WOMEN IN CHURCH HISTORY: STEREOTYPES, ARCHTYPES AND OPERATIONAL MODALITIES
by Earl Kent Brown

Few issues in recent church history have proved more controversial than the growing debate over the role and place of women in the life of the church. On the one hand one sees a photograph of a nun in full habit picketing St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City with a sign reading, "Ordain Women or Stop Baptizing Them!" At the other extreme are certain pietist groups who forbid their women members even to speak at church meetings, in accord with their interpretation of the Pauline prohibitions. The remarkable thing about both of these extreme groups, and many others in between the extremes, is that they share the same basic stereotype of the historic role of women in the church. The implications for current action drawn from that stereotype, of course, are quite different. But the various groups seem to share a common conception of what the role of women has been in church history.

The stereotype of woman's role in historic Christianity runs as follows. Women have been restricted to certain secondary and support roles in the life of the church. They participate as attendants, as worshippers, as listeners to the sermons men preach, as money-raisers, as educators of children in the faith and in church participation, as wives and mothers of preachers, and as givers of hospitality and largesse. Of course there is nothing ignoble about any of these roles in themselves. Quite the contrary. The church could not survive without them. For this reason the conservatives see these roles as the appropriate roles for women to follow in the future. The more activist women, who are influenced by the modern feminist movement, are not satisfied. The roles noted above are important and noble; but when they are seen as the only roles permitted to women, activist women protest. The effect of the stereotype, they note, is that females have been systematically excluded from the "real" positions of power — i.e. from the preaching, sacramental and disciplinary ministries — and from the hierarchies where the "important" decisions are made. No

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male church historian can read this indictment without squirming. There is sufficient truth in it to make sensitive males uncomfortable and to make sensitive females furious.

The purpose of this paper is first to examine the sources from which the stereotype arose, and second to consider whether a careful reading of church history does not suggest there are also archetypes of other female roles in church life. We shall try to suggest other modalities by which women have found it possible to exercise more than the traditional roles noted above.

I. Sources of the Stereotypes

Like many other role expectations for Christians, the definition of the role of women seems to have originated in the transitional early years of the church — i.e. the first to third centuries A.D. The new faith required many adjustments of self-perception and of institutional form. Women were trying to understand what their part in the life of the body of Christ was, just as men were. The perception of proper female roles would seem to have risen from several sources.

1. Biblical models: There were numerous women who heard Jesus preach, and many were healed by him; though we have only a few names. When one examines the names we do have, it soon becomes clear that they provide models primarily for rather passive "follower-type" women. Mary Magdala, of whom we know as much as of any New Testament woman, is painted with brief strokes. She was healed and then travelled with Him along with Susanna, Churza and others. Luke 8:3 suggests these women "provided for [the disciples and Jesus] out of their means."2 Mary was loyal, more so even than some of the Twelve, for she was present at the foot of the cross. She met Jesus after the resurrection, perhaps the first person so to do. She touched his feet according to Matthew (28:9), and in John (20:16) we hear of the emotional recognition of her "rabboni." He then sent her to tell the other disciples what she had seen. Thereafter, Mary Magdala walks out of the Biblical narrative never to be heard of again.

The portraits of the other women are even less complete. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, poured ointment on Jesus’ feet (John 12:3). Jesus was pleased and is said to have "loved" both Mary and Martha. The main thing we recall about Mary is that she sat at the Lord’s feet listening to his words which practice Jesus identified as the "good portion." (Luke 10:42) Martha too comes across only in minor detail. She is the busy housekeeper, "distracted with much serving." (Luke 10:40) She had faith that had Jesus reached Lazarus before his death,

\[\text{2Here and hereafter in this paper all citations to the Bible are quoted from the Revised Standard Version.}\]
her brother need not have died. But one cannot say she took any leadership role. Of Dorcas, whom Peter raised from the dead, we know only that she was “full of good works and acts of charity.” (Acts 9:36) Lydia, of Philippi, one of Paul’s converts, expressed her faith by offering the Apostle hospitality in her home. (Acts 16:14-15)

The Virgin is something of a special case. But, in view of the amazing growth of her cult later, it is remarkable to note how little the New Testament says of her. She hears the angel’s announcement. She magnifies God. She bears Jesus and ponders on the events of his birth. When he was twelve years old, she took him to Jerusalem. She was present at the wedding of Cana. Later she tried to see her son when he was busy, and the result can hardly have been pleasant for her. (Matt. 12:46-50) She followed him down the via dolorosa to Golgotha, and there she watched him die. She may have been present at the Ascension, for she is reported shortly afterwards in prayer with the eleven and some other women. (Acts 1:14) She is never mentioned in the New Testament again.

The point is that the model of woman provided by these women of the New Testament is the model of the listener at Christ’s feet, the “happy, hard working housewife,” and the regular attendant at worship services led by men. She gives herself to good works of various kinds in the spare moments in between washing the diapers and making the beds. However, Jesus did not choose one of them as one of the twelve apostles. His reasons may have been purely pragmatic. If an apostle is one who is sent with a message to proclaim, and if such a commission involves extensive travel alone across the countryside, a woman would have found it hard to exercise such an office in the first century Roman Empire. Indeed a lone woman traveller would have so compromised her moral reputation as to destroy her apostolate. But whatever his reasons, Jesus did not choose a woman apostle. And the apostles in Acts 6 did not choose a woman deacon. Moreover, Jesus himself was a male. All the emphasis on apostolic succession in the early centuries, in order to protect true doctrine, then had the effect of excluding women from the ministerial roles. Thus we read in the Teaching of the Apostles of the mid-third century: “We do not allow women to teach in the Church....Our Master the Lord Jesus having sent us the Twelve, to teach the people and the nations, never officially sent women to preach, though they were available to him.”

The Old Testament models are not much different. Esther is a famous heroine, the saviour of her people. But she did it with feminine wiles and great beauty and charm, not by feminist confrontation.

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politics. Each time she goes before Ahasuerus, she dresses in her best and makes herself as beautiful as possible. Each time he is moved by her beauty and is bent to her will. Sarah is remembered chiefly for her obedience to Abraham. (Gen. 12:10-13) She even masqueraded as his sister on his order. And Sarah is the progenetrix of all Israel.

There are more activist women in the Bible. Phoebe in Romans 16:1 was a "deaconess," whatever that may have been in the first century. We will return to the female diaconate later in this paper. The daughters of Philip, like Huldah and Deborah, were "prophetesses." (Acts 21:8-9) Priscilla, the wife of Aquila, seems to have been a very active partner to her husband. She "expounded" the teachings of Jesus to Apollos with her husband's help. (Acts 18:26) Paul's testimony to her is that she was "my fellow worker in Christ Jesus, who risked [her] neck for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks." (Rom. 16: 3-4) That is quite a tribute! We wish we knew more details, particularly what "work" she did. Then also there is Deborah, Old Testament prophetess and judge, who commanded her men-folk to march against Sisera. When they proved timid, she even marched forth with them. Her colleague Jael was also an activist woman, having driven a peg through the temple of Sisera as he slept. (Judges 4) It is an interesting, if rather lonely, example. How many women ever either get the opportunity, or really want, to drive a peg through a man's temple?

2. Biblical Precept: It was not just Biblical example that worked to keep Christian women in subjection. It was biblical precept as well. One may begin with Gen. 3:16 -- "your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you." Ephesians 5:22-23 advises, "wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife." Eleven verses later Paul concludes, "let the wife see that she respects her husband." I Peter 3:1 recalls the submissiveness and obedience of Sarah to Abraham and recommends this even to the Christian wives of pagans, "so that some...may be won without a word by the behaviour of their wives." Paul's advice in I Corinthians 14:34-35 is famous, or infamous: "Women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate .... If there is any thing they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home." Finally there is I Timothy 2:12 -- "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent."

Early Church women then accepted, with greater or lesser enthusiasm, the biblical subordination to the male. They stressed the duties of modesty, piety and submission. Christian women were expected to exhibit the domestic virtues as evidence of faith and piety.
Their influence doubtless actually extended into all of church life. There are repeated references to the value of a good wife. And even Paul, with his rather low opinion of marriage in general, urges men to cherish, protect and love the wives they have. Withal, important as women were in the church, their role was clearly subordinate. And this fact the stereotype has perpetuated.

Roman Cultural Patterns: Other factors also contributed to a tendency to subordinate women in the life of the early church. The Roman culture in which they lived was highly sexist. In much of Roman law, a woman was little more than a possession of her husband or her father. If she was the power behind the throne, as often doubtless she was, the wise, admired woman knew her place; and in public at least, she kept it. If Suetonius is right, the Emperor Augustus was consistently manipulated by his second wife. But Livia Drusilla was not the emperor; Augustus was, and Livia made a point of being properly subordinate in public. Ideal Hellenistic and Roman women were also submissive to their males, even as Biblical women.

Educational Discrimination: Another factor that doubtless contributed to the stereotype was that both Jewish and Roman society discriminated against women educationally. Women did not become scribes or rabbis in Jerusalem, nor rhetoricians nor philosophers in Athens and Rome. It is remarkable that one can look down the whole list of the great theological writers which Migne has reproduced in some 150 volumes of Greek and Latin and find not a single female name. They are indeed "patrologia", "words of the fathers." There is not a matrilogion in the lot. This is not because women were incapable of thinking deep thoughts. It is rather because the educational barrier was so high that no early church woman, to our knowledge, was able to climb over it and become a respected creative participant in the great theological controversies of early Christendom. Theodora might be said to have tried it, but unfortunately she favoured a heretic, Jacob Bardaeus. Most women of the period would have thought it unseemly even for them to try such things.

The Myth of Eve: A final factor is also worth mentioning, though it is hard to be precise about its effect on the stereotype. That is the power of the myth of Eve. Eve is the mother of all humankind. The monumental error of Eve doubtless permanently stained the contribution that her daughters might try to make to theology or church leadership. We can imagine what the men said to each other, when the women were intrusive: "Look what happened when Adam listened to Eve." The author of I Timothy leads the way as he explains why women should keep silent and be submissive — because, "Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the
woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” (2:13-14) The medieval university regulations at Bologna carry on this theme by forbidding women “to enter the premises because a woman was the head of sin, the right hand of the devil, and the cause of the expulsion from paradise.” 4 In passing, we note that it is strange that those men who rejoiced that Christ’s sacrifice had released men from the stain of Adam, do not seem to have given much consideration to the thought that the same sacrifice of Christ might have redeemed womankind from the stain of Eve.

So we suggest the stereotypical female role in Christian religious circles came to be formed. Biblical examples and precepts; the fact that Jesus was male and named no woman to the twelve; the place of women in Roman society; lack of educational opportunity and the myth of Eve all combined to keep women “in their place.” Indeed they combined also to define that “place” as a clearly subordinate one.

II. Archtypes and Operational Modalities

We must now ask whether the stereotype has always been adhered to. Our thesis is that it has not. While doubtless the stereotype is visible in every generation in the history of the Church, we here argue that there are archtypes of different female roles in the Christian church — i.e. that there are modalities by which women have from time to time assumed far greater roles than the stereotype would suggest. We wish to discuss five such modalities.

1. The mystic/charismatic woman: Though a woman was normally seriously inhibited in speaking out on matters religious in the early church, there are clear New Testament precedents for certain women, who spoke under the special inspiration of God, who had to be listened to. The daughters of Philip are said in Acts 21:8-9 to have “prophesied.” What they said, we don’t know; but it was thought worthy of mention by the author of Acts. Even Paul, though insisting they keep their heads covered, recognized the legitimacy of women prophetesses (I Cor. 11:4-16). This “mystic/charismatic” modality has appeared repeatedly in the history of the Church, and it is particularly resistant to the stereotype. One cannot argue against the Spirit-possessed that they have insufficient education. Nor can one argue that they are not in true subjection to their husbands, since the command of God clearly supersedes the family custom of Hellenistic Christianity. Nor can it be argued that she should be silent as a woman, since the wind of the Spirit “bloweth where it listeth”; and woe betide the man or woman who speaks not when so inspired.

A few examples will make the point. During the outbreak of the Montanist heresy in the middle of the second century, it will be recalled that two prophetesses, Prisca and Maximilla, associated themselves with Montanus. Like him, they claimed to be mouthpieces of the Holy Spirit. They announced that the end of the world was at hand, and that the heavenly Jerusalem was about to descend in Phrygia. Believers should depart thence forthwith, and in preparation for the coming end should practice the most strenuous asceticism—celibacy, fasting, abstinence from meat, etc. The prophetesses were widely and favourably heard. Particularly was their ascetic emphasis welcomed as an appropriate counter to the growing worldliness of the Church leadership and membership. It will be recalled that it was this ascetic aspect of Montanism that won the ablest Latin theologian of the generation to their side—Tertullian of Carthage. The cases of Prisca and Maximilla, however, also demonstrate one of the dangers of this modality. The person who claims to speak for God had better be right! I.e., Their prophecies, if any, had better come true, or they will be considered heretics or fools. Doubtless the fact that the two women were conspicuously identified with a movement whose prophecy of an early end proved illusory, and whose teachings were declared heretical, did the cause of a better place for women in the church serious harm in the succeeding decades.

Another example of a mystic or charismatic woman, more orthodox in her influence, was Catharine of Siena. She began to have visions while still quite young, and was soon making prophecies. After an injury disfigured her and made her marriage prospects nil, her parents consented to her desire to enter the Dominican Second Order of nuns. There she became persuaded that she wore a marriage ring given her by Christ, and that she bore the stigmata (i.e. the wounds of Christ) as well. Only she could see the ring. The stigmata too were given to her invisibly, at her request, lest she take too much pride in bearing publicly the signs of Christ’s passion. The remarkable thing is that her contemporaries believed her claims to be true and saw her as an exemplary model of a saint. Her long Dialogues with God, dictated while in a mystic trance, were widely circulated. And we have over 350 of her letters addressed to the great and near great of her time. In 1375 she urged Queen Joan of Naples to go on Crusade. In 1376 she was ambassadress to reconcile Pope Gregory XI with the Florentines. Between 1376-78 she appeared before Gregory in Avignon and, in the name of God, commanded him to return both himself and the papal office to Rome and thus end the long papal Avignon residence. She felt free, indeed compelled, to communicate to the Pope these marching orders, mediated to her through the direct inspiration of God. Her
letters are full of criticism of priests, cardinals and even of popes. She was a practical leader of church affairs whom princes, both secular and clerical, took most seriously. She died in 1380 and was named a saint in 1461. In 1970 Pope Paul VI, hardly a feminist, named her a "doctor" of the Roman Catholic Church.

At this point one is tempted to discuss Jeanne d'Arc and Teresa of Avila, but we pass them to go to a more modern example. Ann Lee, a native of Manchester, England, was born in 1736. At 23 she joined the so-called "shaking quakers," who were subject to frenzied physical manifestations in their religious zeal. She fit in beautifully, and was soon seeing visions and dreaming dreams with the best of them. A culminating vision of Christ in 1770 resulted in the announcement of three divinely revealed teachings: (1) Sex is the root of all evil and true believers must be celibate; (2) Communal life and community of property and goods are necessary for the holy life; (3) Withdrawal from the world is necessary, since the world will not allow the Shakers to live in peace in the world.5

A wealthy convert provided the finances for Ann and a half dozen followers to migrate to America. There, in 1776, Mother Ann and a few followers acquired a farm in upstate New York which became the first Shaker commune. She died there in 1784, but the movement continued to expand for another seventy-five years. At maximum extent, eventually there were about twenty-five Shaker communities with a membership of over six thousand. They were remarkably productive communities too. They identified Mother Ann as the female incarnation of the logos, and hence saw her as the fulfillment of the promised second coming of Christ.

Other examples of the modality, "mystic/charismatic women," also come to mind. Amie Semple MacPherson, founder of the Church of the Four Square Gospel, and Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, are but two. The modality has recurred repeatedly in the history of the church. The contemporary commentator is tempted to note that the gift of prophecy is not the only gift of the Spirit recognized in the New Testament. Women in 1978 who feel strongly that they have been blessed with the gift of preaching or other forms of church leadership may find in this historic modality some justification for their own exercise of those gifts.

2. The Queen Regnant: Defender of the Faith: Though most women in the early church, and latter-day church as well, found themselves in rather subordinate positions, queens and great noblewomen provide an interesting and often highly influential ex-

ception. This is particularly true if they are “queen regnant” — i.e. queen in their own right, rather than “queen consort” to a “king regnant.”

An early interesting case is the Empress Pulcheria Augusta. She is the first empress regnant in Roman imperial history. She was a granddaughter of the orthodox emperor Theodosius I, who in 380 had directed that all his Roman subjects “hold the faith which the holy Apostle Peter gave to the Romans.” She was much more able, politically, intellectually and theologically, than her father, the Emperor Arcadius (d.414) or her brother Theodosius II. Until the latter married she was the primary influence upon him, and she is said to have run the imperial court rather like a convent. It was she who persuaded him to condemn Nestorianism in 431. She also returned the bones of St. John Chrysostom to Constantinople in 438, thereby ending a local schism. By 449, however, her brother had slipped from under her intellectual control and approved the monophysite “Council of Robbers.” Pulcheria, orthodox to the core, appealed to Pope Leo I to aid her in defending orthodoxy. His Tome was probably written partly in response to this plea. The death of Theodosius II in 450 brought Pulcheria herself to the throne. She summoned a new council which met at Chalcedon in 451. That council produced the Chalcedonian formula, which was, in part, a paraphrase of the Tome of Leo. The Empress attended the sixth session of Chalcedon in person, and she acclaimed its decisions. She sought to enforce those decisions in her empire. That she failed, and the Monophysite schisms erupted, is not due to the fact she was a woman. Rather there were political and ethnic divisions in the empire she ruled, which no one could control. Moreover, she died within two years. She has been popularly considered a Saint since the early middle ages.

There are many examples of influential noblewomen in the medieval and Reformation periods. One thinks of the Countess Matilda, to whose fortress at Canossa Henry IV came, arrayed in sackcloth and ashes, to beg the forgiveness of Gregory VII. She seems to have had major influence with the Pope. In France one thinks of Jeanne d’ Alret, Queen of Navarre, Duchess of Bourbon and good friend of John Calvin. She was far more devoted to the Reformation than was her son, Henry IV of France. On the other side of the controversies of the time was Catharine de Medici, who as regent for her son, Charles IX, summoned the Colloquy of Poissy in which Protestants made their case before the royal court itself. She presumed to act as one of the judges of their argument. Renee, Calvinist Duchess of Ferrara, lost her throne because of her faith. Marguerite d’ Angouleme, sister of Francis I, was the patroness of L’Efevre d’
Etaples. In Britain the stories of Mary of Scots, John Knox’s worthy opponent, and of “Bloody” Mary Tudor, Queen of England and persecutor of Protestants, are familiar to all students of church history.

We cannot leave this modality, however, without a more extended consideration of another Queen Regnant. Queen Elizabeth I of England was the daughter of Henry VIII and his second Queen, the unhappy Anne Boleyn. She came to the throne in 1558 in succession to her father Henry VIII (d.1547), her half brother Edward VI (d. 1553) and her half sister, Mary I (d.1558). England was, at her accession, faced with the full flood of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation on the continent and with political pressures from both Roman Catholic and Protestant princes who urged England to declare on one side or the other. In her brother’s reign, England had seemed to be going Protestant under the influence of Cranmer, Bucer, Knox, etc. In her sister’s reign, an attempt was made to return England to Roman Catholic loyalty, and over two hundred martyrdoms of Protestant leaders resulted, as well as a major migration of Protestants to the continent.

The degree to which the religious policy followed by Queen Elizabeth was her own and the degree to which it was that of her advisors will be debated until the end of time. The balance of historical opinion at the moment seems to be that in substantial part the Queen herself should be credited, or debited, for the deeds done in her name. Certainly she had studied Melanchthon’s *Loci Communes* so carefully that she could quote long passages from memory. She was also a consummate politician with a clear sense of where the balances of religious and political opinion were in her country. The modifications of the new Act of Supremacy; the equivocal words of delivery in the new communion liturgy; the manipulation of the Pope and of Philip II of Spain by private half-promises to become Catholic, while busily building up a strong settlement in England that would be baptised the “middle road”; even the revision of the 42 Articles of Cranmer into the 39 Articles of Religion of the Church of England — all of these events by which the character of Anglicanism was defined for the next four centuries, bear the imprint of the Queen’s hand, though others were involved as well. Certainly, none of them could have been achieved without her approval or against her opposition.

One final word should be said before we leave this modality. It may be asked what relevance “queens regnant” have for modern women. There never were very many of them, and “queens regnant” today are in distinctly short supply. The three that occur to me, the queens of Denmark, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, are, also, all constitutional monarchs, who loyally do what their ministers
tell them to. Those ministers are mostly males. The point is that the example of the “queen regnant” belies the canard that sex alone is sufficient grounds for exclusion from church leadership. It is true that John Knox wrote his famous First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women. It is also true that when accident of birth made women powerful enough, church leaders, even very conservative male church leaders, hearkened to their words and acted accordingly. If it was legitimate for Elizabeth I to be “Supreme Governor of the Church of England” for 45 years, and for Victoria to hold the same office for 64 years, it is hard to understand why it is legitimate to exclude women from church government roles in 1978 on the basis of their sex alone.

3 The Feminine Enclave: Our third modality is the feminine enclave in the male-dominated church. When women find themselves excluded from leadership roles in the church at large, one solution for women of a more independent mind is to form within the church an enclave of women who in large part control their own destinies and life style. Within their own community they rule themselves and are pretty much allowed to go their own way by their nominal lords and masters.

The most striking examples of this modality are the female monastic communities. Almost as soon as we begin to have evidence of monastic rules for males, we begin to hear of sister orders with the same or a similar rule. Within these orders, the lady abbess or mother superior ruled her nuns as fully and thoroughly as any male abbot ruled his monks, and a good deal more thoroughly than the priests and bishops ruled the laity nominally under their command. A recent book entitled The Lady Was a Bishop examines the life style and the powers of the lady abbesses of the late medieval convents. The author concludes that these abbesses within their convents exercised every office of rule, spiritual guidance, and discipline normally exercised by males save only the performance of the sacraments.

These abbesses also managed the temporalities of their convents, and managed them very well in many cases. This meant extensive housekeeping organization for communities of hundreds of nuns. It also usually meant the supervision of numerous serfs and free tenants who worked the estates that supported the convent. It also involved marketing, storing, planning against famine or war, making payments to her hierarchical superiors, running hospices and hospitals, etc. The evidence is also, that these lady abbesses were often consulted by their local bishops — i.e. their hierarchical superiors — on matters affecting the whole diocese. Their advice was not taken lightly. The reasons for taking it seriously may have varied. Some doubtless recommended

themselves by the wisdom of their comments. Others were heard, because their family connections were too important to flout. Others were heard because the incomes they paid to the bishops as the largest ecclesiastical landholders in his diocese made up a major portion of his income. For whatever reasons, the office of lady abbess or mother superior of a major convent or woman's order is probably the single most powerful church role exercised by a woman in Roman Catholic history. At least it is, if one ignores the myth of the "Papess Joanna."

These women were not unwilling, on occasion, to resist the will of male superiors. One famous abbess even talked back to the Pope. Clare, the first Franciscan abbess, was a complete devotee of the rule of poverty she had learned from Francis. After the latter's death, major efforts were made to cause the poor Clares to accept property or land grants for their support. When Pope Gregory IX was in Assisi in 1228 in connection with the celebrations centering on the sanctification of St. Francis, he had a long talk with Clare at San Damiano. He urged her to accept lands from him, arguing that the state of the times made it impossible for communities of nuns to survive without great possessions. She argued that they had done quite nicely for some 15 years with the help of certain of the Franciscan brothers who begged on their behalf. When the Pope insisted, Clare apparently looked at him with amazement. Suspecting that her vow of poverty was the difficulty, Gregory IX said, "If it is your vows which prevent you, we will release you from them." Her reply is a classic. "Holy Father, absolve me from my sins, but I have no desire for a dispensation from following after Jesus Christ."

The female monastic communities are not the only examples of the feminine enclave at work. Methodists need only hear the words "Woman's Division of Christian Service" or "Woman's Foreign Missionary Society" to know that. In that church the women have very much "run their own show," in the sense that they spent the money the women's missionary organizations raised, determined who would be sent out as missionaries, and where, and to do what. This was true when Lois Stiles Lee Parker and her friends founded the W.F.M.S. in 1869. From the start they refused to give their contributions into the general funds of the central Missionary Society, where men would have disbursed them and determined priorities on their use. It was not that the men were perceived as men of ill will. Rather it was that they were men, and as men could not be counted upon to see the women's problems and needs clearly. So they founded their own feminist enclave, and they did not subordinate themselves to the Methodist Episcopal Church's hierarchy and conferences until they were assured
their autonomy would be respected.\textsuperscript{8} A similar story could be told from the history of nearly every major Protestant denomination in America.

The first missionaries to be sent out by the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church came to India. They were Dr. Clara Swain and Miss Isabella Thoburn. Dr. Swain was appointed to Bareilly in the Northwestern Province, where she founded the hospital which is her monument. Miss Thoburn was appointed to Lucknow to work among women, though the exact shape of her ministry was not initially clearly defined. It soon became clear that the burden on her heart was the condition of the women of India and her goal their emancipation from the bonds of centuries of repression. The particular problems of Indian women — acute subordination to their men, seclusion of many in the zenana, the evils of child marriage, the tragic condition of the upper caste widows, the miniscule female literacy rate — motivated in Miss Thoburn a dream of a special ministry by and for women. She was firmly convinced that “no people ever rise higher, as a people, than the point to which they elevate their women.”\textsuperscript{9}

She began by founding a day school in Lucknow. Within a year she had created the girl’s boarding school at the Lal Bagh, which was to become world famous and to draw its students from all over India. The school required mastery both of the mother tongue and of English, since English was the route to higher education in 19th century India. On the foundation of the Lal Bagh School Miss Thoburn erected, in time, a college in which young women could prepare for university examination for the B.A. or the B.Sc. degrees. Religion was both an intentional and an incidental part of the curriculum in both schools. The overwhelming majority of the girls were Christian. As she saw it, “the stamp we put upon our girls, they will impress on their households, and from these the influence will go out into communities and down through generations.”\textsuperscript{10}

But she had an even wider vision than that. For she was persuaded that in her time Christian women in India were “relatively more important than Christian men” as far as the future was concerned. For it seemed to her that Christian women were almost the only women capable of speaking out for Indian women as a whole. “Their prominence is...due...to the freedom which the religion of freedom has brought them, the education it has given them, and the

\textsuperscript{10}James Thoburn, \textit{Life of Isabella Thoburn}, Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1903, p. 78.
duties to which it has called them.” It is for this reason that they are so important for the future. “They stand as the representatives of all the women of India as they will be when they are free.”

She knew her girls were good, and she was sure they were the hope of Indian womanhood. One of them was Lilavati Singh, graduate of the Lal Bagh, and one of the first three girls in the college in 1886. She later joined the faculty of the college and was no doubt Miss Thoburn’s choice as her own successor. Tragically she died very shortly after Miss Thoburn herself. Miss Singh came to the United States in 1899, where an address she gave inspired ex-President Harrison to his oft-quoted remark. “If I had given a million dollars to foreign missions, and was assured that no result had come from it all except the evolution of one such woman as that, I should feel amply repaid for my expenditure.”

The modality “feminine enclave” is widely distributed in Christian history from early times to the present. It is also discoverable in very “high church” and very “low church” traditions. Of the modalities discussed in this paper, this is probably the most commonly used way in which women have escaped the stereotype and given expression to their sense of call to God’s service.

4. The Community Withdrawn: Our fourth modality arises in a situation where women of different religious groups or geographical areas sense a common need or problem of women too which women might or should minister. Their sense is that the male-dominated church as a whole will not, or at least has not, addressed the issue forthrightly. They either have not the strength or the will to try to create a feminist enclave in each denomination or area involved. Hence they, in effect, withdraw from the churches for common action, so far as that one issue is concerned. They create an organization of women, run by women, outside the church but based on religious motivation. They draw their support from many churches and geographical areas and they “do their thing.” The model is the familiar model of the voluntary society, only its full members are all women and its goals are particularly appropriate for women.

In Washington, D.C., the United States capital, there is a statuary hall where each state of the American Union is permitted to erect a statue of a “favorite son.” One state to date, as Frederick Norwood has remarked, has chosen a “favorite daughter.” She is Frances Willard. Miss Willard had two major careers. Her first love was education for women. She was a teacher, later dean of a college for women and for a time president of a women’s college which later

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11Ibid, p. 287.
13Ibid, p. 322.
became part of Northwestern University. In her world travels, however, she became particularly aware of the downtrodden state of many of the women of the world. A common element in that suppression of women, world-wide, seemed to her to be the malign influence of the excessive use by men of alcoholic drink, and the efforts of the alcohol trade to increase their profits at the cost of the general population. Her second career began when she joined, and soon became the leader of, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. This was an interdenominational agency, in the sense that its members came from all the evangelical denominations in America. Its underlying motives were clearly religious. Its opposition to hard drink was theologically based — usually resting on arguments having to do with the warping of the image of God in which humankind is made and in perfectionist teachings. It sought to bring its major concern to the attention of the churches through the influence its members had as local church members and through petitions and presentations at denominational synods and assemblies.

Partly because of its confusion in the popular mind with the Anti-Saloon-League, whose actions were at times almost farcical, the W.C.T.U. has a reputation in 1978 for extremism and narrowness which it ill-deserves. Actually under Miss Willard’s leadership, it was not a one-issue movement at all. She was concerned about, and created a W.C.T.U. department to work on, discriminatory labour and remuneration policies — i.e. situations where women were paid lower salaries for doing the same work men did for more money. She was concerned about the working conditions of women and children in an America that was rapidly industrializing. She favoured the formation of labour unions in the 1880’s. She never ceased to agitate for equal educational opportunities for women. She was personally acquainted with the early Fabian Socialists, and was herself a socialist who believed in public ownership of many of the major means of production and service. She was a “social gospeller” with a will, whose life and career were over before Walter Rauschenbusch had published his first book. A doctoral candidate has recently completed a Ph.D. dissertation at Boston University revealing how many of Rauschenbusch’s insights she foreshadowed.

A parallel example of this same modality centered in another issue in the same years. That is the National American Woman’s Suffrage Association under the leadership of Susan B. Anthony and Anna

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Howard Shaw. Again, the leadership and followers came from a multitude of Christian churches. Dr. Shaw herself was one of the first women ever to be ordained in a Methodist denomination. Again, the motivation was professedly theological. Again, the *modus operandi* was to bring political pressure on the churches, and through the churches on the society as a whole, to achieve reform. Both the W.C.T.U. and the N.A.W.S.A. eventually adopted the tactic of amending the U.S. constitution to achieve their purposes. Those amendments, the 18th and 19th, were passed within a year of each other after World War I. Both, to a degree, proved disappointments to their proponents; but that is another story. Today a number of the women's rights groups in America which labor for the passage of E.R.A., the "Equal Rights Amendment," partake of the same modality we have just described — "The Community Withdrawn."

The modality of the "community withdrawn" has appeared in many places in Christian history, particularly in more recent years as women have gained greater freedom to move independently in society. It has proved an effective way to mobilize interdenominational Christian support for programs of service to women and by women, for which the stereotypical "women's role" makes little provision.

5. **Full Ministerial Members of the Body of Christ:** As archetype for female participation in the life of the church, this modality historically has partaken of the utmost in aspiration and the minimum in fulfilment of the five modalities discussed herein. Such a modality implies a church structure which is, or aspires to be, totally inclusive and totally non discriminatory on the basis of sex. There have been very few such churches.

The key issues, of course, have to do with the three primary ministerial functions of church leadership and the degree to which women are enabled to participate therein. Those functions are: (1) Proclamation or teaching the word; (2) Administration of the sacraments; (3) Administration of discipline. If indeed the Protestant Reformers were correct that the true church is a congregation of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely, the sacraments are administered rightly and Christian discipline is duly maintained, then these roles are the central roles in the leadership of the church. If women are excluded from them solely on sexual grounds, one does not have women who function as full ministerial members of the body of Christ.

The key portions of scripture which limit women in these areas are Pauline, and it is well to remind ourselves again of what they are at

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this point. The narrowest and most sexist is I Timothy 2:12: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent." Whether truly Pauline or not, and it comes from the Pastoral Epistles which many scholars date quite late, this passage has seemed to many to exclude all three of the roles noted above: preaching, sacraments and discipline. I Corin. 14:34 has the famous dictum, "Women should keep silence in the churches." Somewhat more open is I Corin. 11:5, which, as noted above, accepts the notion that women may "prophesy", so long as they keep their heads covered and demonstrate appropriate modesty. Philippians 4:3 has not been quoted previously. "I ask you also...help these women [i.e. Euodia and Syntyche] for they have labored side by side with me in the Gospel together with Clement and the rest." What is the meaning of to "labor...in the gospel?" Some have argued it surely means teaching or preaching. Certainly the comparison to Clement is suggestive. If this Clement is the same Clement who eventually became a presbyter and bishop in Rome, he surely was a preacher. We have already quoted here Romans 16:3-4, with its identification of Priscilla as a "fellow worker in Christ Jesus who risked [her] neck for my life." We have noted that in Acts 18:26 she is said to have "expounded" the gospel to Apollos. We have arranged these passages from the most clearly anti-feminist, through the various teachings of Paul, which we note are not all of one type. Clearly there is a place, even for Paul, for the leadership services of women in the church. The question is whether that place is acceptable to sensitive women in a modern church.

One's response to this question is, of course, greatly conditioned by one's opinion of the authority of the Pauline teaching itself. Paul, himself, admits that on some of the matters he addresses, in I Corinthians at least, he has "no command of the Lord." (I Corin. 7:25) Feminists have argued that this may have been true in more cases than even Paul realized. Paul, they argue, is saying more about his own culture-blindness, and limited understanding, than he says about the will of God in the passages noted above where he excludes women from leadership roles. Moreover, Paul, we recall, wrote for a church expecting the early return of the Lord. Can one safely generalize from letters to a church, whose world was expected to end momentarily, and apply its rules literally to a church 1950 years old and still alive in a society Paul could never even have imagined?

It is Paul, too, who gives us the earliest hint of a special leadership role for women in the early church. At the start of the long chapter of salutations at the end of Romans, he commends to his readers the "diaconos" Phoebe. (16:1) Note, the noun form is feminine, diaconissa, does not appear in the New
Testament. Apparently it was used in the third or fourth century for the first time. Diaconoi are discussed at length in I Timothy 3:8-13; but verse 11 speaks of the "women likewise," as if there were women diaconoi when I Timothy was written. If the late date of the Pastorals be granted, then we may have an even earlier testimony to the existence of such a group in a secular letter from Governor Pliny of Bythynia to the Emperor Trajan, ca. 112. In that letter he notes that he has recently tortured "two Christian handmaidens called deaconesses." 16 Exactly how early an actual group or order of women deacons existed is hard to tell. No woman is in the first list of diaconoi appointed in Acts 6, even though it was the complaint that the Greek widows were being discriminated against that led to the appointment of deacons.

By the third century, it seems quite clear that such a group did exist, and most of our information about them comes from a document of the fourth and fifth centuries, the Apostolic Constitutions, 17 and from late conciliar decrees. Initially the deaconesses appear to have been distinct from the "widows" of I Tim. 5:3-4 and Acts 9:39, though by the fourth century there seems to be an absorption of the latter by the former group. What were the functions of the diaconissae?

1. To care for the sick and the poor.
2. To be present at the private interviews of women with priests or deacons. Presumably this was "on account of the imaginations of the evil," as the Apostolic Constitutions 18 quaintly put it. But they thus played at least an observational role in the disciplinary process.
3. To instruct the women catechumens. Instruction of new members is certainly teaching the Word, and at least borders on preaching.
4. To keep order in the women's sections of the churches in which the sexes had come to worship separately--i.e. a disciplinary function.
5. To go on errands in places where men would not be permitted or where men would be in danger--as in the women's quarters in a pagan home or visiting prisoners in jail.
6. To raise and care for orphans.

16 The Latin word here translated "deaconesses" is ministræ. An English text of the entire letter may be found in Henry Bettenson, Documents of the Christian Church, London: Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 5.
18 Ibid., III,15.
7. To provide care and hospitality for travelling Christians.
8. To be constant in prayer for the community.
9. To assist at the women's baptizing. They did at least two things. They assisted the ladies who had been immersed to get up from the waters, "that so this conferring of the invisible seal may take place with becoming decency."¹⁹ They also assisted in the anointing with holy oil of those portions of the body other than the head where it would be indiscreet for a man's hand or eye to wander. In some places the breasts, ears, nose and forehead were anointed. In such cases the Apostolic Constitutions directs, "the Deacon shall anoint only the forehead with holy oil, and after him the deaconess shall anoint them."²⁰ The function is limited to women, but is clearly sacramental.

10. In some Nestorian and Monophysite sees, it is said the deaconesses even served the communion to women, though this was certainly seen as a scandal by the orthodox.

Clearly these early deaconesses partook to a degree of all three of the central leadership roles. They taught, though to women only. They assisted in the sacraments, in the case of the baptism of adult women; and they performed actions without which the baptism liturgy would have been considered incomplete. They administered discipline among the women. The natural question to be asked is whether they were ordained to this function. The answer is not at all clear. The Apostolic Constitutions say that there was an imposition of hands by the bishop in the presence of the presbyters and deacons and attribute this custom to the Apostle Bartholomew.²¹ So also, earlier in the same work we read, "ordain also deaconesses."²² The Justinian Code of 529 also refers to their "ordination." On the other hand Canon XIX of the Council of Nicea (325) flatly says that the deaconesses "have no imposition of hands and are to be numbered only among the laity."²³ The Synod of Orange (411) forbids women ordination, as does also the Synod of Orleans (533). The vigor with which these latter synods forbid ordination leads one to suspect strongly that the practice had been going on. One does not get this excited about something no one was doing anyhow. We conclude therefore from the evidence that deaconesses were ordained in some sees by imposition of hands just as deacons were, but that in other sees the practice was seen as scandalous and forbidden.

¹⁹Ibid.
²⁰Ibid.
²¹Ibid., VIII,19.
²²Ibid., III, 15.
Were the early deaconesses examples of the modality “full ministerial members of the body of Christ”? Obviously not! But they come closer to it than any other women in the first 1700 years of the history of the church. And one cannot move from the brief Biblical references, to the references in Polycarp and Ignatius, to the *Apostolic Constitutions*, to the Justinian Code without wondering whether a leadership role for women was not in evolution in those years that had a greater potential or promise in it than was ever actually realized. One may then ask: if such an evolution of a woman’s leadership order was in progress for three or four centuries, why was the potential not fulfilled? I would speculate by offering five reasons.

1. The heresy and the behaviour of the Montanist prophetesses and of the women associated with Simon Magus and Marcion embarrassed all women church leaders.

2. In the Gnostic and subsequent theological crises, the teaching role was more and more jealously reserved to the Bishop, the “curator of doctrine” *par excellence*. The reason was not sexism but to protect true doctrine. The unintended side effect may well have been a decline of the teaching function of the deaconesses.

3. There is no strong Biblical precedent for such activist women. The Bible suggests there were deaconesses, but leaves their ministerial functions quite undefined. Male ministers on the other hand have their functions clearly laid out in Scripture.

4. The institution of infant baptism was almost universal by the fifth century. That would have deprived women deaconesses of much of their *raison d’etre*. Their instruction of catechumens was rarely needed, for there were few adult catechumens to instruct. Nor was their assistance in the baptism of women essential when the “women” were infants.

5. Finally, female monasticism, the “female enclave,” tended to take up and rechannel the energies of widows and virgins who might otherwise have become deaconesses.

The preaching function has been assumed by women in many Protestant denominations, but not without difficulty. I choose the following example because it is a remarkable example of an emerging woman’s leadership role in a century that is normally thought of as quite anti-feminist. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was a priest of the Church of England throughout his life. His movement began as a society within the Church of England and did not separate from the mother church in England until after the founder’s passing. Early in his career, he shared the typical high church prejudices against women speaking in church. But Wesley was a pragmatist when it came to the practical institutions of church life. If a modality of evangelical activity worked —
i.e. if souls were won to Christ — he would hasten to his Bible looking for precedents, even if some were scandalized. And anyway, Methodist meetings were not technically "churches." They were "societies." Women were soon leading his class meetings in which groups of Methodists sought to build up each other in the faith. Sarah Crosby was so successful as a class leader that by 1760 she found herself faced with upwards of 200 persons coming for instruction.

When she wrote to Mr. Wesley to report that she had talked to them at length — almost preached in fact—he replied that she had acted properly. However, he suggested she might avoid future criticism if she would "tell them simply, 'you lay me under a great difficulty. The Methodists do not allow of woman preachers; neither do I take upon me any such character. But I will just nakedly tell you what is in my heart.'" One of my students once remarked, "it sounds as if he is telling her it is O.K. to preach as long as she doesn't call it preaching." Actually he is distinguishing between "witnessing," i.e. telling one's own experience, and "preaching," i.e. expounding on the Holy Scriptures. This latter function is the one which, in his day, particularly provoked criticism. His advice in 1769 makes the distinction even more explicit. "1. Pray in private or public as much as you can; 2. even in public you may properly enough intermix short exhortations with prayers; but keep as far from what is called preaching as you can; therefore never take a text; never speak in continual discourse without some break....Tell the people, 'we shall have another prayer meeting at such and such a time.'"

By June 1771 he had reached the place where even "preaching," properly so-called, seemed acceptable to him. He had found his precedents. He writes, "I think the strength of the cause rests there - on your having an extraordinary call. So I am persuaded has every one of our lay preachers; otherwise I could not countenance his preaching at all.... St. Paul's ordinary rule was 'I permit not a woman to speak in the congregation.' Yet in extraordinary cases he made a few exceptions, at Corinth in particular." Wesley does not identify which scripture passages he has in mind as his "extraordinary cases." But I suspect he is recalling the passage cited earlier here where Paul’s advice is that prophetesses may speak if they keep their heads covered. (I Corin. 11:5) Prophetesses would certainly be an "extraordinary case," and the comment is in a letter to Corinth. He may also have had in mind Priscilla, whom Paul first met in Corinth, and who, as we have noted earlier, is reported to have "expounded the way of God more accurately." (Acts 18:26) Clearly Wesley was convinced that all his lay preachers were

26 Ibid., p. 257.
“extraordinary cases.” It required only a minor extension of this notion of the “extraordinary case,” and a happy New Testament precedent or two, to enable him to justify women preaching as well.

Certainly there was a small but striking cadre of remarkable women who became successful preachers in 18th century Methodism. One woman, Selena, Countess of Huntingdon, became the chief administrator of the Whitefield branch of the Methodist revival — building chapel buildings, appointing preachers to their leadership and expelling those who were not faithful. She might be called, the first — and to date the last — woman Methodist bishop. Certainly she performed many of the functions of administration and discipline that would be the duty of latter-day male Methodist bishops.

Because of the nature of Methodism as society, not church, Wesley could approve women preaching without having to face the issue of ordination for the sacraments. He was ordained, but most of his male preachers were not. Methodists were supposed to go to the mother Church of England parish churches for the sacraments. The sacramental “nut” has been the hardest for women to “crack.” And it is not “cracked” yet in many denominations. Generally I think it is true that the more seriously a given denomination has taken the sacraments — i.e. the more centrally important they have seemed — the harder it has been for women to achieve full ordination. Thus the churches that first ordained women were those in which the sacrament seemed less significant — the Unitarians in the United States for instance. Those churches in which Congregational church government left the local church sovereign and free to call whom it would to its pulpit also were among the first to ordain women. It is easier to convince one local congregation that a greatly loved daughter of the local group is called of God, than it is to convince a whole connectional system dominated by male presbyters that women, in general, are qualified for orders. Unitarians, Congregationalists, the Friends, and some Baptists provide early examples.

When churches of mediate sacramentary views, like the Presbyterians and Methodists, began to consider ordination of women, there was much backing and filling. Some complained even at the education of women, lest that be taken as an excuse to seek ordination. Bishop James Thoburn of the Methodist Episcopal Church, writing in India in 1893, sought to defend his sister’s educational endeavors at Lucknow. He noted that in a society where the seclusion of women is the rule in certain classes, the sacraments of baptism and communion were not available to enclosed women in their zenanas if there were not women who could perform them. He cited a sad case of a dying woman who wished to be baptised. Her husband had no objection. But....(1) She could not leave the zenana; and (2) No man but her husband could enter
the zenana. The woman died unbaptised. It was such a case that led him to write:

The trouble with many persons is that they are in bondage to notions which have sprung up in modern times..... One of these notions is an exaggerated idea of the sanctity of certain ministerial functions, which in the New Testament are uniformly treated as incidental rather than vital.... The freedom of the disciple to work in the master's name must never be jeopardized. God never intended that the Christian Church should be divided into "union" and "non union" workers and that under the plea of respect for the ministry, the vast majority of the disciples of Jesus Christ should be forbidden to work in the master's name.27

Nevertheless, women were not even allowed to sit as members of an American Methodist General Conference-- a disciplinary function-- until 1904; though lay males had been members since 1888. It was only very gradually that the Methodist Episcopal Church moved to local orders for women, to accepted supply status for women, to pastoral appointment without sacramental privileges for women, and finally in 1956 to full ordination for women.

In our own time the issue is being fought out in what might be called the sacramentally "high" churches. The decision of the Episcopal Church, U.S.A., in 1976, to ordain women is a major breakthrough in that arena, though it has already produced a schism in that church; and some of the present Bishops have announced that they personally will not participate in such ordinations. Recently (Summer 1978), the world Anglican Bishops, meeting at the decennial Lambeth Conference, found a typically Anglican solution to the problem. They agreed to disagree! That is, by a majority of nine to one they agreed to leave female ordination up to each national church. More recently still, the Mother Anglican Church refused to undertake such ordinations, though the vote was close.

There was a post Vatican II flurry of excitement in the Roman Catholic Church. But it was soon apparent there would be no Roman Catholic deaconesses, much less presbyters, as long as Paul VI lived — and quite possibly not for a long time after that. Paul is dead. The sexist mentality of the hierarchy is not. This one must conclude despite the reported remark of Pope John Paul I during his tragically short reign. "He [God] is Father. Even more, God is mother."28 Many a Roman Catholic woman is angry with her church, as the example in the opening paragraph of this paper makes clear. There is no external evidence of movement on the issue whatsoever among the Russian, Greek, Syrian or other "Orthodox" churches.

In many ways the modality, "full ministerial member of the body of Christ," is the hardest modality of the five to use, for it flies most clearly

in the face of the stereotype and its Biblical foundations. Yet progress is being made. In many denominations today women enjoy full ordination and both the privileges and the responsibilities that go with such an office. The number of women who have availed themselves of the opportunity for ordination in those churches is still not large. Sometimes such women feel their opportunities for full ministry are somewhat curtailed by the attitudes of some of their male superiors in the hierarchy and by the attitudes of some males and females in the local congregations they serve. Still they are recognized as full ministers. In the "high" churches the battle for the recognition of this modality is just beginning, and the path ahead is by no means clear.

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How then shall we conclude? We have seen the nature and the origins of the stereotype. We have tried to suggest that the stereotype only partially describes historic reality. By using the five modalities herein discussed, women have found, across the centuries of church history, ways to transcend the stereotypical roles assigned to them and ways to give expression to what they sense as the call of God. Our faith in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and in the remarkable creativity of women seeking freedom to respond more fully to the call of God, causes us to believe that the exclusive stereotype will continue to be eroded as we move into a new day of true equality of men and women before God and in the Church which seeks to do God's will.