The Women Behind the Pulpit:
Uncovering Female Leadership in a Male Dominated Religion
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Religious Studies Honors Thesis
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Abstract

It is clear that in early Christianity some women held prominent positions of leadership and had influential voices. Over time, those voices have been phased out, giving men the power to dominate. Modern research shows that women, though masked in history, have a strong heritage and history of being apostles, teachers, prophets, presbyters (an elder or minister), widows, deacons, and bishops.¹ Scholars see this in stories like that of Thecla and Mary Magdalene. We can hypothesize that these women had important influence based on how well kept their stories are, but know that their biographies have been altered based on how many versions exist.

After the First Council of Nicæa, stories of significant women were excluded from the early stages of the canon as the patriarchy became the figureheads of the church. The ramifications of this exclusion have lasted for centuries. For many women, during the time from the First Council of Nicæa to the time around the Reformation, the convent was where they found autonomy and education. Women lost even this little authority when, in 1522, Martin Luther wrote The Estate of Marriage and argued that the practice of taking monastic vows destroyed the freedom of the Christian. “In the shift from nun to wife, however, many women actually lost personal status, for women in the convent often had considerably more power than they were allowed in the secular world as wives and mothers.”² It is not until recently that women have been able to be officially recognized as leaders in the

church. This work attempts to trace the long path to ordination using the Lutheran Church as an example of Christian women's plights. The goal of this paper, then, is threefold: 1) To recapture the earliest voices that have been silenced and to give them an audience. 2) To examine the preservation of women's voices during the Reformation, namely the movement from the convents to the household. 3) To examine contemporary experiences in the Lutheran Church.

Women's voices come to the forefront again during the 1950's as they started their fight for equality in the church. Using the model of the Lutheran Church it is easy to follow the progression and modernization of ordaining women in some branches while other branches have stayed extremely patriarchal. In 1958 the Lutheran Church of Sweden ordained their first female pastor. Now, Sweden has their first female archbishop, Antje Jackelén, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America has their first female bishop, Elizabeth Eaton. Continuing with this example, the last portion of my paper is a brief history and overview of three branches of the Lutheran Church—the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America which ordains women and believes they are equal to men, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod which trains women to work as deaconesses although they do not believe in or support female ordination, and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod which believes that women were created to be submissive to men. After tracing the history of women in early Christianity and the Reformation, I will look

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more closely at case studies of women in the modern Lutheran Church. The most important aspect of this paper is finding women’s voices in history and bringing them into the open; from there, analyzing the shift that has or has not taken place and looking at the reasons behind it. By researching the muted voices of women in the church in antiquity and analyzing the reasons that certain churches have embraced the ordination of women, one can gain a better understanding of how women’s roles have shifted rather than been created from scratch in the last 60 years that women have obtained power in the Lutheran Church.

**History of Scholarship**

Female’s roles in the church have been researched from several different perspectives. Scholars have been in communication with each other about the importance that women have played and how they carried the church through the early years. Women like Mary Magdalene and Thecla have taken the stage again and again. There has been debate about Thecla being one of the early women that lead an ascetic lifestyle, bound to chastity and being a handmaid of God, instead of being an early feminist revolutionary working alongside Paul. Scholars that date Thecla as a first century figure associate her with the early convent movement.

Women in the Reformation have been discussed in several different ways. There has been a debate over whether the Reformation was beneficial or detrimental for women and their status in society. Women in the convents had the ability to gain an education and had autonomy. With the Reformation and those identifying as Protestants moving away from the convents, women were taken out
of that scholastic setting and given the duty of child rearing and upkeep within the home.

As female ordination has taken hold despite still-strong opposition, scholars have started tracing the history and attempted to find when this conversation started to take place.

My research puts these three things into conversation. I establish how the roles of women in the church have transformed through the centuries and see how women have begun to regain their rightful power.

Growing up in the Lutheran church, I have watched my own congregation transform as the first praise band was established to replace the traditional church choir on some Sundays, and then again as the first female pastor was called. These changes, especially the calling of our first female pastor, caused an internal schism within my church. Many older members decided to find a different place to worship, stating that it was “against God’s will to have a female at the helm of Christ’s ship.” Since being at the center of the backlash of the church as a member of the Call Committee, I have had varying degrees of interest in the legitimacy of the sentiment of the church members that decided to take their membership somewhere where women were not ordained. I wanted to know why women were not permitted to preach if they could share the gospel just as effectively as men. After my first religious studies class my first semester at University of Redlands, I was hooked. I quickly declared as a Religious Studies major. Many of my projects held women as the focus—Jewish women in the Diaspora, a comparison piece of Lilith and Thecla, Muslim women and their agency within Islam. With my thesis being a yearlong
project, I decided to study something closer to home to try to get to the center of what I really want to know: Is there consistent evidence that supports that women are not equal in the church, and if so, why are women traditionally the impetus that make sure their husbands and children live faithfully?

The Lutheran Church provides a comprehensive spectrum of ‘strictly patriarchal’ to ‘allowing and supporting female ordination.’ Comparing responses from women in these different branches of Lutheranism—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—and comparing it with research of women in the time periods that, in essence, created the Lutheran Church, I can gain a better understanding of how

**Methods and Implications of Research**

My paper consists of six parts: an introduction, women in the modern church, women in the Reformation, women in the church in antiquity, a conclusion and an appendix of surveys from women in the WELS, the LCMS and the ELCA responding to a set of six questions. Parts two through four are all synthesized research from secondary data sources. Part two summarizes the responses that women provided about their religious upbringing and current beliefs and sentiments about the church while providing research on particular branches’ beliefs and doctrine. The appendix will provide their responses in their entirety.

Two questions I have are how the interpretation of scripture has impacted the implementation of female leadership and what roles women play outside of
ordination. By looking at one denomination specifically and how differences occur across different branches, I can get an insight into both of these areas.