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Women, Church, and Power: A Historical Study of Chuch Devaluation and Gender Inequality

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Women, Church, and Power: A Historical Study of Chuch Devaluation and Gender Inequality

Mujeres, Iglesia y Poder: Un Estudio Histórico de la Devaluación Eclesiástica y la Desigualdad de Género

Silvia C. Scholtus

Abstract- Due to the broad scope of the study of the feminine universe, this article, seeks to limit itself to reviewing the influence that Christianity received in the face of crises that, during its expansion into different regions, caused the modification of adoption of practices related to the role of women that were not the empowering and liberating practices initiated by Christ. To this end, the study realizes a bibliographic review and an analysis of various biblical texts and their interpretations in an attempt to understand the aspects of inequality between men and women. The topic is articulated by presenting a review of the teachings and practices of Christ and the apostolic age. Then, it proceeds by briefly describing the following centuries up to the present day, examining how the mixture of different cultures and interests, both internal and external to the Church, produced syncretism, hybridization, or religious inculturation within Christianity in its diversity. This situation leaded to the devaluation of women within the ecclesiastical sphere due to issues of power. The study concludes that the history of ecclesiastical devaluation of women has occurred due to syncretism between the Christian religion and its environment and due to internal power issues stemming from difficulties or biases in the interpretation of the biblical text. This situation has not yet been fully resolved in the 21st century. There are still challenges for theological and ecclesiastical studies to improve the status of women.

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Resumen- Dada la amplitud del tema de estudios del universo femenino, este artículo busca circunscribirse a revisar la influencia que fue recibiendo el cristianismo ante crisis que, durante su expansión hacia diferentes regiones, hizo que se modificaran o asumieran prácticas en relación con el rol de la mujer que no eran las de empoderamiento y liberación iniciadas por Cristo. Para esto se hizo una revisión bibliográfica y se analizaron diferentes textos de la Biblia y su interpretación en procura de comprender estos aspectos de desigualdad entre hombres y mujeres.

El tema se articula presentando una revisión de las enseñanzas y las prácticas de Cristo y de la época apostólica, y avanza describiendo brevemente los siguientes siglos hasta la época actual revisando cómo la mezcla con diferentes culturas e intereses internos y externos a la Iglesia fueron produciendo sincretismo, hibridación o inculturación religiosa dentro de la diversidad del cristianismo dando lugar a la desvalorización de la mujer dentro del ámbito eclesiástico por cuestiones de poder. El estudio concluye que la historia de desvalorización eclesiástica de la mujer ha ocurrido por sincretismos de la religión cristiana con su entorno y por cuestiones internas de poder debido a dificultades o sesgos en la interpretación del texto bíblico. Esta situación aún no ha sido resuelta completamente en este siglo XXI. Todavía hay desafíos de estudios en el área teológica y eclesiástica para mejorar la situación de la mujer.

Palabras Clave: historia cristianismo, interpretación bíblica, mujer, desigualdad de género, liderazgo, iglesia primitiva, sincretismo, prácticas eclesiásticas, teología feminista, tradiciones apostólicas.

I. Introduction

It has been observed that, since the mid-20th century, a large number of studies on women began to be published. These have diverse orientations and approaches.

The historiographical stories that come down from antiquity are the work of men, since women could rarely leave a written legacy. These stories were based on the dichotomy of male dominance and female submission (L. Sevares Canalejo, 2016; S.A. Ochoa Torres, 2019; J. Torres, 2019). However, there are documentary, epigraphic and archaeological records showing that, in the early days of Christianity, women had an active participation and had been empowered in the private and public spheres because of the gospel (M.A. Pérez Reyes, 2003; Torres, 2019; F. Rivas, 2020; J. Sánchez Herrero, 2022). There are studies that describe how the Early Church, due to the teachings left by Christ himself, began promoting several countercultural changes in its practice by valuing women and promoting equality in the reception of divine grace.

Among these studies on the feminine universe from a Christian perspective, there are varied and complex attitudes. Sometimes fluctuating in their support for women between the 2nd and 5th centuries. Over the centuries, it has been seen that the attitude that brought contempt to women became more pronounced (S. Santelia, 2015). Within Christianity, this also affected

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and disrupted concepts of value, sin, justice, and others, gradually damaging the Church's influence at the social, cultural, and religious levels (L. González Seara, 1968). It has been observed that this did not always occur from the Church outward, but rather from outside the Church inward. That is, it was a mutual impact resulting from syncretism, hybridization, or inculturation.

In general, the practices in any sphere of society arise from ideological support. These ideologies are modified, adjusted, or perverted in the course of their practice (H.M. Rasi, 2000). For example, considerations about the sexes produced asymmetries, leading to the use of the term "gender." This term became a substitute, beginning in the 20th century, to refer to women from a more neutral perspective, one that did not emphasize the differences between men and women. This situation is framed within feminist proposals. Contemporary studies have focused on a more ambiguous expression, leading to studies that seek to differentiate terminologies regarding gender perspectives and ideologies. This is due not only to the goal of eliminating discrimination derived from the fact of "being a woman" but also any obstacle that impedes the free choice of sexual orientations (M. Miranda Novoa, 2012). In this regard, some ecclesiastical circles mislead these new guidelines for free choice of sexual orientation, blaming or attributing this to feminist movements. These issues are derived from other agendas, but are not the same.

From what it is observed so far, it can be deduced that gender differences have always been a source of debate in various field: scientific, biological, ecclesiastical, cultural, social, legal, and more. Below are some examples of debate in these areas.

In the biological and medical field, it is noted that studies on women have been comparatively recent in promoting the improvement of their health. The lack of consideration for women in previous centuries clouded "science" in each era. This led to a lack of interest in improving women's condition, as they were considered inferior beings. Therefore, it was considered pointless to waste time learning about aspects of their biology or other factors associated with women (S.C. Scholtus, 2024).

In the field of biblical interpretation, the question arises: where does the problem of the devaluation of women begin? It likely begins with the interpretation of the biblical book of Genesis 3:16, which foretells the consequences that sin would bring to women. They would be mistreated by their male counterparts. This passage is a subject of discussion among interpreters, trying to define whether it records a divine mandate or a premonition of the consequences of sin. The former interpretation brought dire consequences to the devaluation of women. However, those who adopt the latter do so in relation to Genesis 3:15, where God forgives woman, making her the channel through which he would bring salvation to humanity, and this would cause her to suffer at the hands of the serpent in his destructive attempt to prevent the fulfillment of the divine promise. The rest of the biblical text records these attempts, especially during the gestation process in Mary and the upbringing of Christ as a child. This second interpretation also considers the importance of differentiation between the two types of leadership present in the biblical text: dominion versus service out of love. All those who subscribe to the leadership of man's dominion over woman would be following the leadership of the serpent, and those who seek a leadership of service and love would be following the leadership of God. Christ himself emphasized this last leadership in his teachings (Matthew 20:25-28) (S.C. Scholtus, 2017a). The predominance of the first interpretation gradually affected the sphere of ecclesiastical practice. Furthermore, in the interpretation of Genesis (3:15), it was not scientifically known that women also carried "seed," a clear allusion to "ovum." Therefore, interpreters never considered the concrete possibility that the term "seed" could refer to something carried by women. This fact was passed on to considering women as a collective concept of humanity. This is probable the reason for children's stories that refer to men as the ones who plant the seed and women as the nest or womb for its development (Scholtus, 2024). In this area as well, especially during the last two centuries after the discovery of the egg cell in 1827 by biologist Karl Ernst Von Baer (Scholtus, 2024), there has been a proliferation of studies seeking to review the interpretation of various passages that were historically used to devalue women in ecclesiastical practice.

Regarding the cultural and social field, it is observed that they reflect concepts that emerge from scientific reflections and religious interpretations that are transmitted from generation to generation (L. Itchart and J.I. Gonati, 2014). The asymmetries of institutionalized power between groups of women and men are complexly intertwined with other social identities and vary across cultures (M.M. Lazar, 2007). The use of media alters, intercepts, and shapes or deforms ideologies (J.B. Pelcher, 2021).

As described, from the scientific, biological, ecclesiastical, cultural, and social perspectives, women have historically suffered devaluation and inequality in relation to men. Ideologies regarding gender issues began in Greece and Rome. These influenced the mythologies created by men to establish, sustain, and maintain the patriarchal system for centuries (Molas Font et al., 2006, p. 228) and were passed down through generations, initiating a cultural mainstreaming that may have affected the understanding and interpretation of biblical passages. This Greco-Roman culture, with its burden of violence against women, laid the foundations for "Western civilization" (ibid., 230).

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T. Kuhn (1972) studied that crisis caused by events or situations produce anomalies that cannot be resolved within the current paradigm, which generates questioning and change. History records that women emerged in different historical contexts who sought to defend their interests as a result of questions in various areas. For example, the fight for access to education, for the right to inheritance, and others. When, starting in the 19th century, women gained greater access to education, even at a higher level, and their intellectual capacity became evident, this promoted changes in the way women were viewed in subsequent generations. This led to new generations adopting a new group identity that provoked confrontations with the ideologies and practices of the previous ones (T. Allen Lambert, 1972; J.J. Callejo González, 2010; M.A. Mosqueira, 2013 and 2014).

As already mentioned, to better understand this situation, there are numerous studies in different disciplines (social sciences, health sciences, linguistics, political sciences, religious sciences, to name a few), some of which have led to discussions about utopia and praxis.

Due to the breadth of the topic, this article seeks to limit itself to reviewing the influence Christianity received in the face of the crises that, during its expansion into different regions, caused the modification or adoption of practices related to the role of women that were not the empowering and liberating practices initiated by Christ. To this end, this article realized a bibliographic review, and analysed various Biblical texts and their interpretations in an attempt to understand these aspects of inequality between men and women.

The topic is articulated by presenting a review of the teachings and practices of Christ and the apostolic age, and progresses by briefly describing the following centuries up to the present time, intercepting how the mixture with different cultures and interests internal and external to the Church were producing syncretism, hybridization or religious inculturation within the diversity of Christianity, giving rise to the devaluation of women within the ecclesiastical sphere for reasons of power.

Before addressing the historical topic, some questions about syncretism are first presented.

II. The Impact of Syncretism on Christianity

When it comes to understand religious syncretism, studies show that it is a dynamic process in which women also play a role as cultural actors and agents. What women understand or have learned about how they are defined has led to adaptations that create new forms of spirituality, and it has also become a form of resistance to cultural and religious domination that prevents women from affirming their own identity in different cultural contexts.

As apostolic Christianity spread to other cultures in different directions, it suffered several cultural clashes. Some of these were recorded in the New Testament by different apostles. For example, the Book of Acts describes the approaches Paul and other evangelists had to use as they traveled through different regions of the Roman Empire promoting Christian beliefs. Even the Pauline letters address the apostle's confrontations with those who had accepted Christianity and came from different cultures, warning of the danger of introducing practices alien to those taught by the gospel (for example: 1 and 2 Thessalonians; 1 and 2 Corinthians; Galatians).

In almost every place where Christianity has been introduced, it has had to confront the social, political, cultural, and religious aspects of its environment. Even today, studies on the subject of syncretism, hybridization, and inculturation are observed in all religions. Therefore, it can be said that there is a mixture of concepts that affect doctrine and practice within all branches of Christianity.

Syncretism, hybridization, or inculturation refers to the fusion of different religious traditions and elements to create new beliefs and practices. Specifically, inculturation involves a process of integrating the Gospel with a particular culture, resulting from dialogue and adaptation, seeking to enrich the faith and open it to the process of spreading the Gospel. Ultimately, these processes are due to the influence of interaction with various spheres outside the Church, which lead to modifications of the original beliefs, producing a slow transformation into another religious system with practices alien to the original doctrines. Within Christianity, these syncretic aspects have historically given rise to various reform movements at different times.

Over the centuries since the beginning of the early Church, the world has undergone many changes. It is very different today from what it was in the first century. Even within Christianity, the way we refer to God has different implications for the “Christianities” within Christendom. Some have analysed the secular transformation of religion into a process they call “civil religion,” which had its origins in J. J. Rousseau (R.N. Bellah, 2005), that is, when the state appropriates religious terminology and adapts it to its political ends.

Political syncretism in Christianity has been analysed in different historical periods, for example, R. Rukini and R. Oliver (2019) found that, by the 4th century AD, a priestly-episcopal leadership emerged in Christianity that was a consequence of the schism between Judaism and Christianity as an event of acculturation or contextualization of Christianity with political and social concepts present at that time

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(Forerunner Chronicles, 2016). The trajectories of different syncretism within Christianity are studied by scholars within their respective geographical regions and historical periods, and they indicate that there is an intersection with internal movements resulting from the transmission and reception of the Christian message in marginal sectors, which are even affected by confrontation due to polarization and competition with other religions (for example, Islam) (L. Sanneh, 2007; idem, 2015; C. J. Anderson, 2020).

There is evidence that traditional limitations on the role of women have come from secular cultural sources that have been allowed to control the position of the church (R. M. Groothuis, 1994). These studies showed that whenever a change occurs in secular society regarding the role of women, this role will change in the church as well. This has not always been the case. Christ sought to improve the role of women within the church, and this liberating event promoted some social changes, which were then distorted and appeased over time, producing the reverse process of influence from society to church, rather than from church to society.

Therefore, the first-century church is not the same as that of the following centuries. The interpretation of the apostles' practices and biblical writings gradually led the church toward a syncretism based on all kinds of ideologies. Concepts about the role of women were not left out in these centuries.

The syncretism that distorted Christianity led to a lack of recognition, both internally and externally, of the value of Christian concepts and doctrines—that is, the Bible as the foundation of faith and the gospel. Various religious organizations contributed to the construction and development of epistemologies, within a historical context and organizational structures that shaped the acceptance of the knowledge conveyed by the Christian gospel (F. Parra, 2004).

Although those with higher levels of education are likely to have fewer sexist attitudes, active participation in Christian churches that do not value the role of women can reinforce sexism and legitimize gender inequality (P. Glick, M. Lameiras and Y.R. Castro, 2002).

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, and even today, purported scientific evidence in biology, psychology, and other sciences has been used to justify this inferiority of women. That is, science and culture, as influential elements in the Christian religion, combined to undervalue and undermine women. The rise of evolutionary theory coincided with the widespread repression of women in American society. Social Darwinism created categories among human beings, with white men having the highest rank over all women, Jews, and people of color (F. Hiebert, 1998). This led to women being disrespected in various areas of daily life and community life. Currently, in the 21st century, we can see a tendency in scientific studies to review these studies and detect their inconsistencies. For example, in the fields of psychiatry and psychology, biases were observed as a result of using measurement instruments for women that were based solely on male standards. This prevented women from being identified according to their own interests or needs (M.G. Hubbard, 1992).

Some scholars suggest the need for a doctrinal and structural deconstruction of contemporary Christianity with the aim of recovering beliefs and concepts that were distorted by syncretism (R. Kerbs, 2022; F. Canale, 2002). Some have even proposed rethinking the theory of religious deinstitutionalization (J. Algranti, M. Mosqueira, D. Setton, 2018, p. 109). Although this is difficult to achieve, at least these are voices that warn about the importance of reviewing what each Christian believes and practices in order to call themselves as such. But above all, it is important to better teach biblical concepts about women, to prevent women from believing that in order to practice biblical teachings they must be submissive or subordinate, considering themselves inferior to men (S. Harris Howell and K. Duncan, 2018).

G. Cruz Jaimes (2008) said that syncretism impacts women's daily lives, relationships between women and men, and relationships with institutions. What follows is a brief historical review to note the impact of various syncretic elements and their influence on the role of women in the church and society.

III. Christ, the Apostles and the Ecclesiastical Practice in the 1st Century

The Gospel records present Christ valuing women by addressing their health needs, their concerns as mothers, and even accepting their leadership in evangelism (Matthew 9:20-22; Mark 10:11-14; John 4:8; 20:16-18). These were revolutionary and countercultural concepts for the time, when both women and children were considered inferior members of society and even restricted in their public activities.

The apostles continued this line of Christlike treatment. Historical and biblical studies provide evidence that there were attempts to integrate women alongside men in receiving the gifts and the mission. The biblical book of Acts recounts this aspect in the first chapters, since Christ's instructions in chapter 1 promise the sending of the Holy Spirit to equip these first believers as witnesses first in Jerusalem and then in other places (v. 8). And the group of believers awaiting this event was made up of men and women who received the gifts equally.

Consensus on the role of women in the ecclesiastical sphere was not always easy or unanimous, as accounts show that several concepts that still persisted in the minds of the new converts to

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Christianity had to be dealt with. Initially, the community of early believers was made up mostly of Jews and proselytes. They held diverse interpretations of the role of women.

That is to say, women who embraced Christianity in its early days played an active role in the evangelizing and leadership work carried out by the early Church at the time of Pentecost. However, the spread of the gospel to other cultures, coupled with internal conflicts over the composition of the Church with people of Jewish origin and from other cultures, led to conflicts regarding the active role of women.

Below are some aspects related to beliefs about the role of women in the early centuries.

a) Jews and Women

In the first century, during the administration of the great Rabbi Gamaliel, the Great Council of Jerusalem drafted laws that applied to the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, and sought to preserve peace between them, as well as improve the position of women (G. Klein, cited in R. Santala, 2005).

The diversity of opinions regarding the role of women among first-century Jews is evident today in the diversity of Jewish communities and schools of thought. In the time of Christ and the apostles, there are several groups described as Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes. Each had its own traditions and interpretations of the biblical text.

Today, to simplify the matter a little, the main ethnic groups are Ashkenazim, Sephardim, and Mizrahim, each with its own history, culture, and linguistic traditions. Within religious practice, there are different currents of Judaism, such as Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Secular, and Messianic.

This is because Jews have suffered certain religious and cultural syncretism due to the empires that dominated the area in different historical periods. Added to this is the biblical and historical account of the time the Jewish people had to live in Babylonian and Persian exile. It was during the first century that both Jesus and his apostles had to confront interpretive traditions that damaged the message of the Hebrew Scriptures. This led to constant corrections from Christ in his sermons and public statements.

b) Pentecost and the First Meetings of Christians

After Christ's death, Jesus' disciples were to wait together for the outpouring of the Spirit before going out to spread the gospel (Acts 1:8). The Bible records that when the gifts of the Spirit were poured out on the day of Pentecost, the gifts were given without discrimination. Men and women gathered in prayer received them (Acts 2:17). The apostle Peter, when explaining the phenomenon (Acts 2:17), drew on the prophetic passage of Joel 2:28, which promises the outpouring of the Spirit on men, women, and children.

Despite the diversity of groups within first-century Judaism, the impact of the preaching of the gospel produced widespread acceptance. Of course, this brought some problems to the rising church (Acts 2:41; 4:4; S.C. Scholtus, 2006). Accepting Christ as the Messiah and his gospel led to persecution. Some families welcomed those who accepted the new faith and were expelled from their homes. In other words, the Spirit also granted the gifts of hospitality and generosity to address the problems that the rising church was facing (Acts 2:43-47). This hospitality led to the organization of groups of Christian believers who met in homes.

Two important aspects of the dissemination of Christ's teachings through the apostles and early believers can be summarized: (1) the Holy Spirit granted gifts without gender or age discrimination to participate in the mission and proclamation of the gospel; (2) the early believers had to gather in homes, where they found refuge after losing their own. And, although at first these were safe places, later they became the first places where they were sought by the rulers' emissaries during the first persecutions at the hands of the Jews. The Book of Acts records that Saul, later the apostle Paul, was also among them (Acts 8 and 9).

These house church meetings opened the door for greater participation of women in leadership roles.

c) Women Leaders in House Churches

There are records that in ancient Mediterranean society, among Jews and non-Jews, women often played social and political leadership roles (B. Brooten, 2020).

These roles are likely rooted in women's authority within their homes, where they were dedicated to administration (Proverbs 31). Most business and trade were conducted around the homes of the wealthy. These households were often large and included immediate family members, non-immediate family members, servants or slaves, and employees. In the ancient world, men and women could be owners and bosses. Some historians describe women's experience as managers of these properties, their social authority, economic power, and political influence, which established their leadership in other areas of Greco-Roman society, which, by the beginning of the Christian era, had achieved a certain emancipation, overcoming the roles traditionally imposed on it (K. Milnor, 2009). This experience seems to have also been practiced within Judaism, as women assumed leadership roles in the synagogues of Jewish society in which some served as elders (D. M. Gill and B. Cavaness, 2009).

The Bible records that God also bestowed His gifts of prophecy and explanation of the law upon women, and even the gift of being a judge. This can be seen, for example, in the case of Deborah (Judges 4 and 5). These leadership positions were not always

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accepted by the various schools of thought within Judaism. This is observed in the records of oral tradition and the Talmud. The Talmud only records the scholarship of two women in the explanation and interpretation of Scripture. For example, Bruriah (wife of Rabbi Meir) is described as participating in Jewish legal debates, challenging the rabbis of the time; and Yalta (wife of Rabbi Nachman and daughter of the Exilarch) is noted for her scholarship (G. Patt-Shamir, 2010; D. Samuels, 1994).

Currently, there are synagogues led by female rabbis. This situation stems from a long process of reclaiming rights since approximately the 19th century. Some feminist movements highlight this struggle within Judaism (P.S. Nadell, 2019).

But continuing with the first century, the early church's meeting place included private homes, considered the setting for women's activities. Some authors point out that gradually, the administrative leadership of these small house-churches came to be in the hands of those who served as domestic leaders, exercised mostly by women (F.F. Esler, 2000), since, at that time, Christian corporations or societies were not legal (R. Krautherimer and S. Ćurĉić, 1992).

This made it easier for women, who were accustomed to exercising authority, to become patrons and function as protectors, hostesses, and shelterers for church leaders. This is because some women were wealthy, educated, and had high social status in their communities, such as those who supported the ministry of Christ and his apostles (Matthew 27:55; Luke 8:1-3). Biblical records mention believers or churches meeting in women's homes (Colossians 4:15; 1 Corinthians 1:11; Romans 16:1-2; Acts 16:15; A.J. Levine, ed., 1991).

But not all women recorded as exercising leadership were wealthy. Two slave women were deaconesses ["ministers" is translated from Latin for the Greek term *diákonos*] (Pliny, Ep. X.96, cited in J. Stevenson, 1987). Although not everyone agrees with the mention of women in leadership among early Christians, some record that early Christian texts mention women who financially supported Christian groups and were benefactors of synagogues (G. Clark, 2004).

It can be observed from the analysis of the biblical text and the historical record that the practice of the early Christian church included women in leadership. This leadership included the apostleship, eldership, and other offices. For example, G. Bilezikian (2006) stated that "the openness of the early church to women in leadership positions was such that the designation of 'apostle' for a woman was received without difficulty" (p. 152).

By taking into account the background of Christ and the early Christian believers in their consideration of the role of women in the ecclesiastical sphere, including as leaders, we now review some Pauline texts that are controversial and appear to present some contradictions, according to the interpretation of different biblical scholars.

IV. Paul and the Oral Law

The apostle Paul, in his biography, mentioned that he was a disciple and completed his education at the feet of the great Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3; S. C. Scholtus, 2017b). This background is important when trying to understand Paul's writings. As already mentioned, Gamaliel promoted an improvement in the conditions of women and better treatment for those from non-Jewish (Gentile) cultures or nations.

In the Pauline letters we see that the apostle showed zeal to help the Gentiles in their needs (2 Corinthians 9:1-5), as well as some advice to improve the situation of women in which he sought to counteract some practices of the cultures in which he had to do missionary work (Galatians 3:28; 2 Corinthians 6:12-13; 1 Corinthians 7:6-11, 20,24-27,40; 11:7; Ephesians 5:25, 28,32-33; 1 Timothy 3:11-12 and Titus 1:6).

Pauline studies reveal certain statements about women that may seem contradictory if one ignores the context in which the apostle wrote them. After accepting Jesus' messiahship, Paul wrote a biography indicating that he not only studied at the school of Gamaliel and received a degree, but that he was also made a teacher in Christ's school (Galatians 1 and 2). His life apparently embodied the principles of love and respect for all human beings in need of divine grace. Although the underlying theme of support for the poor, women, and those from other nations is evident in the Pauline epistles, some passages are still controversial among biblical interpreters today. It is likely that some only look at the text without observing the historical and linguistic context of the Pauline epistles and the Bible in general. This diversity of interpretations is due to the different schools of interpretation that exist within biblical scholarship.

In some cases, the apostle's counsel regarding local situations that perverted the concepts of Christ's gospel regarding the role of women in the church are taken as principles of general and universal application. In biblical scholarship, there are those who do not consider the Bible as a whole and analyse what the authors said individually without integrating it with the rest of the writing. Regarding the Pauline letters, there is no consensus among scholars as to whether all the Pauline letters appearing in the biblical canon are truly from the apostle's pen. Therefore, when problematic passages are interpreted in isolation, without considering the complete body of Paul's letters or Scripture, interpretive conflicts arise.

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Some Examples

Women can Prophesy in the Church

In 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, the apostle Paul argued that women should cover their heads when praying or prophesying in church, and he equates covering with long hair (v. 15). In this passage, Paul declared that women could pray and prophesy in church, that is, that women could express themselves in the ecclesiastical sphere, something unusual within the practice of first-century Judaism (R. C. Prohl, 1957; G. Inrig, 1975).

Women can also Teach

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, is Paul attempting syncretism or issuing a command? Some studies explain that the phrases that seem to restrict women are not Pauline expressions, but rather Pauline quotations from non-biblical texts to argue against them. If these texts were interpreted as Pauline, Paul would be guilty of contradicting himself. Hence the varied opinions of scholars.

Some have attempted to resolve this apparent Pauline contradiction by saying that it is a note added by a commentator and copied and incorporated into later manuscripts of the letter. This claim of appealing to textual criticism on the grounds of late interpolation carries no certainty or weight (G. Fee, 1987; D. W. Odell-Scott, 2000; W. L. Richards, 2004; P. B. Payne, 2009; K. R. MacGregor, 2018). Some report that 1 Cor 11:4–5 and 14:34–35 appear to have come from different writers, although no manuscript has been found that omits the verses (D. B. Wallace, 2004). Therefore, this apparent attempt to resolve the situation is difficult to prove.

However, if we look at the context, considering that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is Pauline, then we would have to say that Paul contradicts himself, since Paul's central point in that chapter is that, in the church, anyone, regardless of gender, could be taught by anyone. He said,

> What do we conclude, brothers? That when you come together, each one can have a hymn, a teaching, a revelation, a message in tongues, or an interpretation. All these should be done for the edification of the church… You can all prophesy, one by one, so that all may learn and all may be encouraged. (vv. 26, 31)

The commands of silence and submission about which Paul was consulted in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 are explicit in the Oral Torah or Jewish oral law; they do not appear in the Old Testament text (*Mishnah*, 2020, Ketub 7:6; Josephus, *Against Apion*, Book II, 24.201; Philo of Alexandria, c.50, *Hypothetica* [*Apology for the Jews*], par. 7.14). Therefore, it seems that Paul transcribed the Corinthian consultation in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. This consultation could be a syncretic or hybrid attempt by Jews who had accepted the gospel but wished to continue their Judaizing practices. They tried to support their claims on a "law" to restrict women's freedom in manifesting the gifts granted by the Spirit in the ecclesiastical sphere. This is why the apostle Paul strongly opposed this attempt of syncretism. Paul repeatedly confronted the Oral Law or Torah in his writings as an invalid authority for believers in Christ, to the point that observing it meant rejecting Christ (Galatians 4:11; 5:1-4).

Another Attempt of Syncretism in Ephesus

In other passages, we see the apostle Paul's struggle to avoid further syncretic attempts in spreading the gospel among those who were not originally Jewish. 1 Timothy 2:11-12, a controversial passage in its interpretation, is actually a reflection of an attempt of hybridization or syncretism with the culture of Ephesus. The apostle said, "Let the woman learn in silence [Greek, *esuchía*], with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority [Greek, *authentein*] over the man, but to be in silence [Greek, *esuchía*]." What does the phrase "nor to usurp authority over the man" (1 Tim 2:12) mean? When the text is analysed in its original language, the Greek word "*authentein*" is a hapax legomenon, meaning it is the only time it is used in the biblical text. Normally, the biblical word for "authority" used in the New Testament is *ezousía*, but Paul does not use it in this passage. He's using a different expression. The meaning of the word "*authentein*" that appears in the letter is a word with very negative connotations. It includes dominance, but a dominance that takes control, even in sexual matters. Some propose translating it as "dedicating oneself to fertility practices" (C. Kroeger, 2005). And, although this interpretation has been debated, it has allowed us to observe that traditional lexicons always need to be revised.

In line with this proposed interpretation, it is observed that, in extrabiblical literature, the use of this term is associated with violence. This suggests that women who came from the cult of Diana and had accepted Christianity were usurping the leaders' authority through violence. Paul had said enough. Paul's command was not related to women in general or to being a woman, but to this particular group of women due to their behaviour inconsistent with the gospel of Christ in a particular context.

Therefore, this passage is an example of the difficulties within the church in the time of the early Christians regarding possible religious syncretism. In this passage from 1 Timothy, Paul is not prohibiting women from exercising leadership or teaching, or even learning, but rather defining the manner in which they should do so.

Scripture shows that God is not exclusive when incorporating women into the mission of spreading his kingdom on earth. At the beginning of the biblical account in Genesis, we see the choice of woman as the

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protagonist in God's mission to save the fallen race during the struggle between good and evil that subsequently broke out (Genesis 3:15). There is biblical evidence to indicate that both men and women can speak and prophesy in the name of God. In his letters, Paul himself mentioned several women who were tasked with preaching and serving congregations (Romans 16:1-5).

What was the Apostle Paul's Proposal Regarding Women?

In short, it is clear that when we analyze Scripture as a whole, we see that God did not prevent women from accessing theological knowledge or leading as part of the mission. Paul's writings echo Christ's liberating mission in relation to those who were marginalized and mistreated, whether women, children, or people from cultures alien to the gospel (Luke 4:18; Galatians 3:28).

Given Paul's liberating emphasis on the Oral Law, it is difficult to imagine that he could have demanded silence from women in the church as a result of obedience to the Oral Torah. These practices, originating in the Judaizing factions of the church, required strict obedience to that law to achieve salvation, and Paul vehemently confronted them. These Judaizers identified themselves in the Letter to the Corinthians and questioned Paul's apostleship (1 Corinthians 9:1-18). That is why Paul defended this last aspect in 1 Corinthians 14:37-38. Paul's characterization of these individuals sounds harsh. He called them false apostles and deceivers who were posing as apostles in his second letter to them (2 Corinthians 11:13), and he warned the Corinthians that these so-called apostles (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11) preached a gospel different from Jesus' and had a harmful spirit (2 Corinthians 11: 3-4). During his earthly ministry, Jesus also confronted the oral tradition of the Jews, calling it "the leaven of the Pharisees" (Matthew 16:6, 11). Paul called it "old leaven," "the leaven of malice" in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8.

In the early Church, and following the guidance of Christ and the apostles, efforts were made to avoid any syncretic intention that would prevent the inclusion of women in the mission.

V. The Dynamic Leadership of the Early Church

As evidenced by the records presented, women played a dynamic role, including leadership, in the early church. Some notable examples of leadership are presented below.

a) Phoebe and the Diaconate

Phoebe was called a "deacon" of the church (Romans 16:1). In this passage, the Greek term describing the leadership role is masculine. This indicates that in the early days, no distinction was made between the feminine and masculine forms of the term (S. Heine, 1987).

The apostle commented on Phoebe's leadership qualities when he wrote the final remarks of his letter, calling her a "*prostátis*" (Greek), or patron (Gill and Cavaness, 2009). A similar term, albeit in a verbal form, is used in 1 Timothy 3:4 (Greek, *proistamenon*) when referring to the qualities of a bishop (*episcopo*).

These concepts about Phoebe's leadership as a deacon and patroness seem to indicate that she exercised important leadership, given that Paul mentions her in the same way as he does male leadership.

Junia: Apostle or misreading of a woman's name?

A controversial leadership is that of the apostle Junia, recorded by the apostle Paul in Romans 16:7. In theological circles, there is debate as to whether it was a man's or a woman's name. Paul not only mentions Junia as an apostle, but also extols her status among the apostles. This name has led to various biases in interpretation. The Greek word Iunian can be translated into English in two ways: Junia (a woman's name) or Junias (adding an "s" at the end, like a man's name).

Álvarez Valdés (2015) clearly explains that it was a woman's name. The testimony of the oldest biblical manuscripts (c. 180 AD), the oldest translations of the New Testament into Syriac, Coptic and Latin (c. 200 to 300 AD), and the almost absolute unanimity of the testimony of the Fathers of the Christian Church until the 12th century all considered it to be a woman's name.

This unanimity was interrupted by Epiphanius of Salamis (310-403), a bishop who, in his work *List of the Disciples* (*Index Discipulorum*), purports to list the 72 disciples sent by Jesus, and said: "Junias, who is mentioned by Paul, was appointed bishop of Apameia in Syria." This is the only voice that considered the term masculine. However, scholars consider his words to be unreliable (Álvarez Valdés, 2015; E.E. Richter, 2022 and 2023).

From the 13th century onwards, with Aegidius of Rome (1243-1316), the term began to be considered masculine. He was an Italian theologian and philosopher of the Order of the Hermits of Saint Augustine. He was a disciple of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Aegidius stated in his commentary on Romans, *Opera Exegetica, Opuscula I*, that Andronicus and Junias were "admirable men" and began calling him "Junias" (p. 97, cited in B. Brooten, 1977, p. 141). Although he did not base his claim on any evidence or argument, he offered the explanation that a woman could not have been an apostle. This prejudice became the main argument against what had always been asserted until the 13th century, namely, Junia's femininity. This hypothesis of Aegidius's soon took on considerable proportions and gained adherents. Among those who adhered to this was Martin Luther (1483–1546), who, in his famous German translation of the

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Bible (1522), introduced the masculine name for Junia. From that moment on, this name was considered masculine in all Protestant Bibles (Álvarez Valdés, 2015; Richter, 2022 and 2023).

Since it was evident that "Junias" did not exist as a male name, the "hypocoristic" hypothesis arose in the 17th century. New studies have finally ruled out this hypothesis that the name Paul cites was a male name or an abbreviation of "Juniano" (H. Lietzmann, 1928; J. Piper and W. Grudem, 1991; Álvarez Valdés, 2015).

Despite this, some Bibles erroneously translate the term as masculine. This is because the critical edition of the Greek New Testament lists Junia as feminine in the earliest editions, but beginning with the 13th edition (1927) abruptly changed, without explanation or footnotes, and made the name masculine (Junias). This sounded the death knell for Junia in the following decades of exegetical scholarship among biblical scholars who relied solely on this critical edition of the Greek. It was not until the latest edition, the 28th (1993), that it was again corrected to be feminine (E. E. Richter, 2021).

To summarize what has been said about Junia, commentators on the text up to the 13th century considered it feminine. The same was true of ancient translations of the Pauline text. Doubts only began in the 13th century, with Aegidius of Rome, not for exegetical reasons, but rather due to cultural syncretism that created a conflict with the role of women at that time. Modern scholarship has reaffirmed that it is a feminine name. Therefore, this suggests that women also held leadership roles in the early Church. In the case of Junia, this woman was praised as an apostle and leader in her time.

As can be seen from the examples given, women exercised leadership in the early Church, although later attempts were made to silence these Scriptural testimonies through syncretic efforts. The following section presents how the transition from home meetings to institutional structures brought about changes in the way women's leadership roles were viewed.

VI. Transition to Institutional Structures

Continuing to study the centuries following, it is noted that centralized administration of community corporate properties did not appear until the 3rd century (P. Lampe, 2003; B. Whiterington, 1988).

As time goes by and generational changes occurred, syncretic intentions became more pronounced. The church gradually incorporated concepts alien to the originally preached gospel. Discussions over interpretation and ecclesiastical practice, coupled with external influences in the political and social spheres, appear to have been influential factors. Gradually, certain biases emerged that perverted doctrines and practices, supported by arbitrary interpretations of biblical texts and the beginning of an oral tradition that contradicted biblical teachings.

As already seen, the apostle Paul warned against this situation in almost all of his letters. The biblical description of the apostles' time shows that there were proposals and interpretations that undermined the gospel. It was already mentioned that the liberating effects of Jesus' inclusive words, his resurrection and Pentecost, and the holding of private meetings in homes, which were considered places of influence for women, opened the door for women to exercise their gifts in a more gender-equal context in the life and witness of the early church (S.C. Scholtus, 2021). Of course, this liberating air felt by women brought problems by producing clashes both internally within the church and externally as the gospel spread to different cultural traditions. This may have been one of the reasons why Paul expressed himself regarding the relationship between the sexes in several of his letters, seeking to balance women's feelings and men's reactions.

The shift in meeting places from the home to public church buildings (between the 2nd and 4th centuries) documents a loss of freedom, especially for women, whose proper spheres of activity had been considered largely within the home (Witherington, 1988). In some places, the early church accepted prevailing social and cultural norms and attitudes and limited or prohibited women's leadership roles, but not everywhere.

The standardization of worship and the canonization of beliefs and Scripture led to bishops and tradition taking over in many churches, rather than apostles, prophets, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Writer E. H. White (1954) reflected that the beginning of the great apostasy of the early church "was in seeking to supplement the authority of God by that of the church" and "ended by forbidding what He had explicitly enjoined" (p. 289).

According to W. Frend (1984), everything was done according to oral tradition. It was not legal to do anything apart from what the elder said, even baptizing or holding a feast (Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans*, V111, cited in J. Stevenson, 1987). Male bishops, whose gifts could be in the areas of administration and/or teaching, assumed leadership roles, protected by the concept of imitating a typological priesthood restricted to men, and some could even buy their position in the Catholic Church (T. Whiting, 1988). This interpretation of an exclusively male ecclesiastical priesthood, based on the Levitical priesthood abolished after Christ's death, blurred and annulled the universal priesthood of believers (1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6), which begins with the creation of the first couple and continues, in the

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biblical description, until the restoration of the earth and into eternity (S. C. Scholtus, 2019). This priesthood includes also women.

The influence of leadership models from political life impacted the church (K. J. Torjessen, 1995). Next, we examine how the process of the ecclesiastical sphere's transition from domestic to public life affected women's role in the church, as the structure of ecclesiastical leadership changed through slow and persistent attempts at syncretic action.

Formation of the Leadership Structure

a) In the early Church

Different types of leadership responsibilities are highlighted in the New Testament texts. In addition to the apostles, the early Church gradually added other types of leadership based on the gifts bestowed upon the Church.

i. *Deacons*

The New Testament texts emphasize that every member of the church enters as a minister or servant ("deacon" in Greek), since Christ called all believers to serve as he served (Matthew 20:27-28), and, as the apostle Paul clarified, this inclusiveness made no distinction based on sex (Galatians 3:28). And it is in this process of serving that it is important to understand that everyone is commanded to be a deacon or servant:

> Y hay diversidad de ministerios, pero el Señor es el mismo. Y hay diversidad de operaciones, pero Dios, que hace todas las cosas en todos, es el mismo. Pero a cada uno le es dada la manifestación del Espíritu para provecho. (1 Corinthians 12:5-7).

The apostle Paul was a deacon (Ephesians 3:7, the word "deacon" is translated into Latin as "minister" in some versions) and, along with Timothy, considered themselves itinerant servants (deacons) or evangelists of God. Both visited and instructed scattered Christian groups, naming the local leadership represented by the terms "elder" and "elderess" as the church grew.

Therefore, the Bible mentions the service or diakonia of all the gifts bestowed by the Spirit. Some of these gifts were used to exercise leadership that would properly guide the community of believers. From the beginning of the New Testament church, to establish order as in any community, the primary leadership among believers was assigned to the "twelve" apostles (or envoys) indicated by Christ, because the number 12 represents divine government. That is, in this way Christ inaugurated the leaders of a people or church that would spread his gospel. This concept of the number 12 is present in the biblical record, since there were 12 tribes of Israel whom God chose to form a people that would spread his salvation; similarly, Christ chose 12 apostles from among those who followed him to form the new people of God, or church. This concept is used in the book of Revelation to symbolize or represent, in various scenarios, God's government in the universe.

ii. *Elders*

Among the gifts bestowed upon the Church were those of administration, teaching, and using the familiar Jewish model of instructing the people in the synagogues, that is, the eldership. Hence, the "apostles and elders" responded as leaders of the church (Acts 15:22). However, all considered themselves deacons or servants, as Paul and Timothy did. These deacons, who were also evangelists, were responsible for appointing elders in the churches they founded (Acts 14:23).

The first leaders chosen to collaborate with the apostles in the diakonia, or service of the church, were of Greek origin. They helped solve the problem of the apostles' lack of time in the face of the demands for the constant growth of the Church (Acts 6:1-7). "Seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" were chosen (Acts 6:3). That is, these leaders were chosen for service just as the apostles were. They administered the church's resources, as was considered the service of "tables" (Acts 6:2), and had gifts of instruction, preaching, and going forth as evangelists. This is evident from the description of their activities in the following accounts from the book of Acts. These types of leaders were known among the Jews as "elders" when they were in charge of a group or church locally, similar to those dedicated to that task in the synagogues of the Jewish people, or they were called "evangelists" when they extended their diakonia, or service, to an itinerant community.

The term "elder" comes from the Old Testament. It refers to those who held an important position as heads of families or tribes. Moses chose "elders" from among the best leaders of his people to guide them in judging common matters (Numbers 11: 16-17; Deuteronomy 1:16-17). This role has always been maintained among the Jewish people.

Although the basic definition of "elder" refers to age or experience, its use in the New Testament followed the Old Testament's outline, which describes the appointment of individuals who were tribal leaders and leaders in the nation of Israel. These individuals were responsible for serving the needs of their area of influence and for judging. Women recognized in this line also served in this capacity, as was the case with the prophetess and judge Deborah (Judges 4).

These initial hierarchical structures initially followed the model of Jewish tradition, which established a government of elders (presbyters) presided over by another elder, who in apostolic times became James, the brother of Jesus. For communities of Gentile origin, the church was also governed by elders (presbyters or bishops) who were in charge of its administration.

To represent the interests of all, they met in a council of "elders" that decided the interests of the people in general (Numbers 11:24; 2 Kings 23:1; 2 Chronicles 24:39; Psalm 107:32; Jeremiah 26:17). The

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role of the elder continued despite the addition of priestly and royal authorities. The term came to have an additional meaning, such as "leader" or "representative," even "judge" (Exodus 18:22; Acts 13:20). The functions of the elders, priests, and kings are also compared to those of look after a flock, and for this reason they were called "shepherds" (Isaiah 56:10-11).

In the New Testament, the words "elder," "bishop," and "presbyter" are used interchangeably (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). The term "elders" refers to mature, reputable, and experienced individuals. This does not mean that only older individuals could act as church elders. As mentioned earlier, in the Old Testament, tribal leaders were elders, and these were not necessarily all elderly. Paul's instruction to Titus to "appoint in every city presbyters [elders]" and "elder women" (Titus 1:5; 2:2-3) indicates that women could assume ecclesiastical leadership. It is not clear from the biblical text that the fact of an election implied any practice now considered an ordination ritual.

With this practice as a model, this structure has continued in various forms that have been modified over time as the organization and tradition of the Church have been imposed on ecclesiastical practice. In the beginning, the disciples in general, not just the twelve, spread the gospel and accompanied the development of the Christian community. When the first apostles died, the elders and evangelists assumed the leadership of the church.

Thus, it was observed that there were two types of leadership in the New Testament church: apostles and elders, both were recognized as deacons (servants), regardless of gender.

b) In the Post-Apostolic Church

Subsequently, post-apostolic history witnessed a turning point. The term "deacon" was changed to be used exclusively in reference to men, and the feminine equivalent "deaconess" was used for the leadership of women who assigned tasks to other women in various churches (J. Laporte, 1982).

If one considers that in the early Church, the diaconate referred to service in the church with various gifts, we can understand why deacons (also translated as "minister" or "servant"), such as Paul and Timothy, were responsible for appointing elders in the churches.

By 100 AD, there is evidence of standardization in many church practices (Krautherimer and Ćurĉić, 1992). By the 3rd century, bishops, elders (presbyters), and deacons were classified within a hierarchy of ritually ordained professionals and as publicly recognized officials of church buildings (Stevenson, 1987) to differentiate those who dedicated their time exclusively to church work in order to receive monetary compensation (salary) from those who were voluntary servants. The term "deacon" was restricted in use and came to be considered a lesser category of church leadership, rather than an umbrella term that allowed for service without gender discrimination.

When the first Christians organized themselves into communities, they lacked hierarchies, but they maintained an orderly exercise of functions appropriate to their gifts, and everything was shared. Mutual aid was the basis of life in these communities, which were entered into after baptism (Acts 4).

When the first charismatic authorities (apostles) disappeared, hierarchical structures gradually emerged that resembled those of the societies from which the ecclesiastical communities originated. During the Roman regime, the churches adopted the concept of ordination (from the Latin "ordo"), which emulated the class stratification within the empire. J. F. Romano (2014) describes this hierarchical structure as having far from pious intentions and had limited influence.

This initial hierarchical structure gave rise to the conditions for aspiring to become an elder or bishop, which was similar to that required of deacons and those who were considered auxiliaries to bishops.

Later, higher hierarchies emerged that claimed to represent Christ in their priestly functions. From this appeared the concept of priesthood and later papal authority in the Roman Catholic Church (S.G. Selvam, 2019). The established liturgy promoted an exchange between human beings and the divine that oriented Roman society toward God and protected the dominion of the priesthood. Since the new priesthood hierarchy was based on the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament, women were marginalized in the exercise of the priesthood.

Therefore, the new ecclesiastical hierarchies and order of functions that were inconsistent with the practices of the early Church were: priesthood, bishops or presbyters (formerly elders), and deacons. This presents challenges for study. For example, why was a priesthood established that was not present in the ecclesiastical organization indicated by Christ? Why were deacons considered a lesser hierarchical service when previously they were the umbrella under which all the gifts upon the Church were bestowed?

It is evident that political, social, and religious syncretism influenced these changes in leadership designations, the organization of functions, and hierarchies within the Church. These new introductions of ecclesiastical hierarchies, even debated today, purported to be protected by the biblical text, although in reality they were strongly rooted in oral tradition and the Church's Magisterium. This gave rise to discrimination and devaluation of women in the ecclesiastical sphere, which, combined with social factors, brought oppression and gender abuse within the Christian Church itself.

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c) Women Leaders between the 2nd and 5th Centuries

From the 2nd to the 4th century AD, there is historical and archaeological evidence that women were ordained as bishops and presbyters in some areas of the church, and were held in high esteem in the community (R. Gryson, 1980; Krautherimer and Ćurčić, 1992; Torjessen, 1995; L.E. Eisen, 2000).

Rather than continuing a path of liberation from the oppression of women as Christ did during his ministry, it was already evident that in the time of the apostles, there was discussion within the Church about the role of women, a result of some attempting to maintain Jewish traditions. The devaluation of women and the continued oppression of women gradually took hold in the following centuries. There were several factors, but one of them was the attempt to merge the interests of the Church with the political power of the time from the 4th century onward.

Although some women were ecclesiastically denied ordination, they had the qualities to be bishops and were very influential in activities that included supervision, care and administration of large numbers of people (Gryson, 1980; K. Torjessen Malcom, 1982; E.A. Clark, 1983; Frend, 1984; Esler, 2000).

Over time, women, who held positions of power in many churches, were restricted. Gradually, women were prohibited from holding church offices, and warnings were given about listening to women teachers, denouncing what they said as heretical doctrines. Evidence of this is found in Canon 19 of the First Council of Nicaea in 324 AD, which states that Paulinists (followers of Paul of Samosata) who returned to the Catholic Church had to be rebaptized and, if they had a good name, could be reordained. Female deacons, on the other hand, and those who had registered as pastors were only allowed to be counted among the laity (Eisen, 2000).

Meanwhile, the history of the Roman Empire, between the 3rd and 5th centuries, records that women were gaining greater opportunities, such as owning land, writing wills and appearing in court, being orators, and more. This situation was mostly an opportunity for women of the upper or wealthy classes, since there were always slaves and freed women who were oppressed and easily forced into prostitution (R. Bauman, 1992; B.W. Frier and T.A.J. McGinn, 2004; D. Johnson, 1999; Y. Thomas, 1994).

Over the centuries, increasing restrictions have been observed on the possibility of women in the Christian Church assuming ecclesiastical administrative positions that would allow them to rule over men (D. Rocco Tedesco, 2012). The theme of the Church and power is a summation of the internal and external power of the Church in collusion with political power. Since Tertullian, a current of thought has been developing that sought to confine women to the sphere of the home, and they could only participate in the Church by keeping their place to avoid offending the male sex (R. Teja, 1999). This aspect has been maintained in different currents of Christianity.

It is evident that, at the beginning of the early church, women were active in many ways, including in leadership roles as apostles, prophets, and bishops. But also, from the very beginning, there was controversy over the role of women in the church, which became more evident with the changes in the venue of believers' meetings. As meetings moved from homes to public buildings, communities began to become more closed on the issue of granting women participation in the ecclesiastical sphere, as evidenced in the documentation of the period. Even the scarcity of writings left by women, compared to those left by men, is noticeable. This led to the loss of the voice of women within the church. The influence left by attitudes against them, in political, social, and cultural norms, which were syncretic factors in the decisions of church councils, and in the canonization of some sacred books and the destruction or prohibition of other documents written by women, is notable (Whiterington, 1988).

That is, leadership in church buildings took on a dominant form of one person over another, hence the hierarchization and exclusion in different forms, giving rise to elite leadership.

Without the leadership of the apostles and prophets, and with the loss of the female voice in the church, the period that followed the early Church was given a name, the “Dark Ages” (Frend, 1984, p. 828). And, as already mentioned, this was due to the fact that the tradition of interpreting the Church's magisterium was considered authoritative above Scripture, the voice of the Spirit, and the experience of the early Church. It can be deduced, then, that not only did the Judaizers invent oral laws excluding women, but that Christian leaders did the same over the centuries, imposing "laws" from an oral, non-biblical tradition on the Christian Church.

By following the traditions and concepts emanating from the Catholic Church, Protestant churches continued to maintain the orders and hierarchies of deacons, elders, bishops, or presbyters. This did not fully reflect the practice of the early Church. The Protestant legacy of *Sola Scriptura*, as a pillar, left pending the revision of important practices of early Christianity and did not completely abandon the Christian oral tradition (A.S. Santrac, 2015; R.R. Tornalejo, 2017). This means that within the different Christian denominations, there were no major changes regarding the consideration of the role of women in the ecclesiastical sphere.

In short, from the very beginning of Christianity, there have always been those who defended or attacked women's participation in theological and ecclesiastical fields. It is a topic that continues to be debated within the Catholic Church itself (V. Rue, 2008)

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and several Protestant and Evangelical churches. A wide range of literature is available on these topics from different perspectives within the Christian churches in general.

VII. Conclusive Summary

This article sought to contribute to the dialogue on the reasons for gender inequality in the ecclesiastical sphere. Based on the review made in the preceding sections, it can be seen that the devaluation of women in the ecclesiastical sphere is rooted in social concepts and practices, reflecting political, social, cultural, and religious syncretisms. It is evident that the influences of the environments in which the gospel spread brought conflicts within the church from its very beginning. Both Christ and the apostles presented their attempts to guide a correct understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures.

According to the evidence presented, this conflict to avoid syncretism in theology and ecclesiastical practice extended throughout all the centuries of Christian history. These syncretic processes promoted the oppression and marginalization of women, something absent in the gospel of Christ, and this prevented women from fully exercising their gifts granted by the Spirit and from providing service (diakonia) within the church by collaborating in the spreading of the gospel.

These syncretic processes within the church had a back and forth. Not only were external influences introduced syncretically into the church, but the church also influenced, through the believers themselves, the exclusion and oppression of women also at the social and political levels, as indicated by Harris Howell and Duncan (2018), because women themselves believed they should be subjugated by men, as they were taught by interpretations of biblical passages.

Biblical and ecclesiastical records reveal how the devaluation of women within the Christian Church occurred due to syncretic reasons. The lack of ecclesiastical recognition of women's leadership and gifts of the Spirit was syncretized with the devaluation of women at the social level. In this way, concepts of inequality and the superiority of men over women were strengthened.

As in other areas, despite struggles spanning centuries to improve the status of women, there is still a long way to go, as evidenced by the continued demands of various movements seeking recognition of women in various spheres, including the ecclesiastical sphere.

Christ began his ministry by leading a proposal to free the oppressed,

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19)

It is encouraging to note the various attempts by various Christian communities to improve the role of women. Although it is still difficult to understand the original direction after so many historical failures. Contemporary Christian society calls for more inclusive and liberating practices similar to those pioneered by Christ and the apostles.

Based on the themes presented in this article, several possible lines of study emerge. Discussions and historical records require a review that includes better descriptions of women's influence in different spheres. In the theological sphere, the use of updated lexicons and documentation in linguistic discussions is suggested to avoid biased interpretations of the biblical text. Ecclesiological discussions should take care to avoid the introduction of syncretic processes with ongoing social or political ideologies. It would also be important for ecclesiastical practice to include studies to improve teaching processes for all parishioners with a more faithful interpretation of the biblical text, both for women, who in some ecclesiastical spheres have the least access to theological knowledge and instruction, and for men to avoid the perception of women as inferior.

The value a woman receives from the humblest surroundings of her home to the way she is respected in the church, in society, and her contribution to the economy of any country increases her personal and community benefits.

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