.52 As we shall see shortly, there continued to be disputes over which texts were to be included in the canon for centuries. However, Constantine’s efforts marked a dramatic shift towards uniformity.

Through the efforts of Constantine, the majority (“orthodox”) Christians had the power to assert the superiority of their agenda, and efforts to ensure uniformity were redoubled by those within leadership positions. One of the greatest voices of this time was Augustine of Hippo. However, this push is evident not only in his works, but also in numerous councils and synods that followed Constantine’s reign. Although he lived just two centuries after Tertullian, Augustine began his prolific writing career within a vastly changed Christian community. In that short span of time, Christianity had gone from being a diverse minority group of persecuted men and women whose connection had to do with belief in the teachings or works of Jesus into the (single-entity) state-sponsored religion.

Augustine has, deservedly or not, often been viewed as one of the primary fonts of Christian misogyny. It is less important, for this essay, to try to adduce what

51 MacDonald, Lee. 186, n38. Although MacDonald argues that the commission represented the NT, he cites Gregory Robbins, who claims that the Constantine’s commission to Eusebius was only for gospel books. MacDonald, however, asserts that most of the NT writings were widely accepted by the fourth century and that fifty copies of the gospels would not have been sent to Constantinople without the rest of these recognized scriptures. See Robbins, Gregory. “Fifty Copies of Sacred Writings,” VC 4.36; “ Entire Bibles or Gospel Books?” Studia Patristica, 19. E.A. Livingstone ed.; Leuven: Peeters, 1898) 91-98.

52 Ibid., 186, n39.
Augustine meant to say, and more important to how his words may have been perceived by contemporaries and later generations. Augustine, like those before him, lived in a culture in which the predominant view of women was that they were inferior, or at least subordinate, to men. Augustine, using verses from Genesis and the epistles of Paul, expounds that such subordination is the natural order as God wanted it. In *Confessions*, Augustine describes how man, in the image of God (and with the corresponding power of reasoning and understanding) is to woman as the part of the soul which directs is to that which obeys:

As in his soul there is one power which rules by directing, another made subject that it might obey, so also for the man was corporeally made a woman, who, in the mind of her rational understanding should also have a like nature, in the sex, however, of her body should be in like manner subject to the sex of her husband, as the appetite of action is subjected by reason of the mind, to conceive the skill of acting rightly.53

Similarly, in *De Trinitate*, Augustine appears to claim that man is the image of God, but woman is not:

The woman together with her own husband is the image of God, so that that whole substance may be one image; but when she is referred separately to her quality of help-meet, which regards the woman herself alone, then she is not the image of God; but as regards the man alone, he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman too is joined with him in one.54


54 Augustine, *De Trinitate*. 12.7.10 (NPNF. Series 1, vol. 03).
However, care should be taken before jumping to quick conclusions (as many who have labeled Augustine a misogynist have done). In this statement, many believe that Augustine says woman is, by her nature, not in the image of God and therefore always subordinate to man, who is. However, this is not quite what he says. As he states, woman is not the image of God when she is assigned as a helpmate, when her function is to assist. In other words, when woman and man are together, they are the image of God, but when man is being assisted by woman, it is the man who is the image of God and has the authority. Augustine does not say that woman without man is not in the image of God. Indeed, while Augustine may have respected, honored and even admired the spiritual abilities of women, but his words had the effect of reinforcing the hierarchy of men and women, with the sole ability to lead reserved for men.

Augustine’s uncompromising statements regarding what was regarded as man’s natural place over woman was reiterated by numerous synods and councils in the centuries following Constantine’s push for uniformity. In fact, from 325 to 533 C.E., Church councils voiced increasing opposition to the ordination of women. In 325, the first Council of Nicea was called in an attempt to bring leaders from all over Christendom together and find a consensus on matters of doctrine. Although it is most remembered for the development of the Nicene Creed, it also addressed the problem of Paulianists, a group of heretics, who sought refuge in the Catholic Church. Concerning the deaconesses in particular, Canon 19 notes that they “have no imposition of hands,” the mark of

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55 These councils include the Councils of Nicaea (Canon 19), Chalcedon (Canon 15), Council of Orange (Canon 26), Council of Epaon (Canon 21) and Synod of Orleans (Canon 11), and possibly others.
ordination, and “are to be numbered only among the laity.” However, by the Councils of Orange (441 CE) and Orleans (511 CE), and the Synod of Epaon (517 CE) the Church’s stance on the ordination of women was more established. These councils, called for various political and doctrinal reasons, also continued to forbid the practice of conferring any sort of ordination upon deaconesses. According to Canon 26 from the Council of Orange, “Female deacons (Diaconae) are by no means (omnimodis) to be ordained (ordinandae). If there are any who have already been ordained (si quae iam sunt), let them submit their heads to the benediction (benedictioni…capita submittant) that is granted to the laity (quae populo impenditur). The Synod at Epaon, in 517, also states that “We wholly abolish throughout our region the consecration (consecrationem) of widows, who are called deacons (diaconas); if they wish to convert, let them receive only the penitential benediction.”

The repeated insistence that women must not engage in activities reserved for the male priests shows that they continued to do so, at least in some circles, despite the Church leadership. In fact, in certain communities and at certain times, women held offices similar to, if not the same as, their ordained male counterparts throughout the first six centuries of Christianity. However, Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek note that “once a sense of clerical status had developed, that is, by the early third century, it is

58 Council of Epaon, Canon 21. In Madigan and Osiek, 146.
59 Madigan and Osiek have compiled a significant amount of works – documents and inscriptions, observing the presence and development of the role of such women in the first centuries of Christianity. Their findings have been very helpful in this work.
fairly clear that ordained or clergy women ordinarily did not perform the same role as their male counterparts.\textsuperscript{60} In fact, according to them, “there is no doubt that in some times and places the ordination of female deacons was seen as sacramental, even if not for exactly the same purposes as that of male deacons.”\textsuperscript{61} Ultimately, Madigan and Osiek conclude that whatever the female diaconate looked like in the West, the acceptance it received was minimal:

It does not seem that the female diaconate in the West took any clear shape. It probably consisted of local adaptations of what people in the time and place knew of the office in the East, sometimes being confused with an order of widows…Apparently the office of the diaconate for women definitely existed in the West by the fifth century, but was not widely accepted.\textsuperscript{62}

Laurie Guy agrees, stating that “women engaged in teaching would, however, be the exception. The weight of the church voice largely silenced women’s public voices in church.”\textsuperscript{63}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{60} Madigan and Osiek, 6.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{62} Madigan and Osiek, 148.
\end{footnotesize}
Chapter 3: The Gospels, Apostolic Succession and Mary Magdalene

Having examined the current state of the question over the ordination of women and the development of orthodoxy, let us now examine what the writers of the New Testament had to say, and in many cases did not say, concerning the matter. Within the New Testament, there are two general portrayals offered concerning women. In the first, as in the Synoptic Gospels (the title given to Matthew, Mark and Luke because of their similar content, order and message) and the epistles of Paul, the women tend to be overshadowed by the men, most notably in terms of leadership. However, as we shall see in the rest of this chapter, the Gospel of John challenges the consensus of these views. In the account given in the Gospel of John, women play an essential role that is at least equal to that of the men while not overtly giving women a place ahead of them. This division becomes most evident when one compares the roles of Peter and Mary Magdalene.

The author of Luke pays more attention to women, especially Mary Magdalene, Mary Bethany and Martha, than either the Gospel of Mark or Matthew. However, the status of these women is never equal or superior to that of the men. As Krister Stendahl has noted, “the story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42) not-withstanding, the circle around Jesus is a circle of men. The Last Supper is described as a meal with the Twelve,
and men are in charge even of the preparations (Luke 22:12 f.). Even in the exception, the story of Martha and Mary could suggest that for women, simply following (as Mary did) is more important than dealing with preparations.

In addition, according to the author of the Gospel of Luke, although Mary Magdalene and other women were the first to enter the tomb after Jesus’ death, they were met not by Christ, but by angels. Jesus did then appear to two disciples, but apparently neither was one of the eleven apostles:

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him… One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?... They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together.

Although one is named as Cleopas, the other disciple’s identity is problematic. The scripture just quoted states that the disciples subsequently joined the eleven in Jerusalem, and yet one verse later, they proclaim that “The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” Either the author/redactor of Luke inserted this from another known written or oral tradition, or the second disciple’s name was Simon, but not the Simon who was called Peter.

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67 Luke 24:34.
The situation takes a different twist in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, where the women appear to get a more prominent position. After the death of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and at least one other woman go to Jesus’ tomb, find it empty and are met by a man (or angel) who tells them of the miraculous resurrection of Jesus and directs them to go tell the men.\(^6\) According to Mark, the women are bewildered and afraid at this point, and end up saying nothing to anyone and, in the most reliable manuscripts, the gospel ends here.\(^6\) However, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus appears to the women as they leave: “The women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’”\(^7\) However, while this may seem like a statement of recognition for the importance of the women as those to first see the risen Christ, it merely serves to continue Matthew’s view for the role of women. The women in the Gospel of Matthew, Jane Kopas has noted, “usually appear as background personalities or in association with men. With a few notable exceptions, they do not have speaking roles and often appear as figures in a tableau.”\(^7\) The two Marys, here, may indeed be the first to see the risen Christ, but they do so only as messengers. Jesus greets them as if conducting business, and has nothing to say to them except that they should not fear and should deliver his message. Krister Stendahl notes that Jewish law at the

\(^6\) Mark 16:1-8, Matthew 28:1.

\(^6\) Mark 16:8. Later manuscripts include an account of Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene, who delivers the message to the unbelieving disciples.

\(^7\) Matthew 28:8-10.

time did not find women as competent to witness, and that what we see in the Synoptic Gospels stresses this point.\textsuperscript{72} The women may have been the apostles to the apostles, but they could be no more.

It could be argued, as Sarah Tyler has, that the picture of women in the Synoptic Gospels is not entirely without merit. In Mark, for example, we see women as part of a great picture of discipleship that can be contrasted with the negative portrayal of the male inner circle. According to her, “Mark emphasizes this clearly: [the men] fail to understand the parables (4:13), their eyes are closed and their ears are shut to the significance of the miraculous feedings (8:14-21), and when Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, he can nonetheless think only of a victorious leader (8:31ff).”\textsuperscript{73} And, lest we forget, Peter denies knowing Jesus three times. In contrast, Tyler asserts, the women are able to grasp the importance of Jesus’ suffering on the cross. However, she completes the picture by recalling how the women flee at the end (at least of the early manuscripts, as we have noted) and say nothing to anyone. She sees all of this as an affirmation that women are no less fallible than men. Mitchell, alternatively, sees in Mark (unlike Matthew and Luke) an ending that welcomes dialogue and gives value to the witness.\textsuperscript{74} She argues that at the end of Mark, the women are left in awe and fear but the reader knows that they could not have been silent forever, or the news would never have spread. The women at the end of Mark, Mitchell argues, are there to serve as the midwives to

\textsuperscript{72} Stendahl, 25.


\textsuperscript{74} Mitchell, 4-7.
those who hear the gospel, inviting them to have faith and join the community.  
Although both women and men may be equally fallible, it does not change the fact that, more often than not the Synoptic Gospels reserve positions of leadership for men, and women are relegated to the role of messengers.

Peter

For the Catholic Church, as it exists now, Peter is the linchpin that maintains all claims to authority, because the Catholic Church asserts its divinely sanctioned leadership authority from Christ to Peter up through the ages to the current leaders through apostolic succession. The belief, McDonald points out, is that “the faith received by the apostles from the Lord was passed on to the leaders of the church.”  
The fact that the Church assumed such a position through Peter, whom they recognize as the first Pontiff, is not a problem for most Christians today due to the amount of scriptural support for Peter’s primacy among apostles, especially within the Synoptic Gospels. In Matthew’s account, for example, Peter may not always be the ideal disciple, but he is still Jesus’ chosen leader. Jesus tells him unequivocally, “I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

When listing those who followed Jesus, all three of the Synoptic Gospels present Peter’s name foremost. In contrast, the Gospel of John presents Peter as just one of a

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75 Mitchell, 4.
76 McDonald, 229.
77 Matthew 16:18.
number of Jesus’ chosen followers: “Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas’ (which, when translated, is Peter).”79

The Gospel of Luke, perhaps, is the strongest in favor of Peter’s role as obvious role as leader. Not only does it include material establishing Peter’s leadership that is not found in the others, including his individual call and commission by Jesus to help the other disciples (5:1-11, 22:31-32), but it also lacks certain details from the other gospels, such as traded rebukes between Jesus and Peter (Mark 8:32-33, Matt 16:22-23) and Jesus’ scolding of Peter for sleeping in the garden (Mark 14:37, Matt 26:40). The Gospel of Luke also change's Peter’s statements regarding his denial of following Jesus.80 As one might expect given the prior evidence, the Gospel of Luke is the only canonical gospel which includes an individual resurrection appearance and call to Peter.81

Paul

An examination of the epistles of Paul reinforces the hierarchy established in the Synoptic Gospels. Alongside Peter, Paul stands as one of the foremost leaders of the earliest Christians. Although he never knew Jesus in life, Paul calls himself an apostle in many of his letters, claiming to have been called by the resurrected Jesus. Both a Jew and

79 John 1:40-42.
80 Brock, 39.
81 Ibid., 39.
a Roman citizen, Paul had, prior to his conversion, engaged in an intense persecution of Christians. However, after the vision, he apparently had a change of heart and became an adamant supporter and organizer of the Church, concerning himself especially with outreach to Gentiles. As Delbert Burkett notes, “[Paul] played a key role in transforming Christianity from a Jewish sect into a world religion.”\(^{82}\) In fact, much of Paul’s theological work laid the groundwork for what would become the orthodox strain of Roman Catholicism. Although Paul’s epistles were composed before the gospels, we are examining them at this point because they rely on the oral traditions seen in the gospels, and they reflect a later stage of Church development.

Rather than reading Paul from a twenty-first century perspective, he should be read and understood from the society in which he lived. He was, perhaps first and foremost, preparing Christians for Christ’s imminent return and the new age that it would usher in, and much of the preparation consisted of properly ordering the world in which Christians lived. According to Burkett, “both Paul and Judaic Christianity expected a judgment in which God (or Jesus) would mete out punishment for sin.”\(^{83}\) In order to be an effective leader, Paul addresses his fellow Christians, solidifying his claim to authority and authenticity:

Brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that


\(^{83}\) Ibid., 294.
he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also.\footnote{1 Corinthians 15:1-8.}

By tying himself to the will of Christ, Paul attains the prominence needed to ensure that society will act properly and therefore circumvent God’s punishment. Paul’s way, for those churches he leads becomes inseparable from Christ’s way and to ignore one is to ignore the other. We should note, however, that women are completely absent in Paul’s address.

In order to prepare for the return of Christ, Paul attempts to structure society accordingly. Paul leads both men and women in the ways he thought were suitable. In Galatians 3:28, Paul proclaims a new era in which “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”\footnote{Romans 16:3-5. Much has been made of listing Prisca, the wife, before Aquila. If it was intentional, it is a strong statement in favor of the role of women as at least social equals in Paul’s eyes.} In Romans, Paul refers to Prisca and Aquila, a wife-and-husband team working with him,\footnote{Wayne Meeks has offered an interesting examination of the relationship between the structure of the household and the development of early Christian groups. He believes that reactions to this dissolution of social divisions (even in works attributed to Paul himself) were a practical re-presentation of Aristotelian notions that maintaining order in the household was essential to social harmony. See Meeks, Wayne. The Moral World of the First Christians (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 112-113.} and he sends greetings to other women and praises them for their hard work,\footnote{Philippians 4:2-3; Romans 16:6, 12.} thereby showing that women have a prominent and active place within the new order. However, Paul, himself a Roman and with the Roman notions of proper order, later advocates for these women a strict and
subordinate role in society, in the church, and in the family. In church, as elsewhere, women ought to keep silent and should defer to men:

The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God…Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head…A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.\textsuperscript{88}

If not praying or prophesying, Paul asserts that “women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”\textsuperscript{89} Although Paul refers to the creation narrative of Genesis, the message strongly reflects the social organization of Roman society. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza examines 1 Corinthians 11:2-14:40 and claims that Paul does not intend to cement difference between men and women but rather “aims at playing down the impression of madness and frenzy so typical of orgiastic cultic worship.”\textsuperscript{90} In contrast to such groups, she says that “decency and right order in the community require women prophets and charismatics actively engaged in the worship of the community to look ‘proper.’”\textsuperscript{91} It may also have been that, between the idealistic statement of Galatians 3:28 and his later pragmatic admonitions, Paul realized that chaos

\textsuperscript{88} 1 Corinthians 11:3,5,7-9.

\textsuperscript{89} 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.


\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 230.
would erupt and that gendered responsibilities would be, albeit unfortunately, required until Christ’s return.

According to Schüssler Fiorenza, what we see in Paul’s exhortations is the desire to dissolve the old social hierarchy but to do so in a way that allows the spread of the gospel and yet maintains order in the church: “On the one hand, the old hierarchy associated with men and women…has been overcome; on the other, wholesale emancipation from societal constraints is illusionary enthusiasm that hinders the advancement of the gospel and threatens the unity of the church.”\(^92\) The Catholic Church has maintained that Paul’s admonitions in 1 Corinthians do not suggest that women are in any way bad or unworthy of God’s love, but that the proper role of women is to support men, who are (still) tasked with leading the household and churches.

Paul’s concern with social order also finds expression in letters to Timothy and Titus. These three letters, also called the Pastoral Epistles, deal largely with the need for diligence with regard to the practical issues facing church leaders. Advice is given about proper ways to worship, church organization and responsibilities of members. According to Burkett, the concern is to “invest authority in church leaders who can combat divergent perspectives within the church,”\(^93\) just like a proper shepherd looking after his sheep until the return of the master. However, at the core, they’re all concerned with maintaining order before the return of Christ who will judge all. According to Burkett, “all three Pastorals share the same basic concern: social control. The Pastoralist vests control of the social order in a male hierarchy based upon Roman ideals: in the family a male head of

\(^{92}\) Schüssler Fiorenza, 207.

\(^{93}\) Burkett, 436.
the household, and in the church a male council of elders led by a bishop” and, in this organization, any members who conform are acting dutifully and should be considered pious. ⁹⁴ Concerning women, they “should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.”⁹⁵ However, while these letters have been traditionally attributed to Paul, that authorship is doubtful. According to Dennis MacDonald, the epistles were likely written sometime between 100 and 140 from somewhere in Asia Minor.⁹⁶ What is important, for this essay, is that these letters were not written by Paul.⁹⁷ Therefore, they do not have his authority, and they have their own agenda. Regardless of their authorship, however, these epistles become important for future leaders like Tertullian.

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels and Paul, the Gospel of John elevates the role of women, especially Mary Magdalene. In this narrative, it is not Peter who announces the identification (“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” Matthew 16:16), but Martha: “Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.”⁹⁸ According to Tyler, “John makes it clear that at a time when the Church was developing, Peter was one

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⁹⁴ Burkett, 439.

⁹⁵ 1 Timothy 2:11-14.


⁹⁷ For more information on the issue of authorship, see Delbert Burkett’s An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity, 436-439 and Dennis MacDonald’s The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon, 54-77.

⁹⁸ John 11:27
of a number of characters who had pre-eminence, and Martha is clearly among them.”99 Similarly, when Jesus arrives at the house of Mary Bethany (12:1-8), she rubs his feet with perfumed oil and in so doing shows absolute devotion and an uncanny realization that he will sacrifice himself. Tyler asserts that this narrative also presents her “as a foil to the deceitful Judas and Jesus interprets her action as prophetic.”100

Written after the Gospel of Luke, the author of the Gospel of John singles out Mary Magdalene for a resurrection appearance from Christ, and it is she who receives a commission to go tell the others what she has heard.101 To emphasize this point, the author minimizes Peter’s role. As Ann Graham Brock reminds us, “Jesus does not call Peter; he makes no positive statement in response to Peter’s confession; he does not single him out as a member of an inner circle of disciples; and he makes no individual resurrection appearance to him.”102 Furthermore, in case the gospel reader had any more doubt, the Gospel of John also never offers a list of the exclusive all-male twelve disciples. Given the date of the writing (somewhere between 90 and 150 CE) one might question the depiction of women, and Mary Magdalene in particular, in the Gospel of John to be a direct and forceful response to the Gospel of Luke. For now, we shall leave aside the issue of why the Gospel of John was included in the canon if it portrayed such an undesirably prominent role for women, and be satisfied that we have seen contradictory accounts of the leadership roles of Peter and Mary in the gospels.

99 Tyler, “Women in the gospels: Sarah K. Tyler explores the role of women in the gospels and how it compares with their role in wider ancient near-eastern culture and society, an increasingly popular topic with A-level students.”

100 Ibid.

101 Brock, 60.

102 Ibid., 60.
All of these examples serve to show how John elevated the status of women in Jesus’ life. They are not the victim-survivors or “outsiders” that Jane Kopas perceives in the Gospel of Matthew.\(^{103}\) They are, quite to the contrary, an essential part of the story. Gaff O'Day notes, in fact, that “men do not have a monopoly on witness and discipleship in John, rather, the gospel of John narrates a faith world that would not exist without women's participation in it.”\(^{104}\) Furthermore, the *Gospel of John* may be attempting to establish Mary Magdalene as a concrete alternative to Peter’s leadership. According to Brown, “If other Christian communities thought of Peter as the one who made a supreme confession of Jesus as the Son of God and the one to whom the risen Jesus first appeared, the Johannine community associated such memories with heroines like Martha and Mary Magdalene.”\(^{105}\)

Some recent scholars, however, have gone further than merely claiming the prominence of women in the Gospel of John. In *Let Her Keep It*, Rev. Thomas Butler examines the “signs” in the Gospel of John and sees a startling resemblance to symbolic language from the Torah. According to Butler, the Gospel of John tells how Jesus systematically replaced every element of the Mosaic system of worship: the temple, the festivals of sacrifice and the priesthood. Butler believes that, within John, there are two storylines. The first, he asserts, is similar to the story presented in the Synoptic Gospels. Meanwhile, “a second story is hidden by the Gospel’s author (or authors) through the

\(^{103}\) Kopas, 13-15.


ingenious use of metaphorical language. It tells a Jesus story…about how Jesus and his disciples replace every part of the ancient system of worship in Israel.”

The turning point of Butler’s hidden story is found in chapters 11-13 (although, he examines John without chapter and verse divisions), where he believes “Jesus not only included women among his disciples, he ordained at least two of them.” Butler sees John 12:8 (“Leave her alone that she may keep it for the day of my burial”) to mean “Set her apart that she might keep the tradition of my death.” He believes Jesus sets Mary of Bethany apart, and simultaneously ordains her, as a leader charged with maintaining the Christian tradition. Finally, Butler claims that “Mary of Bethany is the Beloved Disciple of the Fourth Gospel. In John 11:55 through 12:8, she officiates in a liturgical event (the consecration of the new Temple) by anointing the altar of that Temple (the feet of Jesus). This anointing results in her own anointing into a leadership role among the disciples, a role which Jesus affirms and defends with the words, ‘Let her keep it.’”

On an alternate trajectory, Ramon Jusino asserts that it is not Mary of Bethany but Mary Magdalene who is behind the Gospel of John, and that the authorship and role of Mary in the gospel was largely subsumed into the character of the Beloved Disciple, with textual changes to make the change unnoticeable, later after pressure by early


107 Ibid., xv.

108 Ibid., xx.

Christian leaders. In effect, the text that was included in the canon as the Gospel of John actually belonged to a community which wished to be accepted as “orthodox” and so edited it in such a way that it became a text that was neither an embarrassment nor a threat to the male leaders in the church.

Jusino bases his argument on problems with Irenaeus’s defense of John of Zebedee as the author of the Gospel of John. According to Jusino, such a claim is (and was) tenuous, being based on a confusion of identities and the recollection of information received as a child from Polycarp. Jusino believes instead that the early Christians who held the Gospel of John in high-esteem, perhaps even as their primary text, clearly identified Mary Magdalene as the author and the Beloved Disciple. However, due to a schism among this group, and the desire to be accepted as “orthodox” believers, such attributions were changed. For example, Jusino notices what he perceives to be structural flaws in the two places where both Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple are shown: John 19:25-27 and 20:1-11. In the first, he argues, that the puzzling nature of the first half makes it appear as though disciple is one of the women, only to be identified as a male in the second half. In the second instance, Mary Magdalene is the first to discover the empty tomb, and the first to see the risen Jesus. However, sandwiched between the two instances is the scene of Peter and the Beloved Disciple going to the tomb. Setzer asserts that:

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111 Ibid., 4.

112 Ibid., 4.

113 Ibid., 8.
This contrivance accomplishes two things. It retains the tradition of Mary Magdalene as the first to discover the empty tomb...Yet it also gives the Beloved Disciple pride of place as the first person, besides Mary, to reach the empty tomb and the first to actually believe that Jesus has risen.\footnote{Setzer, 262.}

What is odd, according to Jusino, is that in v. 2, Mary is running away from the tomb, and is not mentioned as having returned until v. 11, where she is weeping at the tomb.\footnote{Jusino, 10.} According to Jusino, “the redactor’s effort to conceal the identity of Mary Magdalene as the Beloved Disciple, and make two individuals out of one, has created a muddled account of the Magdalene’s whereabouts between vss. 2 and 10 in this passage.”\footnote{Ibid., 10.}

Jusino hypothesizes that the text that made it into the canon and survive is the one belonging to those who ultimately became “orthodox” and subsequently altered the text, so that Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple appeared to be two different persons, and its authorship.\footnote{Ibid., 4. For a similar argument of the deliberate alteration of scripture, see Bart Ehrman’s The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament (New York: Oxford, 1993). He asserts that, especially in the second and third centuries, scribes intentionally made alterations to scripture to combat “heresies.”} The text of the others, he asserts, was suppressed and eventually disappeared.\footnote{Ibid., 4.} By removing Mary from her position of authorship, distancing her from Jesus and replacing her with a male figure mysteriously called the Beloved Disciple, the text became a text that was neither an embarrassment nor a threat to the male leaders in the church.
Nowhere in the New Testament is the role of men as the leaders of the Christian community explicitly challenged. In the next chapter, we shall examine some texts that did not make it into the Christian canon and see how, by challenging the sole authority of men, they may have been excluded not for theological but social reasons.
Chapter 4: Mary Magdalene and Non-Canonical Texts

Since their discovery, a number of non-canonical texts have been tagged as Gnostic works, and having deemed the texts as “heretical,” scholars have looked at the contents to see what was not in agreement with the Catholic Church’s teachings today. Michael Williams notes that definitions of (ancient) “gnosticism” are problematic, because while they often share some characteristics (including the creation of the world by one or more lesser gods, and the emphasis on secret knowledge), there are also many vague qualifiers. He asserts that “the continual references to what ‘the Gnostics’ believed about this or that, or what features characterized ‘the Gnostic religion,’ have created the impression of a generalized historical and social unity for which there is no evidence and against which there is much.” Instead, Williams reasons that “gnostic” texts were protest texts from a variety of new religious movements.119

An examination of the “gnostic” Gospel of Mary from a Catholic perspective with the goal of determining why it was not included in the New Testament will no doubt focus on the content that is not in agreement with Catholic doctrine as well as the notion of special or hidden knowledge. In the Gospel of Mary, both the dialogue with the Savior and Mary’s teachings present ideas that likely seem very radical to today’s Catholics: the text rejects the interpretation of Jesus’ suffering and path as a path to eternal life, elevates

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the importance of his teachings as a path to inner spiritual knowledge and rest, and presents sin as the result of getting improperly connected, or attached, to the world. However, dismissing the text as heretical simply because of differences from modern doctrine is overly simplistic and anachronistic. As Karen King reminds us, “these first Christians had no New Testament, no Nicene Creed or Apostles Creed, no commonly established church order or chain of authority, no church buildings, and indeed no single understanding of Jesus. All of the elements we might consider to be essential to define Christianity did not yet exist.”

For the first few hundred years after Jesus’ death, there existed a multitude of various strands of Christian thought. Over time, and for different reasons, one such strand gained prominence and was able to establish itself as the “orthodox” position, making all others “heretical.” In fact, George Riley notes the humorous fact that over the centuries, even the “orthodox” position kept changing, especially between those we call Arians and Trinitarians.

In a number of texts that were eventually excluded from the canon, the role over the leadership role of Mary Magdalene and, by extension women, becomes much more prominent than in those that were included. Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Thomas is one of six disciples named, and one of five who speak (the other speakers are Peter, Matthew, Thomas and Salome).

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120 King, Karen. The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2003), 6. King offers a very helpful introduction into the Gospel of Mary, including introductory information and a translation of the text.

121 Riley, George. Many Christs: How Jesus Inspired Not One True Christianity But Many (Minneapolis, Fortress Press), 6. Riley goes into great depth concerning why and how the early Jesus movement appealed to Romans, especially as a “hero” similar to those of the pagans.

to individual disciples are to the figure believed to be Mary Magdalene, and in all but one of them she has a prominent speaking part.\textsuperscript{123} Furthermore, the text depicts the resurrected Jesus with Mary, Judas (Thomas), and Matthew, but excludes the primary male disciples of Peter, James and John. According to Brock, “Mary, Thomas, and Matthew are again portrayed as members of a select group of disciples that now includes Philip and Bartholomew,” which serves to counterbalance depictions of Peter’s inner circle of male disciples.\textsuperscript{124} Furthermore, in what Brock claims may be another deliberate statement against Peter’s inner circle, \textit{Sophia of Jesus Christ} also presents these five disciples at a post-resurrection appearance.

The ability to take an active leadership role is, however, not just limited to Mary Magdalene. There are also non-canonical texts in which the role of women in general is debated, as in the \textit{Acts of Peter} and the \textit{Acts of Paul}, which reiterate the divergent opinions of the position of women in Christian communities. Although neither the \textit{Acts of Peter} nor the \textit{Acts of Paul} made it into the Christian canon, and they have numerous similarities. Furthermore, Brock notes, “written in the second century, they are so chronologically close to each other scholars debate which of them came first.”\textsuperscript{125} And yet, despite their similarities, the two texts present incredibly different depictions of female leadership in early Christianity. The \textit{Acts of Paul} includes many examples of strong and autonomous female leadership: Thecla, Eubula, Artemilla, Queen Tryphaena and Myrta. The \textit{Acts of Peter}, on the other hand, significantly lacks such prominent

\textsuperscript{123} Brock, 98.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 99.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 105.
female roles, which are instead maintained by male figures.\textsuperscript{126} Interestingly, we have a statement by Tertullian that the “presbyter who compiled the \textit{Acts of Paul} stepped down from his office because the example of Thecla that he depicted in his writing was being used to claim the right for women to teach and to baptize,”\textsuperscript{127} suggesting that those leaders in early Christianity who advocated male-only leadership were gaining more power than those advocating for leadership by women as well as men.

Thus far, we have examined texts in which the actual contents do not explicitly challenge Peter’s authority in early Christianity or present any instances of dissention among the early believers. Although some texts elevate the position of Mary Magdalene and other women, and minimize Peter’s position, they do not include any direct and significant challenges to Peter’s apostolicity and there are no significant disagreements. However, a number of non-canonical texts do appear to elevate Mary Magdalene at the expense of Peter. This may reflect an actual, historical tension between two early groups of Christians: those who held Peter to be the foundation of their authority and those who instead chose Mary Magdalene as their figurehead. At the end of the \textit{Gospel of Thomas}, Jesus supports Mary after Peter asserts that she should leave the company of the other disciples. Peter complains: “Let Mary leave us, because women are not worthy of life,” to which Jesus responds, “I myself shall lead her so that I will make her male in order that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”\textsuperscript{128} A literal interpretation of this passage

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{126} Brock, 109.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 122.

\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Gospel of Thomas}, trans. in Brock, 78.
\end{footnotesize}
seems illogical, but to say that “I will make her male” suggests a social transformation in which Mary is equated with her male peers. Similarly, in the Gospel of Mary, as we shall shortly examine in greater detail, Peter specifically doubts Mary’s position, despite having asked her to impart special knowledge from the Savior. In Pistis Sophia, actually comprised of two earlier works, Mary has one of her greatest leadership roles. In the text, Peter twice complains that Mary and other women are asking too many questions and leave no opportunities for the men, and in Pistis Sophia 2.72, we have direct evidence of the controversy over leadership, when Mary complains to Jesus: “My Lord, my mind is understanding at all times that I should come forward at any time and give interpretation of the words which she [Pistis Sophia] spoke, but I am afraid of Peter, for he threatens me and hates our race.” It seems possible that none of these texts were included in the New Testament because of their statements questioning Peter’s authority as the premier apostle in favor of Mary Magdalene.

Whether or not the text of the Gospel of Mary was seen as too radical in doctrine, it does not seem far-fetched to assert that its position concerning authority would be. If, as I argue, the early church fathers claimed authority as men, through apostolic authority from Peter (and thus Jesus himself), then the Gospel of Mary, and indeed Mary Magdalene herself, present a threat to their leadership. In the words of King:

The Gospel of Mary takes two very strong positions concerning the basis of authority: that spiritual maturity, demonstrated by prophetic experience and steadfastness of mind, is more

129 Brock, 87.

130 Pistis Sophia 1.36, 4.146. Trans. in Brock, 87. Although scholars are divided on whether race in this instance refers to gender or the Jews, it is clear that Mary is being intimidated by Peter’s aggression.
reliable than mere apostolic lineage in interpreting apostolic tradition, and that the basis for leadership should be spiritual maturity not a person’s sex.”

Although there is still some debate, most scholars have identified the “Mary” of the *Gospel of Mary* as Mary Magdalene, rather than Jesus’ mother or the sister of Martha. In it, she is presented as a sort of beloved disciple of Jesus who was privileged to teachings the others had not heard and thus in a position to lead them after Christ’s resurrection: “Peter said to Mary, ‘Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than all other women. Tell us the words of the Savior that you remember, the things which you know that we don’t because we haven’t heard them.” However, despite the fact that Peter asked her to share things that the Savior told only her, he questions her position, doubting that the Savior would imparted such knowledge and chosen her, a woman, over the rest of them. As we shall now see, struggle for authority puts Mary in a position deemed unacceptable for the early Christian leaders.

The discovery of the *Gospel of Mary* and other texts that failed to be included in the canon forces us to question pervasive notions of harmony and unanimity between early Christians. Such views stem, in part at least, from the portrayal of the “church” by its early leaders. In an attempt to claim such a serene unity among early Christians,

131 King, 89-90

132 Ibid., 148. It is beyond the scope of this essay to present the arguments. However, for more information, see Karen King’s “Why all the Controversy? Mary in the *Gospel of Mary*” and Antti Marjanen’s “The Mother of Jesus or the Magdalene? The Identity of Mary in the So-Called Gnostic Christian Texts,” both in Jones, F. Stanely, ed. *Which Mary?* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002) 31-42 and 53-74.

133 Berlin Codex, 6:1-2. Translated in King, 15.

Irenaeus asserts, “the church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith.”\textsuperscript{135}

According to Irenaeus, although heretics existed, they certainly did not belong to the Christian religion, which originated from Jesus and was passed down intact and without question. However, recent scholarship and the finding of new texts have presented such a view as questionable. It seems quite likely that, in an attempt to promote an image of unity, any texts – such as the \textit{Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Thomas, Pistis Sophia,} and the \textit{Gospel of Philip} - containing passages challenging Peter’s unquestioned leadership would have been deliberately kept out of the canon. Furthermore, as in the case of presbyter who compiled the \textit{Acts of Paul}, those who advocated such positions would have been removed from positions of authority.

Having excluded such texts from being included in the canon, however, was not enough to ensure that the authority of Mary Magdalene and other women would not once again become a threat. In at least one instance, she and Peter share a role. In a fourth-century Greek version of the \textit{Acts of Philip}, Mariamne, identified by several scholars as Mary Magdalene, occupies a prominent position and is chosen to strengthen and accompany Philip on his mission.\textsuperscript{136} In the Greek version, Jane Schaberg notes:

\begin{quote}
[Mary] stands beside Christ when he commissions his apostles, encourages her brother Philip who is moaning and weeping about the city to which he is sent. She holds the register of the regions to be evangelized,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{135} Irenaeus, \textit{Adversus Haereses, 1.10.1} (ANF01), italics added. There was no singular church entity at this time, regardless of Irenaeus’ assertion.

\textsuperscript{136} Brock, 124. She cites François Bovon’s assertion that the use of Mariamna is a common alternative form of the names used to recognized Mary Magdalene in other patristic texts and that there are strong parallels between this Mary and the other depictions of her. Also cited is Frédéric Amsler, who argues that this Marimne, the sister of Philip, is Mary Magdalene and that she is the same woman depicted in Matthew, Mark and John as well as other non-canonical texts.
and prepares the bread and salt and the breaking of the bread. She is told to accompany him. Dressed as a man, she does so and stands by him when he is martyred.\footnote{Schaberg, 136, discussing \textit{Acta Philippi} 241-247.}

However, in Coptic and other versions of the text, Peter, not Mary, accompanies Philip. It appears that one group – either those following Mary Magdalene or those following Peter – wished to promote their own authority at the expense of the other. If the “Peter group” eliminated Mary Magdalene and replaced her with Peter, his historical and traditional position is strengthened. However, if Peter is replaced with Mary, it may be evidence of that alternative group seeking to undermine the growing power of their rival group.

In other texts, the mother of Jesus is used to diminish the authority of Mary Magdalene. In some cases, Mary Magdalene is simply replaced by Mary, the mother. In the Greek \textit{Acta Thaddaei}, an alternative post-resurrection scene is portrayed in which Jesus appears first to his mother and the other women, and then to Peter and the other disciples.\footnote{Brock, 130.} In addition, Jesus’ mother takes Mary Magdalene’s place in a number of Syriac and Coptic texts.\footnote{Ibid., 129-131, 133-139.} Brock asserts that while an isolated case of such a change might be the result of confusion about which Mary is represented, the frequency suggests otherwise.\footnote{Ibid., 130.} In other cases, Mary, the mother, is used to enhance Peter’s authority. One example is in the \textit{Questions of Bartholomew}.\footnote{Trans in Brock, 139-140 and from James, M.R. \textit{The Apocryphal New Testament} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924) \(<\text{http://www.ricter.com/wordline/barth.htm}>\) Accessed April 19, 2009.} At one point, Mary advises those present
to stand up and pray, and the apostles stand behind her. However, she addresses Peter, saying, “Peter, you chief, you great pillar, do you stand behind us? Did our Lord not say, ‘The head of the man is Christ?’” (II, 7). Later, she has a chance to speak to the Jesus, but defers and tells Peter to go in her place, both because he is a man and the foundation of the church. She says to Peter, “O stone hewn out of rock, did not the Lord build his church upon you?...Thou therefore, since thou art the likeness of Adam, oughtest to ask him” (IV, 3, 4). In this instance, there can be no question: Mary, the mother of Jesus, though highly favored (IV, 2) defers to Peter as the rightful leader of the church. Her place is to follow, not lead.

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142 Brock, 139. Slavonic and Latin witnesses say “Did our Lord not say, ‘The head of man is Christ but the head of the woman is the man’?”
Conclusion

If it were not enough that marginalizing or removing Mary Magdalene from scriptures was not enough, church leaders made sure tradition remembered her as a redeemed penitent (but never a leader). Jerry Camery-Hoggatt notes that in early Catholicism, “within more orthodox circles, the tradition encouraged the identification of Mary with various unnamed women, all of whom were in one way or another guilty of sexual indiscretion or some other vice.”¹⁴³ At the end of the sixth century, the tradition was fixed as Pope Gregory I. Pope Gregory I asserted that Mary Magdalene was in fact the same women referenced in different places of the gospels. In Homily 33, Pope Gregory cobbled together the sinful woman from Luke 7:36-50, a woman (in some manuscripts) taken in adultery in John 7:53-8:11,¹⁴⁴ and Mark’s woman anointing Jesus’ feet in 14:3-9. The Pope’s statements cemented Mary Magdalene’s identity as the perpetual penitent and overshadowed any previous traditions of her as a church leader.

At the beginning of this essay, we mentioned that the Catholic Church asserts that part of the reason women are denied ordination because Jesus did not choose women as any of the twelve apostles. However, arguing that something is permissible or


¹⁴⁴ See Bart Ehrman’s Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005) for his intriguing argument that these passages were added by later scribes.
impermissible because Jesus did or did not do, as the Catholic Church has,\textsuperscript{145} is not a satisfying argument. As Hans Kün\ng and Gerhard Lohfind have noted:

> Are we to think that only married and gainfully employed Jews (whenever possible fishermen from Lake Gennesaret) will now be considered for the office of priest or bishop in the Catholic Church? It is hard not to be ironic when faced with the hermeneutic employed in the recent Roman Declaration on the Ordination of Women. Its determining principle: norms are derived directly from historical facts. ‘Jesus Christ did not call any women to become part of the Twelve’ – and so the Church can admit no women to priestly ordination. Such a hermeneutic is dangerous. Used consistently, it leads not only to oddities like the above but to a rocking of the entire constitution of the Church. For in the judgment of serious exegetes the calling of the Twelve is not a calling to ecclesiastical office; the historical Paul ‘ordained’ no priests at all, not even men; Peter and all the apostles, according to an unambiguous witness of Paul, took their wives on their mission journeys.\textsuperscript{146}

There are many things Jesus did not do that we do today, and many he did that we do not. Tradition has value but in order to be meaningful, it must be relevant to those who are living. Social norms influenced the writing of the New Testament, and they must continue to do so. However, there must always be vigilance so that any new traditions are, as far as possible, believed to be in accord with the God’s desire.

In this essay, we have seen how the discovery of non-canonical texts like the \textit{Gospel of Mary} show that the role of women, and particularly Mary herself, was sidelined by male leaders to protect their leadership over a unified flock. In various instances, texts in which Mary Magdalene held a prominent role were simply excluded from the canon. In others, she was replaced in ways that supported Peter’s apostolic

\textsuperscript{145} Note especially \textit{Inter Insigniores} (Oct. 15, 1976), as mentioned in Chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{146} Kün\ng, Hans and Gerhard Lohfind, “Keine Ordination der Frau?” \textit{Theologische} Quartalschrift (Tübingen, 1977). In Swidler, 8-9.
leadership (or at least did not threaten it). We have seen how a presbyter was removed from his position because a text he compiled led to women claiming a greater role, and how early followers of the *Gospel of John* may have altered their text in a compromise that maintained some of their beliefs of the role of women while better reflect the desires of the leadership. We have seen, in short, a broad effort to make sure that women could never pose a serious threat to the established male leadership.

The place of Mary Magdalene in the early Christian church has again become a hot topic in the past few decades, particularly with the discovery of non-canonical texts like the *Gospel of Mary*, which present us with a very different picture of early Christian communities than we see in the New Testament. We have claimed that the discovery of the *Gospel of Mary* and other non-canonical texts suggest deliberate exclusion and/or alteration that was the result of broad, systematic efforts by early church leaders to systematically diminish or eliminate the presence of Mary Magdalene in scripture and prevent any hints of challenges to their authority via apostolic succession through Peter, rather than exclusion because of doctrinal content. I do not intend to imply that such efforts were malicious in nature (although it is possible that the early male leadership wanted to prohibit women from being ordained as equals in order to secure their own position, such a claim could only be conjecture), but they were intentional, especially after Emperor Constantine elevated Christianity to the position of state-religion.

This all said, where does the Roman Catholic Church go from here? The arguments that have been made previously (both for and against ordination of women) should not be disregarded and should inform any future decisions. On the other hand, the development of the place of women in the Church is more variegated than many
researchers present. I hope that this work will expose a trajectory within the Christian
tradition that has ignored elements within New Testament documents and the motives
behind their selection. I do not join this debate as a Roman Catholic, or as a woman, but
as someone who nonetheless sees value in a Church that can embrace women fully in all
roles rather than relying on a Bridegroom-Bride tradition relied upon on an incomplete
set of texts.

Any attempt to bring women into an ordained role will not be easy. Because of
the value the Catholic Church attributes to tradition, it will also likely not be fast.
However, as Robert Egan notes, “The mere fact that the church has always, or almost
always, up to a certain point, said or done something a certain way does not in itself
preclude critical reflection, spiritual discernment, even radical change—or even
reversal.”

It is not very likely that the Catholic Church would alter the New Testament,
either by altering the texts therein or adding new texts. The Gospel of Mary, for example,
does not exist in its entirety, and it would be difficult, if not impossible, to prove that
John’s Beloved Disciple was once Mary Magdalene. However, if the Church were to
publicly and officially announce that the role of Mary Magdalene in early texts was (or
even “may have been”) intentionally altered would go far into creating new traditions in
which men and women, called to be ordained representatives of God, can equally fulfill
the places to which they feel called without discrimination.

147 Egan, Robert. “Why Not? Scripture, History & Women’s Ordination.” Commonweal 135, no. 7 (April
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