



Preface

Christianity is a religion of history. Much of the Bible is an historical narrative of the outworking of God's redemptive plan in the lives and affairs of men. The dating system of the world today continues to be centered on an historical event – the birth of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. Every Christian has faith in not only the living Jesus Christ but also the historic person of Jesus and His sacrificial death on the cross as the Son of God. The birth of the Christian church continues the history recounted in the Jewish Scriptures – a continuity fully grasped and expounded by Peter at Pentecost, Stephen before his martyrdom, and Paul in his numerous sermons and writings. But the story does not end with the book of Acts. The history of God building His church and opening the hearts of men and women to the Gospel truths continues to our own day. As God continues to build His Church, His people can find examples, warnings, and encouragement as they examine the rich tapestry of Christian history, recognizing that

The shadows as much as the sunlight, the agony as much as the ecstasy, are part of the divine purpose. In the tapestry of time, the hand of God weaves as many somber skeins as bright-hued silks. In our perceptions of history, we see only the reverse side of things; with all the muddle of loose strands, back-stitching and over-worked patterns. We see something of the design as it appears on the right side, but we never see it as it actually is; the clarity and beauty of the design as it appears face up are as yet denied to us.

So the Christian both knows and yet does not know the meaning of history. On the one hand, he has particular insight into the nature of history because he knows the end of the story- and therefore he can gauge the true depth of the “thickness” of events. But at the same time he does not, and cannot know the full meaning of the story.¹

¹ John Briggs, “God, Time, and History,” *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Tom Dowley, ed.). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977, pp. 12-13.



This work examines the feminine threads in the tapestry of Christian history. Much of the material collected was first presented in “Women in Church History” courses I taught in various seminaries. The students and I were enthralled by the accounts of the numerous Christian women who had served their Lord and His Church in humility, faithfulness, and truth. We were also dismayed on two fronts. First, that feminist scholars had re-written the history of the early church to fit their particular agenda – blatantly “reinventing,” “re-imagining” and “reconstructing” (their terms!) a history which attacked the Church itself. Second, at the other end of the story, we were concerned about new ways of understanding “feminine” and “gender” being accepted by Christians, without their knowing the historic, often anti-Christian roots of these ideas. While primarily being a narrative history of women in the church, this work also aims to equip the reader to refute the distortions of women in Christian history which are often being made in academia and the wider culture. While a book about women, this is not a book for women only. The tracing of the feminine threads in the tapestry of Christian history will enrich the understanding of both men and women in Christ’s work of building His Church.

In the past 30 years, women’s history has become a major area of academic research and writing. This new discipline came into its own with the growth of social history, which has increasingly gained ground over the traditional approaches of political, military, diplomatic, and economic history. In addition, new stress on multiculturalism emphasized not only ethnic groups, but also women and homosexuals. These various self-proclaimed oppressed groups spawned a new history advocating their particular positions. Feminist historians often claimed they were specially qualified by their gender to speak with authority about women in history. Routinely they projected contemporary values on the past, and history in their hands often became propaganda.²

The new women’s historians generally made several assumptions in their studies. They assumed that women throughout history had been routinely subordinated to men and that women’s positions needed to improve. All inherited forms of authority were questioned, especially moral and religious authority. More often than not, feminists endorsed women’s moral superiority to men who, they claimed, had been suppressing women for centuries. When dealing with religion, feminists usually asserted certain ‘inalienable’ women’s rights. These usually included the right to ordination; the right to dismantle the ‘sexist’ language

2 This overview of the new women’s history is heavily indebted to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s analysis in the chapter ‘Advocacy and the Writing of American Women’s History’ in *Religious Advocacy and American History* (ed. Bruce Kuklick and D.G. Hart). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997, pp. 96-111.

of hymnals, prayer books, and the Bible; and the right to describe God in female terms. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese noted that to these feminists

...the very idea of a male God and His Son has emerged as the ultimate target. The supposed pretension that God is male brutally exposes the measure in which Christianity has always embodied a plot to discredit, devalue, and disempower women. No longer may any reasonable person expect women to worship a God who has not been cast in their image. And herein lies the ultimate revolution. According to the Bible, God made man in his own image. According to feminism, woman must make God in hers. That the faithful rather than God do the making reverses the central meaning of Christianity, thereby destroying Christianity.³

The methodology of the feminist writers has been very similar to that used by the Jesus Seminar and the 'new school' interpretation of the early Church. While repudiating the canonical Scriptures, they gravitated to writings of lesser authenticity and established a new canon of scriptures they found to be more congenial. Philip Jenkins noted that 'the willingness to claim such texts as part of a lost women's canon is troubling testimony to the ideological character of some modern interpretations of the hidden gospels.'⁴ Behind this method was the belief that there was no 'true Truth,' as Francis Schaeffer would say, and that all these various writings were simply mythologies. By viewing the Bible as just another myth, the feminists could then select the Gnostic writings as myth more attractive and congenial to their postmodern souls. Viewing all ancient religious beliefs, including Biblical Christianity, as an assortment of mythologies, these scholars could then assert that none of the mythologies have a historical, evidentiary basis in fact. Indeed, the feminists found themselves back in the garden with Eve, questioning what God had said and deciding to choose what looked best to them, rather than listening to any authority or examining the historical truthfulness of competing interpretations. Media acceptance of feminist revisionist history and its presence in leading academic circles gave it an aura of authenticity which belied the evidence.

Feminist historians generally followed postmodern historical methods. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza encouraged a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in studying the early Church. In her influential *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, she presumed that the writings from that period were patriarchal, demeaning to women, and did not describe the reality of conditions in the early Church. She contended that texts needed to be decoded to discover the hidden women's history. Texts, then, did not express the inherent meaning of the author. Rather, they were, at best, a collection of ambiguous words and

3 'Advocacy and the Writing of American Women's History,' p. 110.

4 Philip Jenkins. *Hidden Gospels*, p. 147.

phrases. In Dr. Fiorenza's view, the proper function of the modern reader was to give these words and phrases the meaning that the reader preferred in accordance with her agenda. Thus, the subjective interpretation by the modern reader was to take precedence over historical evidence or the intention of the author. Ancient texts were merely used to advance current opinions, and contemporary meanings were substituted for the original meaning of the text.

Karen J. Torjesen opened her book, *When Women Were Priests*, by saying she would unveil 'a hidden history of women's leadership, a history that has been suppressed by the selective memory of succeeding generations of male historians.'⁵ Denying the truthfulness and integrity of the New Testament authors, Torjesen wrote that the conspiracy to suppress women's leadership began when Paul purposefully omitted any reference to Mary Magdalene's announcement of Jesus' resurrection.⁶ She claimed that John, warning against 'Jezebel' in Revelation 2:20-23, was more concerned about opposing the women leaders in the Church than heresy.⁷ Further, Torjesen consistently used sources from the second and third centuries as if they described conditions in the New Testament Church. None of the New Testament women discussed ever were elders, bishops, or pastor-teachers, yet Torjesen held them up as examples of feminine leadership in the early Church. Her bizarre concluding chapter called for a return to what she called the essential writings of Christianity – Goddess Worship:

Knowing about our roots in the earth-centered religion of Old Europe, with its Mother goddess and its kin-centered culture, can augment our efforts to reclaim the non-violence and egalitarianism of the new order announced by Jesus... Christian churches need to return to their authentic heritage...and restore women to equal partnership in the leadership of the church.⁸

Such a claim could only be made by those who, against all evidence, had made the Gnostic writings the norm of the early Church. This approach may more accurately be described as 'propaganda' or 'advocacy' than history.

The history which follows is basically chronological, beginning with women in the Bible and concluding with Christian women in the twentieth century. Each chapter includes general background information important to understanding the historical era of the chapter. Within each chapter, stories of Christian women are grouped according to their most prominent roles during that period – wives, mothers, ascetics, queens, writers, educators,

5 Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, p. 10.

6 *When Women Were Priests*, p. 35.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 268-9.

reformers, evangelists, or philanthropists, etc. Wherever possible, the women are allowed to speak for themselves, from their letters, diaries, or published works. Often these words from centuries ago are as full of meaning and vitality as if spoken yesterday, testifying to a certain continuity of Christian women's experience through the ages. Footnotes direct the reader to the sources of specific quotes, and an extensive bibliography provides further references on women who might not be cited in the text. A growing number of digitized books and historical documents are available on the Internet and, where available, URLs connecting to sources for many of the Christian women are included.

Early chapters tell of Christian women as the Church spread throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. After accounts of women during the millennium of the Medieval Church, we turn to the stories of Christian women during the Reformation. For the period of the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, when the sources for information on Christian women expand dramatically, the focus is on Protestant Christian women in America and Britain.

Many Christian women, from queens to commoners, are recognized in secular histories for their achievements or influence without being acknowledged for the Christian faith undergirding their lives and works. These women as well as lesser-known Christians find their places in these pages. The choice of which Christian women to include depends in part on the sources which have survived. For the later periods, when the sources are more abundant, more selectivity was necessary. For example, there is a wealth of information on the lives and contributions of 19th and 20th-century women missionaries; space constraints limited the inclusion to a few of the most well known, though the bibliography points to sources for further study.

Christian women were integral to the life of the Church wherever Christianity spread, but what we know of their stories is limited by the sources that have survived. There is often more we would like to know about Christian women in various geographical places and times in history. Always there are the numerous 'common' people in the lower and middle classes whose stories frequently are unwritten and remain unknown. Yet, the history of women in Christian history does not need a revisionist makeover. We do not need to recreate an imagined narrative out of speculative evidence. Nor do we write histories – of commoners or of so-called elite – based on what we would have liked for them to have been. Neither do we seek to superimpose contemporary thought patterns and standards on earlier societies. Though at times the evidence might raise unanswered questions, or we might wish the facts to be different, the truth of the story of women in Christian history inspires, challenges and, above all, demonstrates the grace of God producing much fruit through Christian women throughout two millennia of the Church.