

VIRGINITY AND MARRIAGE IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

by

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Under the Direction of

(Carolyn Jones Medine)

ABSTRACT

This is an analysis of the role of women in the early Christian church. The roles examined will be the roles of Christian virginity and Christian marriage. In the early church, women were held in high praise for being brides of Christ. For a time, this was held as the ideal for women. Sexuality was often seen as the result of sin, and it was something to either be destroyed or controlled. A woman who was able to achieve this was to be praised highly due to her purity and actions. However, certain theologians thought otherwise. These theologians emphasized marriage and bearing sons for the church. Marriage was seen as a commandment by God instead of a punishment due to sin. The Early Church tended to emphasize a woman's chastity and purity instead of her bearing sons. However, as the church began to develop, it instead focused on God's commandment to humanity in Genesis: the commandment to multiply the earth. This is an examination of the theological values and impacts of both virginity and marriage.

INDEX WORDS: Virginitv, marriage, Jerome, Martin Luther, Clement of
Alexandria

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Explanation of Sources

The subject of this research is the role of women during the development of the early Christian church, including some focus on women in the Gospels and on Jesus' interactions with the women. The Roman Empire is the background for the majority of these women. The time period I am focusing on is a long, broad period, from around 33 B.C.E, around the death of Jesus, and to about the 5th century. That allows me to examine multiple documents across time and to examine the changing roles of women in a growing Christianity.

Most of the documents for this research come from the Eastern section of the Roman Empire, Israel and Turkey. Some come from Egypt where the city of Alexandria was an important influence. Still others come from Rome or Jerusalem. The Western and Eastern empires have different theologies, meaning there can be differences on their dealings with women. For example, many of the ascetic women seem to have come from the city of Rome. These women seem to have either been wealthy or born into the aristocracy. Although there were ascetic women in the East, they mostly lived in the deserts or wilderness. These ascetics are called the "desert mothers." Ascetic women in the Eastern Empire were well respected for their knowledge, wisdom, and piety towards God.

The majority of the sources used for this research are primary sources. These come from the various Church Fathers, the people who developed the theology of early Christianity. The fathers touched on various topics including those pertaining to women. Some of them wrote biographies in praise of holy and virtuous women. Examples of these are the virgins Macrina, Melania the Younger and Marcellina, praised for being “virgins of Christ.” They gave up everything for Christ and lived as ascetics. Other biographies are those of the martyrs, the women and others like them who die for their faith. One martyr left behind a diary that was written in her own hand. Other biographies of martyrs, however, were written to encourage persecuted Christians. The most valuable is the biography of a virgin named Thecla, who is said to have traveled with the Apostle Paul.

The story of Thecla is one of the most influential stories in the development of early Christianity, although it is not included in the biblical canon. Thecla was a virgin who was pledged to be married. She heard the Apostle Paul one day while he was teaching and decided to follow him. What follows is a series of events quite typical to the literature of the period. Thecla is arrested and sent to the gladiator games to be killed. She is protected by God due to her holiness. After this, she receives the blessing of Paul to teach the Word. Thecla is a very unusual woman in that regard. Later, women promised to virginity were given the name of Thecla in honor of her piety.

Outside of these biographies and journals, the theologians Methodius, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom all wrote treatises on virginity. Of these, Methodius is said to have written earliest. These people mostly wrote about virginity as liberation from society and from marriage. Why is that important? Most of the early church theologians

in the Western tradition, following the thought of Augustine of Hippo, saw sexual relations as a punishment for original sin. Therefore, sex should only be used for procreation. That is why they praised virginity so highly. Virginity keeps a young woman pure and chaste, abstemious from sexual relations and dedicated to Christ. This was the position in the Western Empire. In the East, the correlation between sin and sex was not as directly understood. That is why in the East, the priests are able to marry.

One of the most important virgins is the sister of Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Macrina the Younger. Macrina was the older sister of the family who gave up her wealth to dedicate her life to virginity. She was originally arranged to be married, but the man she was supposed to marry died before the wedding. In response, she decided that Christ was her eternal bridegroom. She is known for establishing a community of virgins on her parents' estate. For all of these reasons, her brother Gregory wrote about her in great affection in the *Life of Saint Macrina*. In this work, he praises his sister's virginity, piety, and asceticism, even while she is on her deathbed.

Other primary sources include the Pauline Epistles included in the Bible, particularly 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. The Apostle Paul both praised and warned women in his writings. Paul's letters have been used in modern society to demean women or to keep them silent in the church. Indeed, perhaps that was Paul's original intention while writing to that particular Christian community. It is important to remember that all of these primary sources were written to a certain group or groups in a certain time and place. We should also remember that 1 Timothy, which is used to demean women, was probably not written by Paul. In that sense, it is easy to see why the value of women may decrease in the eyes of its author.

The problem with most of these primary sources for understanding women in the early church is that men wrote the majority of them. Because of this, they express a male dominated point of view. Even the biographies of the holy women are written by men probably for men. This can present a problem from a historical or sociological point of view. There are few writings from these women themselves that have survived. Even the wealthy women who practiced virginity did not leave many writings. What is left is written by men in power, raising the question of whose voice we hear in these sources.

That is why the prison diary of a martyr named Perpetua is so valuable. This is a diary written mostly by a woman herself in her own voice. Perpetua is an aristocratic woman who converted to Christianity. She kept a diary when she was put into prison, awaiting execution.

Most of these primary sources I am reading come from the translation of Patricia Cox Miller's *Women in Early Christianity*. She has compiled a set of documents from theologians to treatises to the biographies of the ascetic women, divided the documents by topic. Included with these documents are translations of the Apostle Paul especially the passages from 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy prohibiting women from speaking in the church. Other primary sources come from Caroline White's *Lives of Roman Christian Women*. Just like Miller's book, this book contains documents of various women and their roles in the church in full. The excerpts White has used are also slightly different from Miller's.

Most of the material contain in White's work are Jerome's letters addressed to women who are either virgins or pledging to become virgins. Jerome was a former monk who lived in Rome. As a result of this, he knew a lot of the aristocratic women

who gave up their wealth for Christ. Many of his letters to them are praising them as well as giving them instructions for properly living the virgin life.

A third source for this study is New Testament writings. I will use the NRSV version adopted by most academics. The translations are more accurate to the original Greek.

As for secondary sources, there are several sources that will apply to this research. A particularly valuable source has been Kate Cooper's book *Band of Angels: the Forgotten World of Early Christian Women*. The book is an exploration of various women and the roles that they played in the early church. Cooper's book is unique because it explores roles based on class, using a sociological and archaeological method. She explores the ruins of the once great cities to see what life was really like when these women lived. She also explores the life of the Empress Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great. In her preface, Cooper explains the background of society and why she structured her book like she did. She tries to piece together the connections and the differences between "heroines of legend," whose stories may have been exaggerated, and the historical women.

It is important to recognize that the accounts of the women that have survived may be exaggerated slightly. The goal of such biographies and exhortation was to encourage other Christians, especially if they were persecuted. Cooper argues that the majority of women may have been "invisible" because men were focused on institutions and tradition. The "invisible" women, according to Cooper, are the seemingly unimportant women whose actions helped to spread Christianity.

Karen Jo Torjesen, in *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church & the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, argues that, in early Christianity, women did have roles in the ministry at one point. This was possible before the rise of institutionalism-the rise of church buildings. Before churches were built, Christians met in homes and in other small groups, and, women had a prominent role in the religion. However, that all changed with the rise of church buildings and institutions. The political and economic roles of the religion began to change and shift. The Greco-Roman world had certain beliefs on gender that had an impact on Christianity. Men were to exhibit honor and precedence. Women, in contrast, were to exhibit shame. A woman's shame was related to her reputation for chastity and virginity. As the church developed, people began to question women's leadership and ministry. This, then, had an impact on theology, sexuality, and sin--hence, the scandal as referred to in the subtitle of Torjesen's book. The "scandal" is that women are to subordinate to men in ministry and leadership despite the fact they once had power of their own.

The sources for this thesis are varied and valuable. Most of these sources are from the male centered viewpoint, and because of that, an interrogation of their content is necessary to discern what women's roles were and how they themselves understood them.

Previously, we have examined sources of this information. Chapter Two is an introduction to virginity. It examines the developments of Christian theology pertaining to women. The chapter also discusses some aspects of ancient fertility and Greco-Roman society. Chapter Three examines three virgin women who are especially praised in holy

writings. The reason why these women and others are valued will be discussed as well. Taking into account the fact that these writings are mostly from a male perspective, these women are raised to almost god-like figures. In some ways, they are presented as the ideal Christian women. Finally, Chapter Four is a discussion of the theologies of virginity and marriage, the opposite of virginity. Jerome presents virginity as the ideal. He advocates total celibacy even within a marriage. In contrast, Clement of Alexandria focuses more on the importance of marriage. Clement's writings will especially contrast with the earlier writings on virginity. If virginity represents a separation into this ideal, marriage represents raising children in honor of God.

CHAPTER 2

AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN VIRGINITY

The overall subject of this thesis is the role of women in the early church. Determining this role is difficult because of the seemingly contradictory evidence for those roles. In this chapter, we will examine the role of Christian virginity as a vocation and theological implications of that role for the development of the early Christian church. For this chapter, the role of women will be examined starting with the Apostle Paul and up the life of the bishop Athanasius in order to see the correlation in attitudes about virginity and Christian marriage.

Christian Virginity

Despite beliefs to the contrary, women had slightly greater power and authority in the church. This power began to shift as the church developed. The reasons of this shift in power are difficult to determine. What is certain is that many factors caused women's authority and power to shift in the early church. Because of this, it can be difficult to determine what women's roles were. One clear way women were able to achieve power and respect was to dedicate themselves as virgins to the church and to God. These virgins dedicated themselves to Christ by living as "brides of the church." These virgins were given high praise and honor in the writings of the early male theologians who

developed Christianity. There are few writings that have survived that seem to have been written by women. One such example is the story of Perpetua, a wealthy woman who was martyred. Her prison diary has survived in her voice, and that is a valuable source into what it was like for a woman facing death. Despite the shortage of writings written by women in their voice, their stories were written down by men in honor of their exploits. These writings cover different topics, but they all deal with the idea of virginity and asceticism. Such writings include personal letters to virgins, biographies expressing honor or on women's behavior. Among these include several treatises on virginity and women's behavior by some early church theologians. These treatises are filled with instructions and assess the theological impact of virginity. These treatises will be explained in greater detail below.

Introduction to Asceticism

A greater background of the world and of virginity is needed to understand the place of virginity. Christianity developed during the days and in the social context of the Greco-Roman Empire. Because of this, the early Christians had to find a way to separate themselves from the greater Greco-Roman world. In some ways, women had some limited power in the Roman world, especially if they were aristocratic women. Roman women were able to have a comparable amount of freedom, especially compared to women following Judaism. Roman women were able to hold jobs and to own businesses. Women also occupied roles that were less powerful, as prostitutes and fortunetellers. Women had power in the religious sphere. Prophetesses, called Sybils, were said to have been oracles that interpreted messages from the gods and foretold

the future. Women also had a measure of power in the “mystery religions.” These factors are the reason why so many early heresies focused on women’s authority and power in the early church.

What kinds of authority did Christian women exercise? Before virginity and asceticism became popular, there were other ways for women to earn respect and honor. Some Christian women were able to have respect as teachers in the private sphere. The early years of Christianity were a time of turbulence, persecutions and martyrdoms, as reflected in Perpetua’s narrative. Perpetua is an aristocratic woman who has a newborn son. The main conflict of her story is her relationship with her father, the male figure of the household. Her father begins to plead with her to dishonor her faith in Christ. Perpetua is sentenced to death for her faith, which she sticks to. Although Perpetua is disobeying her father, she is obeying someone greater than him. Perpetua is an example of a martyred woman who is sometimes considered to be “masculine” for dying for her faith. In that sense, she is no longer seen as a woman but as a full person.

This is also when the notion of virginity becomes a source of honor and of independence. Asceticism is one mode of independence. Asceticism is the giving up of basic necessities in order to live a life for God. This includes the giving up of food, possessions, and sexual relations. It was seen as an ideal for women. In her book *When Women were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church & the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, Karen Jo Torjesen writes about the appeal of asceticism to women.

For many women the heroic figure of Thecla celebrated in the popular *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a second-century collection of stories associated with the Apostle Paul embodied the ascetic ideal. For an aristocratic woman like Thecla, the renunciation of the world was summed up in the single act of renouncing an

arranged marriage. In so doing she asserted her own autonomy-her right of disposal over her body and her sexuality. In the new context of the ascetic movement women were no longer valued for their reproductive sexuality, and a new ideal of womanhood was created-that of the consecrated virgin.¹

She goes on to write, “By renouncing ‘the world’, they gained control over their own sexuality...Fourth-century writers on asceticism envisioned the virgin lifestyle as a return to the original state of human life, before the fall, sin, and sexual intercourse.”² Torjesen’s argument is that by renouncing such pleasures like food and sexual relations, women were able to become in her own words, “honorary men.” Virginitiy and asceticism became a key way for women to achieve respect. Because the culture at the time expressed male virtues as ideal, asceticism was a way for women to have power in the Christian church. Gregory of Nyssa, writing two hundred years after Thecla’s story has been written down, suggests:

For just as souls are freed from their bodies by death and at the same time liberated from the cares of this life, so was their [Gregory’s mother and sister] existence separated from these things, removed from all of life’s vanity and fashioned in harmonious imitation of the angels.³

Asceticism and virginitiy were paths to remove oneself from the sins of society. By doing such an action, they hoped to return to life as it was before sin. As Christian theology developed, another idea began to develop: that the desire for sex and sexual

¹ Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church & the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (New York: Harper One, 1993), 209-210.

² *Ibid.*, 210.

³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Saint Macrina*, trans. Patricia Cox Miller (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 196.

relations led to sin. The way to combat this was to prevent desire for sex. Virginity was a pure and chaste way of achieving this perfection.

Fertility and Ancient Society

Torjesen's argument also includes her commentary on virginity and sin. Theologians expressed the belief that original sin--the doctrine that human beings were born sinful due to the actions of Adam and Eve in the garden--happened because of sex. In other words, Eve and her sexuality caused the fall of men. Theologians suggested that humanity was created without sexual desire or sexual relations. This argument will lead into the next point in this paper: are sex and sexual relations in it a bad thing? Or is it our desire to sin that causes sex to be labeled a sin?

Fertility and sex were important in ancient religions. Ancient religions, such as those in Canaan and Mesopotamia, worshipped fertility gods connected to the harvest.⁴ To worship these gods, devotees engaged in ritual prostitution through temple prostitution. To the worshippers of these fertility gods, sex was a way to arouse these gods and help the land. For people from Babylon and Mesopotamia, sex was a part of the culture. Even in the Greco-Roman culture, people worship various gods and goddesses in various cults. The devotion to these gods suggested a life of sin and sexual desire. The issue for Christians in that time was how to negotiate the world they lived in and how to treat sexual relations and sex in general.

⁴ Examples of such gods feature in the Hebrew Bible like Ashtoreth and Ishtar.

John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, and Sex

Christian theologians began to make a connection with sexuality and sin. Their interpretations of Genesis 3 linked the fall of mankind to sex and the desire of sex to original sin. This is a concept that began to develop when writers like John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo began to influence Christian thought. In Chrysostom's *On Virginit*y, he writes:

Adam and Eve remained apart from marriage, leading the sort of life in Paradise they would have led had they been in Heaven, luxuriating in their association with God. Desire for sexual relations, conception, labor pains, childbirth, and every form of corruptibility was removed from their soul. As a clear stream flows forth from a pure source, so in that place were they adorned in virginity.⁵

To Chrysostom, Adam and Eve had no part or room for marriage as long as they remained perfect and sinless. The first humans were virgin in the sense that they were without desire for sexual relations. If Adam and Eve did engage in sexual relations, it was “perfect sex,” without carnal desire to overcome one another. After Adam and Eve were created, God says to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”⁶ Perhaps Adam and Eve could have sexual relations but for procreation. Sex came with corruptibility, or sin.

The above summarizes Chrysostom's views towards not just virginity but marriage as well: “However, when they shed the princely raiment of virginity and laid aside their heavenly attire...in their wake came marriage; marriage, a garment befitting

⁵ John Chrysostom, *On Virginit*y, trans. Elizabeth Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, ed. Clark. (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), 122-123.

⁶ Genesis 1:28, New International Version

mortals and slaves.”⁷ He continues, expressing the belief that marriage is completely unnecessary. It came about due to our sin and our passion and desire. He states that although God had no need to grant marriage to us for measures of procreation, he allowed marriage to help quench passion and desire. Therefore, it is better to remain as virgins and to remain pure and chaste in the eyes of God.

Another writer who wrote about sexuality and sin is the theologian Augustine of Hippo. Today, Augustine is regarded as one of the most influential Christian thinkers in the Western World. Augustine was a former pagan who was addicted to sexuality and women. Before his conversion to Christianity, he had a lot of relationships with various women. It was a part of the society he lived in: one could not be a true man unless he embraced sexual relations. When Augustine finally converted to Christianity, he found that he had to renounce his previous sexual behavior. What he discovered was that, while he could stop the behavior, it was harder to renounce the desire for sex and sin. For Augustine, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden, their rational nature was overcome by their irrational natures, thus creating the desire for sin. This is why Adam and Eve’s eyes were opened. As a result of their sin, the rest of humankind was born with the desire to sin.

Original sin is the hereditary sin that consumes the world. Augustine believes it is transmitted by procreation. Here is what he says about sin and sexuality:

Since Adam transmits death to his children by way of generation when he begets them mortal, it is by generation also that he transmits to them sin, for the Apostle presents these two effects as produced at the same time and by the same causality. The explanation of the Pelagians differs from that of St. Paul. According to them the child who receives mortality at his birth receives sin from

⁷ John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, ed. Patricia Cox Miller in *Women in the Early Church* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 109.

Adam only at a later period when he knows the sin of the first man and is inclined to imitate it. The causality of Adam as regards mortality would, therefore, be completely different from his causality as regards sin. Moreover, this supposed influence of the bad example of Adam is almost chimerical; even the faithful when they sin do not sin on account of Adam's bad example, a fortiori infidels who are completely ignorant of the history of the first man. And yet all men are, by the influence of Adam, sinners and condemned (Romans 5:18, 19). The influence of Adam cannot, therefore, be the influence of his bad example which we imitate. (Augustine, "Contra Julian.", VI, xxiv, 75)

Because of Adam and Eve's sin, sexuality became rooted in sin according to Augustine, through excessive desire or lust. As Augustine noticed during his sexual escapades, it is impossible to overcome this desire to sin, even in marriage. Augustine permitted sexuality only as a way for procreation, or having children. Any sexual activity outside of that is sinful. This is a stark contrast to the ancient religions, which embraced fertility and sexual intercourse. From Augustine's theology comes the emphasis on Christian virginity as something pure and holy, a return to perfection.

Instructions to Virgins

Augustine was not the only theologian writing about sexuality, marriage, and virginity. Many works contained instructions on how to live a pure life for Christ. One such example of a treatise such as this is by Athanasius, a theologian from Alexandria, in *Second Letter to Virgins*. Athanasius wrote about a practice called spiritual marriage, a type of arrangement wherein a man and a woman lived together in a chaste marriage.⁸ This practice helped female virgins live safely before the establishment of

⁸ Patricia Cox Miller writes, "A man and woman who had both taken vows of sexual continence lived together in a chaste but non-legalized partnership...for female partners in particular, this living arrangement provided a way to live an ascetic life before monasteries for women were widely available."

monasteries. Yet, Athanasius, as well as John Chrysostom, opposed this practice because it threatened the state of virginity.

Athanasius wrote several letters to virgins instructing them not to follow spiritual marriage. His *Second Letter to Virgins* was addressed to virgins hoping to go into such a practice. In it, he urges them to guard their virginity and describes the relationship they are to have with the true bridegroom: “Virginity is like an enclosed garden that is not trodden upon by anyone, except its gardener alone. Be careful that no merciless stranger spoils the manifold seedlings and beautiful blossoms of the garden...that no one fills the paradise of sweet fragrance with a foul odor.”⁹

Why was a practice such as spiritual marriage so condemned by the early church? One of the reasons was the belief that virgins are to be dedicated to God alone. Athanasius writes: “Therefore, remove yourself from fleshly and human love O virgin! Rather, turn and seek him whom your soul loved.”¹⁰ Over and over again, theologians write to virgins to remain pure and steadfast. Living with a man even in a spiritual marriage is a type of compromise towards virginity: “Not in this way were you delivered from sin; indeed this is another kind of prostitution. You remained free from wantonness--in body, not in soul. You carry out the sinful deed, if not by intercourse, then by the eyes.”¹¹

If, for theologians, virginity was an ideal way of life for women, how did women feel about such a way of life? There are not many writings that have survived that were

⁹ Athanasius, *Second Letter to Virgins*, ed. Patricia Cox Miller in *Women in the Early Church* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 122

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹¹ John Chrysostom, *On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*, ed. Patricia Clark Miller in *Women in the Early Church* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 140.

written in their voices. The writings that have survived are written from the male theological viewpoint. This changes the perspective of women on this period. In the male writings, virginity is an ideal that is to be followed as closely as possible. The women who are to engage in virginity are to set an example for others in the church.

In the next section, there will be an examination of particular virgins in the early church, women honored and praised by the church fathers. Why were these women praised so highly?

CHAPTER 3

A TALE OF THREE VIRGINS: MARY, THECLA AND MACRINA

Mary, Mother of Jesus and Other Women in the Gospels

In the earlier section of this thesis, there was an overall examination of the role of Christian virginity and sexual behavior. This section will discuss the lives and theological impact of a group of virgins who lived in this early period. These virgins are exemplars of how women were to act in the early church. Although there are other unnamed and other respected virgins, the above are some of the most influential of the early church.

Women have been a part of Christianity ever since its beginnings in the Jesus movement. After all, women followed Jesus around Galilee and provided for him. He even allowed women to talk to him, and Mary of Bethany even sat at his feet listening to Jesus despite being a woman--a Jewish woman at that. Therefore, even if women are not disciples, there seem to be an importance to women in Jesus' ministry. This seems to be a contrast to the subordination of women in the culture. Therefore, it is important to examine women in the New Testament.

Christianity originally came from Judaism, and Jesus' original message was to prepare Israel for the coming of the messiah. Jesus would have adhered to Jewish law, as a Jewish rabbi. The New Testament contains several stories about women receiving compassion and mercy. This is important in several ways. The first and most important

way is his interaction with women. Jewish rabbis normally did not allow women to be students. The fact that Jesus is a male rabbi talking to women would have been seen as controversial in and of itself. Women in Jesus' day were usually expected to bear children and to take care of the household. A woman without a husband or sons may have well been considered an unimportant figure in society.¹² This is why an important passage in the Gospels concerns a group of women.

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.¹³

There are some important things to notice from these verses. The most important is probably the most unusual in the society of that time. It says that the women support them out of their own means. Why is that significant? As mentioned, women typically did not follow rabbis nor were they allowed to be students. Only Joanna's husband is mentioned in the passage. He is Herod's steward. Joanna not only follows a Jewish rabbi but also has the means to help support him financially--but what about the others? There is no mention of the other women having either husbands or families that were following Jesus. In fact, many women in the gospel accounts are not mentioned with having families, husbands or sons. Either the families are unimportant to the narrative or they were widows and had nowhere else to go.

¹² Of course, it is easy to make assumptions as to the value of these women. Was Judaism really as strict as some make it out to be? Certain viewpoints may see that. Although women did in some areas have a lower status compared to their male counterparts, they were respected in some areas for being mothers. Later Jewish material emphasizes honoring both mother and father, for example. Determining the true value of women under Judaism is a situation that can be explored another time.

¹³ Luke 8:1-3, New Revised Standard Version

The second key aspect of this passage is that fact that the women were able to help support Jesus and his disciples financially. The passage never says how these women managed to support Jesus along with his disciples. Whatever method they used is not important. What is important is that these women helped minister to Jesus even if he was not part of their social class.

Luke's gospel also contains the story of two Jewish sisters inviting Jesus into their home. This is unusual because the Greek used in that verse says that it is Martha's home. If the house that these sisters lived in belonged to their husbands or father, would it not be mentioned in the text? Perhaps this issue is the same as the other women mentioned in Luke's gospel--that the male relatives in this story are simply not mentioned at all in the text and/or that these sisters are widows or unmarried, though it is surprising that they are able to host Jesus and his disciples in the latter case. This is another example of a woman acting outside of a role traditionally allowed. As for Mary, Martha's sister, she sits at the feet of Jesus and listens to him. That is something that would have created controversy at Jesus' time. A rabbi like Jesus would not usually allow women to listen to him. Mary being allowed to listen to Jesus suggests that women have a part in the kingdom of God as well.

Jesus' perception of women and virginity also carries over to his teachings themselves. One of the most important of these teachings occurs in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus makes an interesting statement in chapter 19. In it, he is teaching his disciples about divorce. Jesus commands his disciples not to divorce except for unchastity. The disciples then say that it is a hard teaching to follow. In verse 11, Jesus begins his teaching. "But he said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but

only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”¹⁴ Although Jesus says little about virginity, he does express this particular statement about eunuchs, a type of male virgin. Jesus is expressing the difficulty of living a virgin lifestyle. There are people who have specifically been chosen by God to live this lifestyle. Because of this, virginity can be seen as a type of vocation—something that one is called to do by God.

Of course, the most significant woman in Christianity is Mary, the mother of Jesus. Although she does not feature in many stories in the synoptic gospels, she is still an important character. Mary’s story begins with her being engaged to a man named Joseph. By Jewish law, Mary and Joseph were considered to be husband and wife. The difference from actual marriage was that they were neither able to live together nor could they have sexual relations.¹⁵ Because of this, Mary was expected to be a virgin until she and Joseph were legally married. Mt 1:18 says, “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶

This is where the main conflict in Mary’s story comes into play. Adultery was treated

¹⁴ Matthew 19:10-12, New Revised Standard Version

¹⁵ Brown suggests that in parts of Judea, it was permitted for a betrothed husband and wife to visit one another before officially becoming husband and wife. In that case, marital relations were not completely condemned. Brown also suggests that the law was a bit more lenient in Galilee. In addition, the Gospel of Matthew seems to presuppose the belief that Mary was to remain a virgin until Joseph officially took her into his home—the final step of marriage. Brown, Raymond, ed. *Mary in the New Testament*. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1978), 83-84.

¹⁶ Matthew 1:18, New Revised Standard Version

very seriously by the Israelites in Mary's day. The law commanded an adulterous woman be put to death.¹⁷ Mary being pregnant before her marriage would have caused a scandal in society.

She was not found out due to Joseph's actions and divine intervention: "Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly."¹⁸ In other words, he planned to put her aside. As Mary was an unwed woman who was supposedly pregnant out of wedlock, this most likely would have amounted to her life being ruined. This does not happen to her because of divine intervention. An angel from the Lord comes to Joseph and tells him she is pregnant due to the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ The story in Matthew closes with the words, "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus."²⁰

The ending of Matthew 1 says that Joseph did have relations with Mary until she had borne Jesus who is described as the firstborn son. The use of the title "firstborn son" suggests that there may have been other siblings in this family. These brothers are listed in the Gospel of Mark: "Is this [referring to Jesus] not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James, and Joses, and Judas, and Simon, and are not his

¹⁷ The law referenced here may be found in Deuteronomy 22:20-21, where a woman who is not a virgin before her wedding is to be 'cut off from her people'-perhaps meaning being put to death.

¹⁸ Matthew 1:19, New Revised Standard Version

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

sisters here with us?”²¹ This suggests that they may have been Jesus’ siblings from at least Mary. An alternative is that they are Joseph’s children with a previous wife. Notice that this specific text only says that Jesus was Mary’s son. This can be an inference that the townspeople know that Jesus is not Joseph’s son biologically.

This passage introduces Jesus’ siblings. Tradition states that one of these, James, was the leader of the Christian church in Jerusalem. However, certain traditions of Christianity state that Mary was a perpetual virgin even after Jesus’ birth. Although the theology concerning Mary’s virginity would not be fully developed for many years, it has its starts in the Gospels.

The first theologians to talk about perpetual virginity were living in the second century C.E. The doctrine of perpetual virginity states that Mary is and always will be a virgin. Her birth of Jesus happens due to miraculous power and the Holy Spirit. Because of these events, Jesus is her only biological son. That means that the people named James, Joses, Judas and Simon are not her own biological children. If that is the case, then why are these individuals called Jesus’ brothers? In the Greco-Roman world, “brothers” was a term that was used in a broader sense than it is today. In that sense, James and the others could be Jesus’ cousins. Alternatively, certain other traditions have them being Joseph’s sons from a previous marriage.²² One tradition that explicitly states these were Joseph’s children from a different marriage is a document called the

²¹ Mark 6:3 New Revised Standard Version

²² One such tradition is the *Protoevangelium of James*. I support Brown’s assertion that the Protoevangelium of James should not be read as a purely historical document of Mary’s life. The Protoevangelium’s claim is that the ones called Jesus’ brothers in Mark are really Jesus’ ‘kinsmen’-a relative of his. This brings up the question that if they are Jesus’ cousins or other relation, why are they in the household of Mary instead of in their own households? These and other questions are not so easily answered. Brown, Raymond, ed. *Mary in the New Testament*. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1978), 67

Protoevangelium of James.²³ This document is one of several that attest to Mary's perpetual virginity. It also attests to Mary's piety and devotion to God, attributes that will show up in later Christian virgins.

As the mother of Jesus, Mary was in a unique position during the development of the early church. It was eventually established by the church theologians at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. that Jesus is both human and divine. Because of Mary's status as the mother of Jesus, several heresies rose up to either undermine or increase her influence. The most important of these heresies is Nestorianism, the beliefs of an early theologian named Nestorius. Nestorius was a leader and a bishop who taught that Mary bore the "Christ" only in the human side of Jesus. This made Mary the bearer of the Christ and not of the begotten son of God. By denying Jesus' divinity, it undermined Mary's position as the mother of God. Eventually, Nestorius was branded as a heretic and his teachings were condemned.

From the Catholic tradition came the idea that Mary is the "Queen of Heaven"-- a title that comes from an ancient fertility goddess.²⁴ As mentioned before, fertility goddesses were especially worshipped for helping fertility and agriculture thrive the land. Pope Pius XII made this pronouncement official to the Roman Catholic Church in *Ad Caeli Reginam* (1954). She is also the queen of the saints that help intercede for us on our behalf.

²³ Ibid, 66. I am grateful for Brown's word study of the Semitic and Greek studies of the word adelphos. Brown's suggestion is that they are referred to in a similar way to the Semitic version--that they are addressed as 'kinsmen' because the people of Nazareth would have been more familiar with Aramaic rather than Greek--hence, the broader usage of *adelphos*.

²⁴ In certain pagan societies, the title "Queen of Heaven" is used for a title of certain fertility goddesses. These goddesses were worship to help increase fertility, usually through ritual prostitution. In the Old Testament, this was used most likely as reference to Ishtar, a Canaanite goddess of fertility and a consort of Baal. Giving a title such as this to Mary would suggest that she is a goddess herself, with great power.

Mary is also said to have been born without the taint of original sin. This is the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which states that Mary is the only person born without this. Catholic teaching also states that Mary was assumed bodily to heaven without dying. Likewise, Mary is also one of the saints in the church—one of the people who intercedes to God for us on our behalf. Catholic teaching also states that Mary remained a virgin her whole life, which is in contrast to Protestantism which argues that this suggests worship of Mary herself. Catholics argue that Mary is the perfect disciple—the one person who puts God first above all others.

In the Eastern, Orthodox, church, she is understood as the *Theotokos*, the bearer of the Son and the Word of God. This understanding emerged from the Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in 431. This doctrine posits that she is ever-virgin—before, during, and eternally after the birth of Jesus.

Mary the mother of Jesus shows up most prominently in the Gospel of John, in which she is the one who helps Jesus develop his first sign or miracle.²⁵ She orders the servants to do whatever Jesus says. Jesus, using the water that the servants bring, turns water into wine. Later on, she struggles to understand Jesus' true mission. She and Jesus' brothers try to take Jesus home with them, thinking that he is insane. Most notably, she is one of those standing at the cross at Jesus' crucifixion in the Gospel of John. "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."²⁶

²⁵ Gospel of John 2. 1-12. New Revised Standard Version.

²⁶ Gospel of John 19:26-27. New Revised Standard Version.

This is another passage some have used to establish Mary's virginity. If she had other biological sons, then she would be supported by one of them and not by Jesus' disciple.

Thecla

Writings on virginity and living a chaste life have existed since the beginnings of the church. People pledged themselves to virginity for different reasons. Some people married and only had sexual relations for procreation. Some marriages did not even do that; they lived together but not as husband and wife. Others remained virgins from life events like the deaths of husbands. Whatever the case, the development of Christian virginity marked a change in Christianity.

The stories of these virgins have been collected over time. As for the historical truth of these stories, that is not important. What is important to realize is that several themes consistently resonate throughout the stories of these virgins. Virginity was seen in many cases as something honorable to be desired. The Early Church Fathers wrote about virginity and how it may protect women from impurity. The elements of impurity is a tradition that has evolved over time which I will explore later. But for now, let's explore one of the earliest stories about virginity. It is about a young woman who decides to dedicate herself to God and break her upcoming marriage. Thecla's story was seen later as an inspiration to other virgin women.

The story of Thecla seems to take on themes to the literature of its time. The Apostle Paul is traveling and preaching the word and the resurrection of Christ. In the city he is preaching in, a young woman is sitting in the window listening to him preach. Paul is preaching that people must fear the one God, and live in chastity. The story

starts the conflict by saying that the woman, Thecla, is a virgin engaged to be married. This means that she is not yet married to her husband. The story also states that she is a “noble woman.” This could describe her virtue. She is sitting in the window listening to Paul’s teaching showing that she is being drawn to the Word of God. This could also describe her station in life. “Noble” suggests that she may have wealth in her family. Thecla’s conversion would have rocked the household. Indeed, everyone in the household weeps for her for she decides to remain a virgin. The man, Thamyris, is a man of importance, so Thecla’s marriage to him would bring some stability to her family. Thamyris decides to bring Thecla to be accused. He uses Christianity and Paul as a scapegoat it seems.

Why does Thecla’s mother have such a harsh reaction towards her daughter’s conversion? Kate Cooper argues that Thecla’s mother condemns her own daughter to death to show how Christianity affected the Roman Empire. In her words:

Theocleia’s harsh reaction her daughter’s conversion--“Burn the lawless one!”--is more than simply the reaction of a parent who has been provoked beyond endurance by a difficult child. The story is designed to show how the new faith had turned the world upside down. Christian literature of the period is full of stories of families that had been torn apart by religion. Mothers had been set against daughters, and brothers against brothers. Parents felt it was their duty to steer their children towards piety for the old gods.²⁷

According to Cooper, then, the story of Thecla is not just a story about a woman defying tradition. It is the story of a torn family. Cooper’s sentence about parents steering their children towards piety does make sense. The Roman Empire of the day

²⁷ Kate Cooper, *Band of Angels* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2013), 79.

was filled with gods and mystery religions around. For the first couple of centuries, Christianity was just another example of one of these mystery religions. Naturally, Thecla's mother would have been concerned about Thecla's piety. Ironically, Thecla does have piety but it's not to the old gods. This is the part of the argument that I agree with. Later on, Cooper talks more about the family structure of the early days of the Church:

To hear the word meant giving up hopes and expectations that did not serve God's plan for humanity, and even refusing to fulfill obligations, however pious they might otherwise seem...Many Christians believed that the faith community itself could-and perhaps should-offer the kind of safety and support that characterizes a good family.²⁸

It seems that Cooper's argument is that the coming of the Kingdom of God is more important than anything on earth. This is an argument that recurs: everybody has to prepare for the kingdom of God. Of course, people thought that the second coming of Christ would happen immediately. They probably were not expecting such a long delay. I think when they realized that, they had to develop their ideals. How does one prepare for such an event? The solution for most, especially those on the upper margins of society, is to follow what Jesus says in the Gospels like "Go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me."²⁹ Another saying of Jesus that I infer from the above passage from Cooper is "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or

²⁸ Kate Cooper, *Band of Angels* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2013), 82.

²⁹ Mark 10:21, New Revised Standard Version

daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”³⁰ Later on, the Apostle Paul writes to keep ready for the coming of the kingdom.

But first, we will return to Thelca’s particular story. As mentioned earlier, Thecla becomes so interested in Paul’s teaching that she decides to devote herself to Christ. Therefore, she breaks of her engagement, something which her fiancé did not like. Thecla’s mother and fiancé were concerned for her. They try to get her to step away from the window and to not listen to Paul. But Thecla refuses. The text says that her mother, fiancée and servants all mourn for her as if she is dead. After they get Paul arrested, Thecla sneaks in to see him and is eventually arrested. First, she is sentenced to be burned at the stake. But because of her new faith in God, she is saved. From here, the story narrates her various trials and rescues.

Thecla soon travels to Antioch, where a nobleman desires her. In other words, he wants to marry her. Thecla does something that is considered shameful: she humiliates the man who is trying to embrace her. One must think about why she does this. Since Thecla promised herself to God, she is a virgin to Christ alone. As a young woman, Thecla would have little power in the society that she lived in. Surely, she must have known she is condemning herself to death. Indeed, the man has her arrested her once again, and she is sentenced to be mauled by wild beasts. Thecla asks the governor that she may be kept pure. As a virgin of Christ, she hopes to keep her body pure to enter the kingdom of God.

Luckily for Thecla, she has a patron in Queen Tyrphaena, a wealthy woman who has lost her own daughter. Tyrphaena asks Thecla to pray for her and her daughter in order that may be saved. She obliges because Tyrphaena kept her pure and holy in

³⁰ Matthew 10:37, New Revised Standard Version

time for death. The narrative describes Thecla praying as the wild animals came towards her. She baptizes herself and is protected by fire, so no one sees her nakedness and she will not be shamed publicly. Finally, they have run out of animals to torture her with. The city recognizes her pious nature and sets her free. The Apostle Paul gives Thecla his blessing to go out and teach the Word of the Lord. So Thecla finishes the rest of the story preaching and becoming a missionary. Some versions end with her establishing one of the first communities for virgins. Others say that she continues traveling and teaching. In any cases, Thecla is an example for women who want to follow Christ despite her sex or her class.

Thecla is an example of a woman who follows Christ by turning her back on her old life. Because of this, she is given great praise by the early church fathers. Gregory of Nyssa, who praised his own sister for her holiness, said Thecla was a role model for being equal to the disciples. Her name was sometimes given to young virgins pledging themselves to Christ. One virgin who had the secret name of Thecla was a woman named Macrina.

Macrina

Gregory of Nyssa writes about his sister Macrina as a virgin. Her story is written by her brother, the influential theologian Gregory of Nyssa. Macrina is the elder sister in their family who was close to her mother. Gregory describes the birth of his sister and her future destiny:

When the time came when she [Emmelia, Gregory's mother] was to be freed from her labor pain by giving birth to the child, she fell

asleep...someone in suprahuman majesty of form and shape appeared to address the little child by the name of Thecla, that Thecla of great fame among maidens. And so that was Macrina's secret name. In my view, however, the figure who appeared declared this not so much to guide the mother in her choice of name as to foretell the life of the child and to point out, by identity of name, a similarity in their choice of life.³¹

Like many other young women in her era, Macrina is engaged to be married. However, her fiancé dies before they can marry. That leads to a problem. Should she be given in marriage to someone else or remain a widow? Macrina decides herself to remain a virgin to Christ and never marry again.

When the young man's death had broken off what had been decided for her, she called her father's decision a marriage, as if what had been decided for her had really happened and she determined to remain by herself for the rest of her life...Her parents brought up the subject of marriage to her on many occasions because of the many young men who as a result of her famed beauty, wanted to sue for her hand...it was improper not to keep faith with a husband who was away on a journey.³²

There are several things to infer from these few sentences. First is the marriage aspect of the above sentence. As I have said previously, marriage was an important part of life. Marriage represented security and money for many people. However, this family was already wealthy. So why the need for marriage in the first place then? One of the main responsibilities for women was to bear children, heirs to keep their money. That is why it is so important for Macrina to convince her mother to live as an ascetic woman.

³¹Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Saint Macrina*, trans. Patricia Cox Miller (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 193.

³² *Ibid.*, 195.

The other thing to infer from the above passage is her beauty. Gregory talks about how beautiful his sister is while she is growing up, and beauty equals goodness or piety. Macrina is no exception. Her brother notes that even though she concealed her beauty, people still noticed it. This girl must have been beautiful despite her many years of fasting and prayer. Macrina and the others knew that outward beauty did not matter. What really mattered was beauty towards Christ and to God.

Finally, Macrina's response to her fiancé's death should be noticed. Because he died before they could consummate the marriage, what should Macrina's status be? Her parents wanted her to remarry perhaps for security. However, due to her faith, Macrina said her husband was just on a journey, meaning he was in the glory of God. She considered it to be improper to marry someone else if her husband was waiting for her in the glory of God. After this event, she decides to devote herself to Christ. She and her mother give up their wealth and live as ascetics: they live as simply as possible. Later in her life, Macrina establishes a community for virgins on her parent's estate, of whom she was the teacher.

In the *Life of Saint Macrina*, Gregory of Nyssa uses certain language to describe his sister. He frequently calls attention to her holiness and piety. One statement addressed about Macrina is about how she is fed with her mother's milk and had never left the side of their mother. This is an important detail in light of Gregory's respect towards his sister. John Penniman, in "Fed to Perfection: Mother's Milk, Roman Family Values and the Transformation of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa," analyzes how Gregory equates breast milk with spiritual life. Breast milk is a metaphor for the true word of God. As infants, we are nourished with breast milk from our mothers. As Christians, we are to

receive nourishment from God in the same way. Macrina was the only one of the siblings to have been nursed by their mother. As she grew up, Macrina never left her mother's side and was an important person in their relationship. Because of this, Macrina fits the archetype of one who grows up nurturing others like she had been nurtured. Because of being fed Christian milk, Macrina was able to nurture many other young and old women.³³

Later in life, Macrina was known to be a teacher as well as a virgin. Because she was the head of her community, she could receive a lot of respect from other virgins. Her brother also noted her wisdom. In fact, he often calls her 'my teacher' as much as he does 'my sister.' Indeed, Macrina often seems to be the one more in control of her emotions as compared to her brother. One of Gregory's other writings are the writings on the Soul and resurrection. In it, Gregory and Macrina discuss topics like the resurrection and what is the soul. The occasion for this event is the death of their brother, the theologian Basil the Great. The thing is, Macrina herself is dying. From the beginning, Gregory paints her sister as the one in control. He writes of her, "She...allowed me to be swept along by the violence of my grief, and after this, tried to restrain me, tried to restrain me, guiding the disorder of my soul with her own ideas as if with a bridle."³⁴

The topic of virginity is an important one in the development of the early church. Contrary to popular belief, women were not invisible in the days of the early church. They were teachers, professors of wisdom, and caretakers of communities. Virgins

³³ John Penniman, "Fed to Perfection: Mother's Milk, Roman Family Values, and the Transformation of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa," *Church History* 84:3 (2015): 495-530. Accessed November 30, 2015.

³⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*, trans. Patricia Cox Miller (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 23.

were able to garner respect from others due to their holiness and piety. They exemplified how women should behave: there are comparisons to the model woman in Proverbs 30 and other passages. Virgins were the brides of Christ.³⁵ The actions of these three women showed that.

³⁵ A reference to this is Ephesians where the author tells wives to be submissive to their husbands because the husband is “head of the church.” Similarly, of 2 Corinthians 11:2 expresses that the church may be promised to Christ so that they may remain pure to him. Statements such as these help reflect the image of the church as the “bride to Christ.” Virgins were to emulate this in their lifestyles.

CHAPTER 4

THEOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF VIRGINITY AND MARRIAGE

As examined, for a time, the Christian church emphasized the concept of Christian virginity--that is, a girl or woman who gives herself up to Christ by refusing to participate in marriage. In the early church, most of the virgins were those who were from the wealthier areas of society. These include women such as Paula (a patron of Jerome) and other Christian women. Although there may have been virgins from poorer areas of society, their writings have not survived. Virginity was stated to be one of the ultimate things a virgin can do. However, not every woman was a virgin or lived the virgin lifestyle. Other women participated in Christianity by marrying. Although the earliest church figures recognized both marriage and virginity, it was virginity that was stressed as an important role in the religion. For example, the theologian John Chrysostom, in his early writings, critiqued the institution of marriage. Later, however, he began to recognize marriage as something holy. This shows that the early church recognized both virginity and marriage as possible ways of salvation despite emphasis of one over the other.

Virginity was emphasized for a long time. Virginity was prized mostly in the Roman Catholic Church, or what will become the Roman Catholic Church. There was also a reverence towards it in the Eastern Orthodoxy Church. Today there are nuns and monks who still work for the church as virgins. However, most Christians today probably do not consider them to be married to Christ as they were in the earliest days of the Christian Church. What happened in the church to cause this shift towards virginity and

to marriage? That is the subject of this section. It will examine the theologies of virginity and marriage. First, it will examine the beginnings of the institution of Christian marriage. Then it will examine the theology of Jerome, who was a strong proponent of total celibacy even within marriage. Jerome does this by writing to a young virgin. Within his letter, he also writes instructions on how to live. Jerome believed one must become a virgin both in body and in spirit. Then the section will discuss marriage as it pertains to Clement of Alexandria, a leader influenced by Greek philosophy. In contrast to Jerome and other leaders such as Augustine of Hippo, Clement prefers to discuss the state of marriage and its influence on Christianity.

Before discussing theologians and their views on marriage, it is important to discuss the definition of Christian marriage before all else. First, Christian marriage is a state of marriage that is recognized by God as well as the state. Marriage in this regard is regarded as something holy and unbreakable depending on denomination. This is an event that brings two people together and makes them into one. Sexuality is reserved only for those that are married. Sex between two people that are either not married or not married to each other is considered adultery, a sin in Christianity. Augustine, particularly, considered sex to be a consequence of the doctrine of original sin so it should be avoided as much as possible. Today, Christians can recognize marriage as a purely secular event. For purposes of this thesis, however, marriage is a Christian institution.

The topics of sex and marriage have always been “hot topics” in the development of Christianity. As early as the time of the Apostle Paul, the topics of marriage and sex were being debated. Paul himself seemed more in favor of virginity and celibacy,

making statements like, “It is well for a man not to touch a woman.”³⁶ At first, he seems in favor of remaining celibate because of his expectation of Christ’s return to Earth. He writes in the letter of 1 Corinthians:

I think in view of the upending crisis it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life and I would spare you that.³⁷

Paul seems to value celibacy as much as possible. However, he recognized the importance of marriage. Paul’s concern is whether or not people are ready for the return of Christ and not an attack on marriage on itself. Indeed, he says those who marry have earthly troubles. Other early Christian theologians have similar views: that marriage is a state of binding due to sin and desire. Many treaties were written to support virginity or celibacy in marriage.

Jerome and Celibacy

The theologian Jerome was a defender of virginity or celibacy in marriage. As with the majority of early theologians, Jerome believed sex was to be used solely for procreation, having children to fill the earth as it is written in Genesis: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.”³⁸ But if one is advocating celibacy and virginity, then it presents a slight contradiction in theology. Jerome has an answer to that particular question. The theologian Jerome lived in the very early days of the

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 7:1, New Revised Standard Version.

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 7:26-28, New Revised Standard Version.

³⁸ Genesis 1: 28, New Revised Standard Version.

Christian church. Among other things, he is known for translating the Bible into Latin. Jerome was a patron of wealthy widows and virgins. He urged women to become virgins for Christ. A particular letter of his that has survived is a letter addressed to a woman named Eustochium. In it, Jerome is encouraging her to remain a virgin in Christ. That is, she is to dedicate her life to perpetual virginity in honor of Christ. Why a life of virginity instead of marriage? Jerome explains this and other similar issues in this letter. In Jerome's point of view, virginity is the highest and purest stage a woman can live. If a woman is able, she is to be kept a virgin. Humankind was created as virgin in the Garden of Eden. A state of holy virginity is supposed to cause us to remember the days of creation.

What about marriage? According to Jerome, marriage is a blessing for it causes virgins to be born. By marrying, women can fill the earth with holy virgins and emulate paradise. Although Jerome prefers that everyone remain in a state of virginity, he also recognizes that there are some who are unable to remain in such a state. The curse of marriage is that it was never meant to be. Jerome argues that the first people were neither married nor had sexual relations in the garden. He writes, "In paradise Eve was a virgin, and it was only after the coats of skins that she began her married life."³⁹ That happens as a result of sin. Furthermore, he expresses the belief that virginity is how humanity was originally created. In *Against Jovani*, he writes, "During the resurrection, virginity will be the norm as it was in the garden. If likeness to the angels is promised us (and there is no difference of sex among the angels), we shall either be of no sex as are

³⁹ Jerome, *Letter to Eustochium*, trans. W. H. Fremantle. *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Ser. 2, Vol. VI (Edinburgh, 1892). <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/jerome-marriage.asp>.

the angels, or at all events which is clearly proved, though we rise from the dead in our own sex, we shall not perform the functions of sex” (Against Jovani, 36).⁴⁰ While the institution of marriage is given some recognition from Jerome, he never stops stressing the importance of Christian virginity, like his contemporary, Augustine of Hippo.

Virginity was often seen as a vocation. It was something that a woman was called by God to do. Not everyone could be a virgin. There were a number of rules that were imposed on virgins. It was not enough to just pledge oneself to God; there were required behaviors. Indeed, this is one of Jerome’s chief concerns.

In *Letter to Eustochium*, he writes to a young woman that is about to pledge herself to Christ. Jerome stresses that there are two kinds of virgins: there are the good virgins and the bad (foolish or evil) virgins. The evil virgins are the virgins who play the part. They keep themselves away from men, but they still think of them. For Jerome, that is not enough. One has to not only remain pure in body, but pure in thought as well. He writes, “Virginity may be lost with a thought. Such are evil virgins, virgins in the flesh, not in the spirit.”⁴¹ For Jerome, a virgin has to remain pure in both body and spirit. If not, there is the danger of compromise in faith. Various women in the scriptures have used their power to seduce men. He writes, “A man cannot use his eyes without danger.” Just looking at a woman invites sin in Jerome’s eyes. Therefore, it is a woman’s job to remain pure and holy.

In contrast, the good virgins are the ones that Eustochium needs to emulate. The good virgin keeps her eyes away from lust. She keeps her eyes on Christ alone. Other virgins lived similarly. The influential virgin Melania the Younger would fast for many

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

days and nights, sleep in a tiny cell that she could hardly move in and pray unceasingly. Virginity was a vocation that few could do so highly.

Clement: Critique of Virginity

Though, in early Christianity, young women dedicated themselves to Christ as virgins, many more probably married. Today, although there are nuns and others young women who live similarly, virginity is not emphasized. Women who become “brides of Christ” are honored and respected in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, yet they cannot become members of the clergy in these denominations. What about Protestantism? The rise of Protestantism saw a shift in perspectives of women’s roles. But even before that change in the church, some in the early church did not regard virginity as highly as someone like Jerome.

One critic of virginity was a prominent theologian named Clement of Alexandria. Clement is one of the most influential theologians in the history of Christianity. Clement was influenced by Greek philosophy, which expressed marriage as a type of civic duty. Therefore, marriage was seen in a better light. Clement opposed the notion that marriage was sinful and that sin came through the world by sex. In his writings, especially *the Pedagogue*, he wrote about the duty of humanity is to fulfill the words of Genesis: “be fruitful and multiply.”⁴² In book two of *The Pedagogue*, he writes, “The purpose of intercourse is to produce children and the ultimate aim is to produce good children.”⁴³ He goes on to explain that sowing good seed in living soil is what brings life.

⁴² Genesis 1:27, New Revised Standard Version.

⁴³ Clement of Alexandria, *The Pedagogue*, trans. Patricia Cox Miller (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 258.

In this way, Clement offers a view similar to that of the earlier theologians: that the purpose of sex is for procreation, increasing the numbers of humanity. The similarities end there for Clement. He goes on to write, “Nature treats legitimate marriage as it does eating and drinking: it allows whatever is appropriate, useful and dignified, and urges us with the desire to produce children. But those who indulge in excess violate the laws of nature and harm themselves in illegitimate unions.”⁴⁴

Clement was writing in response to various groups in his time. Several Gnostic groups were opposed to marriage. They viewed it was something that was sinful. This fit with their philosophy that matter and the material world were sinful. Other groups said that chastity is how we gain spirituality and wisdom. He is also opposed to this notion of self-control. In the *Miscellanies* he writes:

Some openly declare that marriage is fornication and teach that it was introduced by the Devil. They boast that they are imitating the Lord himself who neither married nor possessed anything in the world, and they claim to understand the gospel better than anyone else.⁴⁵

Clement sees marriage as something that was given to us. Like any other thing in the world, marriage can take one further from God. But if done right, it is a blessing. The solution for him is for married persons to control their lust towards each other. This is the thing that ultimately drives them away from God: “The married man must exercise

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* trans. Patricia Cox Miller (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 265.

self-control in procreation, so that he does not feel lust for his wife, whom he must love, while he produces children by a holy and chaste will.”⁴⁶

There is a proper time and place for sexual intercourse. Clement writes, “Our next task to discuss the proper time for sexual intercourse which is reserved only for married persons. The purpose of intercourse is to produce children and the ultimate aim is to produce good children.”⁴⁷ In other words, like most early theologians, sex is used for the purpose of procreating children of God.

Clement is known for his knowledge of Greek philosophy and paganism. Therefore, his theology is in response to some Greek groups. In Clement’s day, there was a group known as the Encratites. This was an early Christian group that emphasized asceticism. As we mentioned earlier, asceticism was usually portrayed in a positive light. This group said marriage should be rejected so that the believer can engage himself in a holy and spiritual existence. A Gnostic subgroup of this group claimed woman came from the Devil. Clement opposed these teachings, arguing that marriage was a duty that was given to us by God. “Our Lord wanted humanity to multiply but he did not say that people should engage in licentious behavior, nor did he intend for them to give themselves over to pleasure as if they were born for rutting.”⁴⁸

The other important belief Clement took from Greek philosophy was the concept of *apatheia*--a life that is free from passion.⁴⁹ For Clement, this is turned towards one

⁴⁶ Ibid., 266.

⁴⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *the Pedagogue*, trans. Patricia Cox Miller (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 258.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Clement himself seems to be inspired in part of a Greek group called the Stoics. The Stoics emphasized getting rid of passions and urges. These are things that remain in our body and cannot be abandoned. To get rid of these

final purpose: it is the coming of Jesus. The passions are what cause us to sin, as they cannot be gotten rid of easily. Christians are to call upon Jesus, a man who lived without being consumed by passion; the ideal that we are to emulate. When it comes to sexuality, therefore, the married Christian is to approach it like a duty or a conscious action in front of God. Peter Brown writes, concerning Clement, “What mattered far more to Clement was that the spiritually mature Christian might often find himself or herself at the head of a large family...to preside over a household was to be a faint image of the Divine Providence.”⁵⁰

Even in the earliest days of the Christian church, marriage was being debated as explained above with Clement of Alexandria debating with the ascetics about the value of marriage. This is one of several shifts in values on the issue of marriage and virginity.

Conclusion

As explained throughout this thesis, it is difficult to define the role of women in the early church. At different times in church history, the virtues of virginity and marriage were emphasized. First, there was the importance of virginity. Virginity, in some ways, represented an ideal type of woman--a woman who fasts, prays constantly and gives money to the poor. This image of the “ideal virgin” is, we might argue, given our sources, an image constructed by the powerful male theologians and bishops of the time. Because of this, these women can be seen as almost divine, someone not quite human or from this world.

passions, one must live a life without these passions. In other words, one must avoid getting controlled by these passions. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 129-30

⁵⁰ ‘Divine Providence’ is a Christian version of a Hellenistic concept. *Ibid.*, 135

Another reason for the emphasis on virginity is the freedom it offered women from society, especially the dangers of childbirth. For some women, it was an escape from family and society. This gave virgin women some measure of authority and power. Finally, virginity can represent a freedom from sexual sin and desire. However, this view is only one side of the coin.

Marriage is the other potential life for women. For the theologians we have examined, the main reason for marriage was to have godly children. Clement of Alexandria is the major proponent of marriage in this thesis. As the church began to develop, movements such as the Protestant Reformation followed Clement and emphasized the value and importance of marriage.

The examination of these particular roles gives an insight to the role of women in the early Christian Church. While our sources on women are scarce, the exemplary women whose stories were recorded represent key elements of what it meant to be part of the Jesus movement: full commitment to Christ through virginity and a focus on the Kingdom of God in the world and in the world to come.

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