



# WOMEN

AND THE SPONTANEOUS  
EXPANSION OF THE  
EARLY CHURCH



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A BILD ENCYCLICAL BY JEFF REED

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**WOMEN AND THE  
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**A BILD  
ENCYCLICAL**

I am writing this article from the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of the M. G. Road Taj Hotel in Bangalore, India, because I have a 3-day “window” between leading training for two mega church-planting networks in India, which are both at the center of an expansion of the gospel in India that is unprecedented in church history. As I reflect on this expansion and the tremendous role women are playing in it, I believe it is all the more important that this issue on the role of women be clarified in the many movements across this time of great expansion of the gospel in India. I am convinced that there is massive confusion over the role of women in the churches of both the West and the Global South. In the West, we have “lost our ball in the woods” of the now almost 40-year egalitarian-patriarchal debate. And there is little evidence of serious biblical study and theological reflection on the role of women in the large-scale church-planting movements in the Global South, over the last half century. As you will see in this article, women were at the very heart of the expansion of the early churches, but women are also the main entry point for Satan to come in and upset churches. So it is critical that we pay careful attention to the abundance of instruction and examples delivered by apostolic teaching to the early churches.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the third in a series of articles written under the branding of a modern-day encyclical, designed to circulate among networks of churches around the world. Most of these articles deal with critical issues with encyclopedic implications, intended to help leaders develop complex networks of well-trained apostolic teams moving amongst well-connected, strong, multiplying churches, all carefully founded on “the way of Christ and His Apostles.” The first paper, *From Jesus to the Gospels*, dealt with the massive modern-day confusion of discipleship and the Gospels and reset the whole issue of the use of the apostolic teaching in Acts and the letters of the Apostles as foundational to returning to the “way of Christ and His Apostles,” as we establish churches today. The second article, *The Early Churches: From Simple Churches to Complex Networks*, brings into view the complex network of the early churches and how this network forms a map for our church-planting movements today. This collection will be completed over the next two years, forming a 5-year collection to be circulated amongst church-planting movements worldwide. The remaining issues will address structuring for spontaneous expansion, financing the movements, and shepherding the churches.

I want to state, at the outset, that I am indebted to a 30-year conversation that has been growing in its research and clarity over the last 25–30 years on the tradition of the family and community “household texts” of the New Testament,<sup>2</sup> led by a school of scholars committed to careful study of the social aspects of the early churches in the Greco-Roman context in which they existed and thrived.<sup>3</sup> And I want to express my indebtedness to Carolyn Osiek and Margaret MacDonald for a wonderful work entitled *A Woman’s Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity*.<sup>4</sup> They are Catholic theology professors, coming from both a Catholic and post-critical theological position, who have charted a whole new course for addressing the role of women in church-planting movements today. While I do not prescribe to everything in their book, I am deeply indebted to their extensive research and commitment to let the texts speak for themselves, as they do in a very fresh way in their work.

### 40 Years in the Theological Wilderness

In the series that I delivered over 7 weeks in our church,<sup>5</sup> I did a fairly extensive review of the 40-year “egalitarian-patriarchal” debate<sup>6</sup> in

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<sup>2</sup> These texts include the family household texts: Ephesians 5:22–6:9; Colossians 3:18–4:1 and 1 Peter 3:1–7; and the community-wide household texts: 1 Timothy and Titus.

<sup>3</sup> I have referred to this school of scholarship in earlier papers, but the most seminal works in this area are David Verner’s *The Household of God: The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles* and David Balch’s *Let the Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter*—both Society of Biblical Literature Monographs. Several authors have been on the trail of the household texts and their implications for women in ministry today. Two of the most prominent, who have written journal articles, are Carolyn Osiek and Margaret MacDonald. They are the authors of the main text behind this article: *A Woman’s Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity*. Osiek’s most important earlier work was *The Family, Religion, and Culture* series, 4 volumes, especially *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, by Carolyn Osiek and David Balch.

<sup>4</sup> *A Woman’s Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* by Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald with Janet H. Tulloch (Fortress Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> This 7-part series entitled “Women in the Early Churches” was given in the winter of 2010 at Oakwood Road Church and is available online at The CityChurch of Ames-Des Moines.

<sup>6</sup> In referring to a “40-year debate,” I am, of course, generalizing, but the contours I list here give a sweeping overview of the progression of the debate. First came secular scholarship/populism, as seen in such works as *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (Dell Publishing, 1963). The secular journey and its global implications are reviewed in the significant book *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* by Estelle Freedman (Ballantine Books, 2002). Radical mainline scholarship was exemplified by works such as Mary Daly’s *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Beacon Press, 1973) and can be traced further in works such as *Womanguides: Reading Towards a Feminist Theology* by Rosemary Radford Ruether (Beacon, 1985). Evangelical egalitarian scholarship soon followed by authors from several prominent evangelical seminaries. One of the first to set the argument was *Man as Male and Female* by Paul Jewett (Eerdmans, 1975), a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. A decade later came Gilbert Belezikian’s *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman’s Place in Church and Family* (Baker, 1985). Belezikian was a professor at Wheaton College and the primary theologian at Willow Creek. His book was essentially written as a manifesto of the church for Willow Creek. During this time, the main publisher of egalitarian populism was InterVarsity Press, with such books as *In Search of God’s Ideal Woman* by Dorothy Pape (IVP, 1976), *Women at the Crossroads: A Path Beyond Feminism and Traditionalism* by Kari Torjesen Malcolm (IVP, 1982), and *Woman in the Bible* by Mary Evans (IVP, 1983). So by the mid-eighties we had prominent seminaries and graduate schools, such as Fuller and

evangelicalism, which has, in many ways, mirrored the mainline churches earlier march toward egalitarianism, following the drift of culture in the global liberation of women. As I will attempt to show in this article, the entire debate is misguided, focusing on the wrong issues, ending in a polarizing direction that is dividing denominations all over the globe to this very day, as it focuses on the more formal aspects of the debate—the ordination of women. It is fair to say that most of American evangelicalism today is egalitarian. Even the young postmodern church-planting movements of North America, most growing out of disenfranchised and disillusioned young evangelicals, are, for the most part, in the egalitarian camp, or maybe, more accurately, have given up on the issue and migrated to an androgynous position.

While it can be said that those in the patriarchal camp, who now refer to themselves as complementarians, have, through efforts such as The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood<sup>7</sup>, defended the biblical position of male leadership in the churches in some form, the real issue of the role of women in the spontaneous expansion of the churches and their role in establishing and shepherding those churches has gone almost untouched. In fact, the research on the “household texts” as a genre, as well as their Greco-Roman context, which gives extensive context and definitive balance to the whole instruction given by the Apostles to the churches in their New Testament, is almost completely absent from the entire debate. The women had a key, if not central, role in the churches. But it is a very different role from what is conceived by either the egalitarian or the patriarchal position, renamed by some as the complementarian position.

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Wheaton, and major evangelical publishers, such as Eerdmans, Baker, and IVP, consistently publishing egalitarian works. Other prominent egalitarian authors included Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, Patricia Gundry, Catherine Clark Kroeger, and Gretchen Gaebelein Hull. Then began the evangelical patriarchal response, which climaxed in the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, formed around “The Danvers Statement” in 1987 and its manifesto-type piece *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway Books, 1991). They settled on a softer term—*complementarian*, which is actually the historic patriarchal position. In response to this association, Men and Women for Biblical Equality was formed to represent the egalitarian scholars. Finally, we have the patriarchal populist response, which for the most case was shallow, focusing on surface issues of appearance and “neat house” kinds of issues, illustrated in Marabel Morgan’s book *The Total Woman* (Revell, 1973). Even books that have substance biblically, like *Creative Counterpart* by Linda Dillow (Revell, 1977), are highly individualistic, focusing on the personal relationship elements of the husband and wife, rather than on the broader context of the church as a household and the Greco-Roman social context of the passages. As far as the debate in evangelicalism goes, it eventually exhausted itself, but practically speaking, partially because of mega churches such as Willow Creek, the evangelical church for the most part just gave up the discussion and settled for the egalitarian position, much easier to defend in Western culture today. I believe that the patriarchal model failed to make its case as it “wrangled endlessly about words” making its case from detailed exegesis rather than from the broad, clear arguments of the household texts and the nature of the social structure of the churches and of families according to God’s design—although Piper got close by at least paralleling it to the qualifications for elders being men who lead their households well.

<sup>7</sup> Two evangelical organizations emerged from the debate: The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and Men and Women for Biblical Equality, representing the classic patriarchal and the modern egalitarian positions respectively.

My Own 38-Year Journey

| Patriarchal–<br>Egalitarian<br>Debate    | Establish social<br>structure of the<br>household   | Benefactors,<br>Apostolic Teams,<br>Women  |
|--|---|--|
| 70s to late 80s                          | Late 80s through 90s  | Late 90s till present  |
| Defend<br>patriarchalism                 | Clark’s book  | Breakthroughs  |
| Constant conflict<br>on women’s<br>roles | Leadership Series 1:<br>especially Acts,<br>Pauline, Essentials,<br>Leaders, Family,<br>Shepherding | Seek the Welfare,<br>Churches of the First<br>Century, Women of<br>the First Century |

This paper is actually the outcome of my own almost 40-year journey in thinking through this issue. In the heat of the egalitarian/patriarchal debate, while defending the unpopular position of male leadership in the home and church, we suffered many losses and attacks. When I was introduced to Stephen Clark’s book, *Men and Women in Christ: An Examination of Roles in Light of the Social Sciences*,<sup>8</sup> I entered a whole new phase of study that began to unveil the social structure of the church as a household and opened up the establishing process of churches. Then after a decade or so of working with church-planting movements globally and being introduced to the entire conversation of the social aspects of the church in the Greco-Roman context, culminating with Osiek and MacDonald’s work, I am able to see this issue with great clarity.

Just a quick word to “Global Pentecostals”<sup>9</sup> reading this article, who make up a majority of the large-scale church-planting movements across the Global South today: You have discovered what this article is all about—that women have a very central, key role to play in the churches, both in their multiplication and in their nurturing. And, you have probably observed that women are more receptive to spiritual things and often initially lead most of the house churches as they are birthed. However, I believe failure to carefully consider all that was delivered to the early churches by the Apostles will result in disastrous results down the road if you fail to lay foundations in your churches of the “household codes” found in the New Testament, and it will open up your churches to a very clear line of attack in the future that will upset entire households and, eventually, bring chaos into your churches.

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<sup>8</sup> *Men and Women in Christ: An Examination of Roles in Light of the Social Sciences* by Stephen Clark (Servant, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> *Global Pentecostalism* is a term for both those of classic Pentecostal traditions and the large church-planting movements in the Global South, often rooted in Pentecostal traditions, yet driven by a sort of return to the early church experiences recorded in Acts, which helped the gospel break into completely pagan societies. See *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel* edited by Murray Dempster, Byron Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (Regnum Books, 1999).

## Basic Thesis

This entire paper revolves around one basic thesis. The thesis can be summarized as follows:

Women had a significant and strategic contribution to the spontaneous expansion of the Church in the first 3 centuries. In fact, their contribution, when fully understood, could even be seen as central; yet it is quite different from what has been imagined in the egalitarian-patriarchal debate of the last 40 years.

This basic thesis became powerfully clear to me as I read *A Woman's Place*.<sup>10</sup> After all of their Greco-Roman research on the social aspects of women's role in the early churches and after an examination of all of the texts on women in Acts and the letters of the Apostles to the churches, with a special focus on the household texts, they conclude with careful reflections:

“We come to the end of this study with greater conviction concerning the influence of women in the creation of early Christian infrastructure, their roles as hosts, teachers, and leaders, and their significant contribution to the expansion of early Christianity in the empire.”<sup>11</sup>

In their book, they address women as key to the stability of their own households, as balancing many very complicated tasks, as hosts of churches in their homes, as patrons, and as agents of expansion.

How vital were these women to the progress of the gospel? Let's do a quick survey of several key New Testament passages. Our first example is seen in the story of Lydia (Acts 16:11–15). Lydia, a leading woman in the city of Philippi, believed, along with her household, and later brought Paul into her home. In Berea (Acts 17:10–12), again we see leading women coming to Christ. Many of these leading women went on to host churches in their homes, as seen with Nympha and the church in her house (Colossians 4:15) and Phoebe, who also became a benefactor to Paul and a key emissary for him to the church at Rome, building his network there and probably laying fund development foundations before he arrived (Romans 16:1–2). Priscilla and Aquilla were a key team ministering at many levels with Paul, including hosting a church in their home. Priscilla probably was from nobility of some type, as seen by the use of her more formal name, at times. And she was quite prominent because we see her correcting Apollos—with her name listed before her husband's in that passage (Acts 18:1–4, 24–26; Romans 16:3). Euodia and Syntyche were two women who served as key co-workers with Paul (Philippians 4:2–3). And then there was the prominence of women in the churches in general, as seen in the admonition in the Pastorals to give a special place of honor/financial support to older widows.

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<sup>10</sup> Osiek and MacDonald, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 250

<sup>9</sup> Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; <sup>10</sup> she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. 1 Timothy 5:9–10

This passage shows the central nature of the role of women in local households of faith and to the stability of their own households. They worked to bring up their children, as well as to serve believers in the churches and to show hospitality to those outside the faith.

How vital were women? They responded as leading women and led their households to Christ; they hosted churches in their homes; they formed ministry teams as married couples; they served as co-workers on Paul's team; they served in significant deacon/servant roles; they engaged in a whole set of infrastructure services: hospitality inside and outside the churches, serving their husbands and raising their children, meeting pressing needs, etc., etc., etc. They were vital, if not central, to the progress of the gospel and the success of churches in the first 300 years.

Yet they were given special roles in relation to men. Those roles often do not square with our modern, Western sensibilities, especially if they are removed from the logic and purpose of their context. They seem to restrict women and the spontaneous expansion of the gospel. Let's just review a few of the passages. In regards to their own households, women were to submit to their husbands, placing themselves under their leadership (Ephesians 5:22–33; Colossians 3:18), even to the point of winning a disobedient husband without a word (1 Peter 3:1–7). Wives were to devote themselves to their households, loving their husbands and children (Titus 2:3–5). Younger widows were to remarry and do the same (1 Timothy 5:11–15). Slaves were to be submissive to their masters (Ephesians 6:5–9; Colossians 3:22–25). In the households of God, in a general “sound doctrine” passage, women were not to teach or exercise authority over men, but to maintain a quiet and non-challenging spirit (1 Timothy 2:11–15).

These teachings were no small order in the culture of the times. Yet their tasks were varied and complicated. Again, Osiek and MacDonald help the picture along significantly. They speak of these varied and difficult tasks. Think of the situation the women of the early churches found themselves in. Many had husbands who viewed their wives as property. Many husbands left their wives, or died young. In the culture, husbands were free to have sex with female slaves, who had no honor and were not considered human. Thirty percent of children died in the 1<sup>st</sup> year; only 50% of all children lived past 10 years old.<sup>12</sup> Female slaves were required to have children, but they would often be sold as they reached puberty or early adulthood. And many were poor and had small homes. So their tasks were full of paradoxes and complex relationships, required a lot of multi-tasking, were lifelong, and at many times were relentless and exhausting.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 65, 78

“Nevertheless, the picture has a unifying element: household life. The attempt to identify the specific activities of women that contributed to the expansion of the gospel leads time and time again to the household: women meeting together in a house, seeking to build believing homes, or struggling to preserve Christian allegiance in the home of a pagan householder.”<sup>13</sup>

On top of all of this, Paul makes it clear that if women do not follow this teaching, it gives Satan a direct shot at upsetting the churches. We will deal with this issue in the argument below.

Now, how does this all square with the basic thesis that women were key, if not central, to the spontaneous expansion of the gospel? I thought you said they hosted churches in their homes; were strong husband and wife teams in ministry; were coworkers with Paul; were benefactors; and at times, emissaries of top leaders, carrying their authority with them. Let’s look at this basic thesis in more detail and attempt to discover how all of this makes the ministry of women so important.

### Corollary Theses: Building the Case

**Corollary Thesis 1:** If our homes are not ordered properly, according to Christ’s design for His churches, then we cannot expect our expansion initiatives, and our churches, to succeed. Christ has set forth, through His Apostles, a “household code” that our churches must follow, and women are key to that. We will never become a powerful, one-minded movement without understanding and adhering to this.

We will now turn our attention to the household codes, which we will look at from the perspective of the specific instructions in the codes to women, specifically to wives. What do I mean by *household codes*? The foundation for understanding these codes is best laid by Verner.

“The author of the Pastorals sets forth in his composition a coherent concept of the church as the household of God. This concept is two-pronged, informing the author’s understanding both of the household as the basic social unit in the church, and of the church as a social structure modeled on the household.”<sup>14</sup>

Verner refers to the Pastorals as containing major sections “concerning household management” called...

- ... Haustafeln—German for household code
- ... Household codes
- ... Household texts
- ... Station codes

The Pastorals are essentially “household texts”: reflecting an understanding of the social structure of churches as a large household made up of older

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 243

<sup>14</sup> *The Household of God: The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles* by David Verner (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series, No. 71) p. 1.



men, older women, younger women, younger men, slaves; also, elders, deacons, widows—all based on household social structures common to household texts of the Greco-Roman culture (cf. both Aristotle and Plato’s politeia idea).<sup>15</sup> Verner argues definitively that the Pastorals are “household code” like material and that the organizing idea of the Pastorals is 1 Timothy 3:15.

<sup>14</sup> “I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, <sup>15</sup> if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.”

This whole discussion of the household of God is built on the individual “household code” texts themselves, dealing with order in individual households. Individual “household code” texts, referring to families that make up a church family, are as follows:

Ephesians 5:22–6:10

Colossians 3:18–4:1

1 Peter 3:1–7

They all follow the household text genre of the day: husbands, wives, parents, children, masters, slaves.

Verner relies heavily on the work of David Balch. One of Balch’s main works is an SBL monograph (1981) based on his earlier dissertation “*Let the Wives Be Submissive...*” *The Origin, Form and Apologetic Function of the Household Duty Code (Haustafeln) in 1 Peter* (1974). Balch’s project grew out of Abraham Malherbe’s suggestion, one of the founding scholars of the Greco-Roman “social aspects” school.<sup>16</sup> Balch traces the household code genre through Greek philosophers (key to Aristotle and Plato’s Politeia—City).

- Callicratidas—*On Happiness of Households*
- Perictione—*On Harmony of a Woman*
- Plutarch—*Advice to Bride and Groom*

These are just a few examples. In the household texts, and in all of these books, it is assumed that the wife is to be submissive to her husband for the sake of harmony.

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<sup>15</sup> The Greeks understood that you could not have a strong and viable society without strong households. This is why they worked so hard on the “household codes”—a society had to have harmony and authority or it would crumble from within. They believed there was a natural, observable order that they saw in the household and the city—the politeia—which they saw as a community of families. In the last few decades in America we have seen these “household codes” of family life erode. The result is now beginning to be seen. Three studies exemplify the breakdown of a society in which the “household codes” dissolve: *The Broken Hearth: Reversing the Moral Collapse of the American Family* by William Bennett (Doubleday, 2001), *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* by David Blankenhorn (Basic Books, 1995), and *The Abolition of Marriage: How We Destroy Lasting Love* by Maggie Gallagher (Regnery, 1996). In both ancient and contemporary society, these codes are naturally observable and verifiable. This presents an excellent “kerygmatic” opportunity for our churches if we properly establish our families.

<sup>16</sup> Malherbe’s work mainly focused on the Thessalonian epistles.

“The culture demanded this relationship between the husband and wife; this hierarchal relationship was not a Christian creation.”<sup>17</sup>

While Verner focused on Paul’s household texts, Balch focused on Peter’s. Peter follows the same line of teaching as Paul and also freely uses the household text genre. Here is Peter’s argument. Peter instructs wives to accept the authority of their husbands (1 Peter 3:1–7). This is even to apply to a husband who is disobedient to the teaching of Christ. Her quiet, respectful attitude toward him is so powerful it can even win an unbelieving husband. The context of Peter’s instructions makes the teaching even more powerful. The context of the instructions, first to slaves (2:18) and then to wives (3:1), is that they were to live in such a way that the Gentiles who were watching would be amazed at what they observed and would become responsive to the gospel (2:12). The section begins in 2:12 with a focus on the progress of the gospel and ends with the same line of reasoning.

The point: Women, through the way they live in their households, are key to the progress of the gospel. This is especially powerful when one understands that the small, simple households of God—the churches in homes—were the vehicle for the spontaneous expansion of the gospel in the first 300 years of the early churches.<sup>18</sup> This means that women were central to that progress.

I remember that the very week I was giving the session behind this teaching, a major leader from India was visiting our church and gave an amazing illustration of this point. Church women began reaching out to women, forming small groups of women in villages, teaching them community health, microbusiness skills, etc., with eventually 2,000 women in the program. Over 1,000 became believers through their serving! Their husbands sat on the periphery the first few months and mocked at first, but their wives remained respectful. As a result, many of the men started becoming believers also.

Listen further to Balch.

“The goal of the wife’s behavior as stated in 3:1 is missionary: the author of 1 Peter hoped that the wives’ conduct would convert their husbands.”<sup>19</sup>

“The wives are to remain silent, ‘without a word,’ so that the husbands ‘disobedient to the word’ may be converted. By being silent, perhaps not verbalizing *the* Word (the gospel) to resistant husbands, the wives would appear *virtuous* to them. This virtue might attract the husbands to Christ.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Let the Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* by David Balch (Society of Biblical Literature Monograph) p. 99.

<sup>18</sup> Again note my paper, *The Early Churches: From Simple Churches to Complex Networks*, which is foundational to the whole argument here.

<sup>19</sup> Balch, op. cit., p. 105

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 99

Now let's turn to Paul's use of the household codes for women in their families. Are the household codes just pragmatic, or are they God's design? We already know the household codes for the community were normative—the Pastorals and 1 Timothy 3:15—conduct in the household of God, the church, the pillar and support of the truth. Again, let's set them in the context of the mission of the churches.

The church has an *administration* (“house” and “law”—house order), cf. 1 Timothy 3:14ff as the heart of the Pastorals. Ephesians states Christ has an administration for His Church (Ephesians 3:11). And the apostolic leaders of Ephesians 4:11 are to equip the saints for the work of the ministry—building and expanding the Church. Therefore the household codes are part of that building up and expanding of the church, thus the overriding reason for the codes. These codes show the ideal family, thus the ideal wife, and the importance of the home as the basic building block of the church. The “household code” (Ephesians 5:22–6:9) is at the heart of the work of the ministry of building up the church (Ephesians 4:11–16) according to Christ's administration (Ephesians 3:11). And the maturing of the wife in the household context is on par with the maturing of the church—showing how important she is in a household of faith. Right after the “household code” is the famous armor of God passage—Ephesians 6:10–18. The challenge is for the churches to hold the ground they have gained against the attacks of Satan. And the progress of the gospel of peace, which is possible only through the previous work of the ministry, will be possible. Again Osiek and MacDonald are helpful.

“Recent work on the Roman family, however, has highlighted the importance of marriage for assertions of identity in society generally and suggests that marriage practices among the early Christians would be one of the most important vehicles for communicating the essence of the church and for negotiating life with neighbors.”<sup>21</sup> (Pax Romana or Greek Politeia)

“The tendency for civic harmony to be linked with marital concord has led historian Peter Brown to describe Ephesians in turn as presenting “an image of unbreakable order that the pagan world could understand.”<sup>22</sup>

The basic code as it applies to the wives of house churches:

<sup>22</sup> Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup> Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Ephesians 5:22–24

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<sup>21</sup> Osiek and MacDonald, op. cit., p. 126.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 120

<sup>18</sup> Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.  
Colossians 3:18

The essence of their role: “Submit to your husband”—place yourself under his authority, to rank under. The concept has to do with order, with the social structure of the household within a community for the sake of harmony. Today some have confused these passages. They claim the word for *head* means source, not order and authority, and that submission is mutual. To the audience of the day, that would have been absurd. The meaning was clear: men are to lead; it is the divine plan and order of things.<sup>23</sup>

What about the community-wide household texts? (the Pastorals)? What do they say about women’s role within the churches themselves? One of the basic “teaching texts” is 1 Timothy 2:11–15. The core of that passage is 2:11–12. The context again is important. In 1 Timothy 2:1–8, men in the churches everywhere are to be in submission to the governing authorities and not raise up their hands in anger. But they are to pray, seeking God to protect them as they lead and protect their church communities. Likewise, women are to possess a quiet spirit as well. They are to respond to the men leading the church communities, not challenging them but submitting to them. Specifically, women are to leave it to the men to exercise authoritative teaching in the churches and to avoid challenging them and engaging in public debate or dispute over the teaching in public gatherings.

Paul gives us lots of other passages in the household texts of the Pastorals that show his logic. See, the households of God, the churches, are built on the social structure of the family household texts. And this order is key to the churches be strong and stable, resistant to Satan’s attacks, and free to focus on the spontaneous progress of the gospel through the multiplication of these small simple churches. Let’s look at his arguments at several places. In Titus 1, Paul says that he left Titus in Crete to “set in order what remains”—to fully establish the churches on the island (Titus 1:5). One of his main jobs was to appoint elders in every city. These men were to be of a certain type: good character, good managers of their own households, have a firm grasp of the teaching, and be able to refute those who brought in another teaching (Titus 3:1–8). Why were they needed? As soon as Paul and his team would leave, Satan would send in those with a different teaching who would try to “upset whole families.” If families were upset, the church community would be affected, and the whole movement would either slow down or shut down. That is why the elders had to be good managers of their own households. If they were not, how could they take care of the household of God (1 Timothy 3:4–5)? Only that kind of elder would be capable of helping other men keep their households under the teaching.

<sup>23</sup> Clark, *op. cit.* This is a thorough treatment (753 pages)—definitive! As leaders, you should master the arguments. The Scripture is crystal clear. Clark has given us open permission to use his work. This book can be found on the Council on Biblical Manhood & Womanhood website: [www.cbmw.org](http://www.cbmw.org), under resources: online books. There are two key chapters:

Part 1: Chapter 3 – The Family: Husbands and Wives

Part 1: Chapter 4 – The Family: Key Texts

It is in this context that Paul gives instruction to Titus and Timothy regarding older women and younger women. Older women are to teach younger women to carefully establish their households within the guidelines of the household codes—loving their husbands and children and taking care of their household—that the gospel would be honored (Titus 2:3–5). Building on the same idea, when instructing young widows to remarry, Timothy encourages them to find new husbands and build strong households, avoiding going house to house as busybodies, which gives Satan an opportunity to enter households through women who are operating outside the “household code” priorities (1 Timothy 5:11–16). In another passage, Paul illustrates to Timothy how Satan works (2 Timothy 3:6–7). False teachers work themselves into the households of weak women, who are all burdened down by emotional issues—women who are not focusing on building strong households and using their strong households to serve the saints and assist those in need in the community (1 Timothy 5:9–10). Once their households are upset, it affects the church household and then the testimony in the community and gives Satan an even bigger opportunity to damage the progress of the gospel locally and beyond. In addition, in 1 Timothy 2:11–16, based on the created order and the fall, Paul gives one of the reasons that men should lead the churches through authoritative teaching: women are more susceptible to being deceived. Now at first this sounds like a prejudiced statement, but think about it for a moment. Most leaders who are close to the ground of large-scale church planting movements will tell you that women have greater spiritual interest and often believe first. They open their homes. Churches are formed. But as all of these household passages imply, if men do not step up and lead in the churches and help other men lead their households, the churches will not be protected and the gospel will not continue to progress on solid ground.

The logic of the whole teaching on women in the household codes should now be becoming clear. The churches are in essence households of households. The churches must have men leading who are managing their own households well and are able to protect the churches and their households. Building solid families is key to churches being strong, being effective locally, and multiplying. A vast majority of the spirit and work of those households lies with the women, as they build their households and minister to the churches and to those in need in the community. Since the multiplication of small church households is key to the progress of the gospel, and since women are the heart of the homes that make up the heart of the churches, then the women are key, if not central, to the spontaneous expansion of the gospel.

Do the “household codes” demean women or regard them as less valuable, one might ask? Absolutely not. If properly understood, the whole situation is honoring to them at every turn. Peter instructs husbands to “grant her honor as a fellow-heir” in the grace of life” (1 Peter 3:7). Paul states that husbands are to love and cherish their wives, doing everything possible to help them mature in Christ (Ephesians 5:25–29). Does it mean

women are less important? No. Once the whole picture is in place, we see that women are . . .

- key to the expansion of the gospel.
- key to winning husbands and passing on the faith to their children.
- creating a powerful apologetic to those watching, through their own households.
- a vital part of building the basic unit of the church—the family household—which is at the heart of the “work of the ministry” and builds and expands the church.
- key to order and harmony in the home and in the household of God, which is necessary for them to be healthy and multiply.

And as you will see in the coming corollary theses as we proceed, this is just the beginning of the extent of their ministry.

Let me make a special note at the conclusion of this initial treatment of the household texts and their application to the ministry of women. In my introduction, in reviewing the literature of the evangelical response to the biblical position of men leading in the homes and churches, I stated that almost all were worthless. Evangelical theologians completely avoid any serious treatment of the “household texts.” Not a single popular response even reflects an understanding of the household texts. As to my rejection of most evangelical material today, the large women’s ministry movements, and large women’s teaching ministries:

1. They reflect no understanding whatsoever of these teachings on households.
2. They actually weaken households, create a gap between husbands and wives, and often lead to resentment by husbands.

Furthermore, without this teaching and its resultant household order in the churches, it is impossible to build strong, multiplying churches, because Satan will begin a process of upsetting a few families. The process might look like this in our contemporary church movements:

1. A couple of households not “in order” according to the “household codes.”
2. A couple of wives get upset, feeling too controlled by the leadership of the church/churches and become discontent.
3. They talk with someone who is also discontent or has left and are critical of the leadership also.
4. They perpetuate criticism of the senior leaders and start introducing other books, materials, and ideas to challenge the teaching.
5. One or several churches get upset.
6. The reputation of the churches is damaged in the community.
7. The leaders become distracted, dealing with the problems, and the spontaneous expansion is slowed down or stopped.

As I stated earlier, the series behind this article grew out of our own situation as a church, as we proceeded to expand our own church by

creating from it a network of 12 “kerygmatic”<sup>24</sup> communities—churches committed to the same radical “spontaneous expansion” of the gospel experienced in the early churches. While as a leadership team we had reached a one mindedness on the importance of women in our churches, we could quickly see that four of the new churches would be at risk from the get-go if we did not take time to look at the role of women in our churches once again and attempt a clear, workable articulation of the key biblical ideas. Setting our churches in order according to the apostolic teaching of the household codes is critical if we are to succeed in being part of the spontaneous expansion of the gospel in our age.

That is why I have been so unsupportive of the “evangelical women’s paradigm.” It results, more often than not, in “upsetting whole families.” It is why we have not let these large women’s teaching ministries inside our door. I have received personal attacks through the years on this issue more than any other.

What about women’s ordination? —a trend solidly rooted in mainline denominations and solidly on a winning course in evangelicalism. I am not actually arguing against the ordination of women in general. But I am arguing against the ordination of women that does not respect the “household texts” and their order for families of the church and the social structure of the church.<sup>25</sup> However, we must also note that almost everywhere in the world where we work, in every type of society and culture that has women’s ordination in which there is no difference between the roles of men and women, the Didache in those denominations is full of major, deeply rooted error and is disestablishing the churches.

**Corollary Thesis 2:** Good works were the central activity of the women of the early churches, and at the foundation of good works was hospitality—setting a lifelong trajectory of service based out of both their homes and the church households. It is impossible to become effective kerygmatic communities today, if we fail to truly open our homes to those in need.

I am calling this concept, as applied to the women of the Early Church, *hospitality-based good works*. I will attempt to show that the concept of good works, which was so much a part of the churches’ mandate in the world, grew out of their homes first.

<sup>9</sup> Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; <sup>10</sup> she must be well attested for her

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<sup>24</sup> This term refers to the small house churches of the first three centuries of the Early Church that were primarily Kerygmatic in nature; in other words, they were the carriers of the gospel story as it multiplied across the Roman Empire.

<sup>25</sup> Donald G. Bloesch’s work *Is the Bible Sexist? Beyond Feminism and Patriarchalism* (Crossway Books 1982), sets forth a thesis, building on Karl Barth’s work, that within high church denominational structures it is possible to ordain women and still respect an authority structure in which men lead and are in authority over the churches. It is a very important area of study and dialogue to reflect on how women can have official recognized positions in the networks of churches without violating the household texts.

good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. 1 Timothy 5:9–10

This is a paradigm passage. It actually creates a snapshot of the overall ministry of the women of the early churches—not all but most. Let's take a closer look at this passage. The three central traits are bookended by “good works” phrases: “she must be well attested for her good works” and “devoted herself to doing good in every way.” The big idea is good works—across a lifetime. There are four key pieces to these good works:

1. “as one who has brought up children”

Several ideas are contained here. It considers it a foundation to all hospitality-based good works. If the home is out of order and chaotic, then the base is gone. “Bringing up children” pictures the whole process of a life of good works in one's family (cf. 1 Timothy 5:14; Titus 2:3–5).

2. “shown hospitality”

This literally means to entertain strangers. *Stranger* comes from “foreign,” “alien,” and also can mean “appearing strange” or “creating distaste,” one who is not logically a “guest.” It was used of someone of a foreign religion, someone from a very different culture, and that person was basically in the enemy category—someone outside your caste, class, or social type. We have movies devoted to this phenomenon—“the other side of the tracks,” “wrong part of town.” TDNT talks about the nature of the word *stranger*.

“Between the stranger and those around him there is reciprocal tension. He is a man from without, strange, hard to fathom, surprising, unsettling, sinister. But to the stranger his odd and different environment is also disturbing and threatening. There thus arises mutual fear, especially of the magical powers of what is foreign. This is the first and basic mood associated with ξένοϛ, no less in early antiquity than in other cultures. On the other hand, the ξένοϛ is the “friend” who is associated with the other in the beautiful reciprocity of hospitality.”<sup>26</sup>

3. “washed the saints' feet”

This is a practice that invites people into our homes with a real attitude of service.

4. “helped the afflicted”

This refers to someone who is pressed with problems: family, financial, catastrophic, health, huge needs, etc.

The basic idea is this: Get your home in good shape. Then open it to the believing family—the church, to those outside the family—even those who are very different (including those who might oppose the faith), and finally to those in great need. This concept of hospitality-based good works, based

<sup>26</sup> Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT), edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich



in our homes, finds its way into the DNA of our church communities. It lays a foundation within our churches. It is to be the core identity of our churches.

Good works are to mark our churches as well, building upon this foundation of hospitality-based good works. Paul makes this case in Titus 3, following the instructions to the church family members of Titus 2. We are to avoid activism, but rather be marked by good works (Titus 3:1–2). We are to avoid doctrinal quarrels and endless speculations about theological issues and differences, but rather be known for good works (Titus 3:8–10). We are to engage in good occupations and to be available to meet pressing needs in the community (Titus 3:14). Our churches are to have the same spirit of hospitality-based good works that we see in our homes.

This spirit of hospitality-based good works based in the homes of leaders who hosted churches can be seen all through Romans 16, 1 Corinthians 16, and in the Acts narrative. Lydia's first instinct once she became a believer was to invite Paul into her home. Paul stayed with Aquilla and Priscilla in their home, and they worked a common trade together. They also housed the church in their home. The example permeates all aspect of the ministry of the believers of the early churches.

The core idea of hospitality-based good works, as applied to women, is this:

1. Women need to work hard to get their homes in order—their relationship with their husbands, children, management, etc.— a place for hospitality-based good works.
2. Then they are to practice hospitality—both to believers and to strangers of all sorts, even those with very unattractive and radically different lives.
3. They need to form the base of a collective engagement in good deeds as churches, which are to carry out good deeds in the same spirit of hospitality as our homes.

Now let's reflect for a moment, on what this might look like in our culture today. Christine Pohl, in her book *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*,<sup>27</sup> describes four types of strangers in our midst.

1. Unknown strangers—short term, for a night/few nights
2. "Risky" strangers—released from institutions, mental problems
3. Desperate Strangers—poor, refugees, homeless
4. Strangers nearest to us—neglected children, abused women, pregnant teens, people isolated from family and friends, college students, international students, etc.

Concerning strangers, she states the following.

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<sup>27</sup> *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, by Christine Pohl (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1999) pp. 85–103.

“Strangers, in the strict sense, are those who are disconnected from basic relationships that give persons a secure place in the world. The most vulnerable strangers are detached from family, community, church, work, and polity. This condition is most clearly seen in the state of homeless people and refugees. . . .

“When we offer hospitality to strangers, we welcome them into a place to which we are somehow connected—a space that has meaning and value to us. This is often our home.... In hospitality, the stranger is welcomed into a safe, personal, and comfortable place, a place of respect and acceptance and friendship. Even if only briefly, the stranger is included in a life-giving and life-sustaining network of relations. Such welcome involves attentive listening and a mutual sharing of lives and life stories. It requires an openness of heart, a willingness to make one’s life visible to others, and a generosity of time and resources.”<sup>28</sup>

Pohl calls for us to make room—a place for others—in our homes, in our churches, in our intentional communities, and in what she calls social services.

Women must begin by getting their homes in order so that they can use their homes for the demands of hospitality. This includes creating spaces for hospitality. Having an open home must become a lifelong habit. Hospitality-based good works are to be the mark of our homes and our churches. We will not experience the spontaneous expansion of our churches and the progress of the gospel without these kinds of good works. And, women are the key! The main mark of their service centers on hospitality-based good works. Note: This does not negate leading women in the city with businesses and prominence, as will be seen in the next three corollary theses below.

**Corollary Thesis 3:** The main challenge to younger women is to establish solid households—loving, well managed homes—which bring great stability to the house churches and lay a foundation for both good works and enterprising activity.

It is a bit unusual to dedicate a special thesis to younger wives with children. But I think it is justified for several reasons. First, several verses specifically address younger women in the pastorals. Second, the tasks of younger women in our churches are not easy. And finally, the churches need a collective consciousness of the challenges of young women.

Let’s begin by looking at the two major passages that set forth the major challenges to younger women.

<sup>3</sup> Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, <sup>4</sup> so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, <sup>5</sup> to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers

<sup>28</sup> Pohl, op. cit., p. 13

of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited. Titus 2:3–5

<sup>11</sup> But refuse to put younger widows on the list; for when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, <sup>12</sup> and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. <sup>13</sup> Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say. <sup>14</sup> So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us. <sup>15</sup> For some have already turned away to follow Satan. 1 Timothy 5:11–15

Let's make a few observations from these passages. They basically cover the same core tasks for younger women. They must get their homes in order. This involves the following core tasks. In 1 Timothy they are to love their husbands and children, be disciplined and chaste, be good managers of their households, be kind, and be submissive to their husbands. In the Titus passage the description is more basic but basically the same: marry, bear children, and manage their households. *Bearing children* is the same idea as *bringing up children* from the qualifications for widows being on the list. *Bringing up children* pictures the whole process of a life of good works in one's family. Titus makes a special note that is very important not to bypass. Young widows are to marry so as not to become idle, "gadding about" (NRSV) and becoming "gossips and busybodies." *Gadding about* means to "make the rounds" and *gossips and busybodies* refers to "creating needless trouble." Satan has an opportunity to "upset whole households" "house to house."

Now we might at this point ask: Why are these core tasks so important? Why would Paul say things like this: get married, love your husband and children, manage your household well? He sounds kind of narrow—old school! Doesn't he know what a modern woman is like? Keep in mind what we discussed earlier. Satan wants to upset entire households (Titus 1:9–11) as part of his strategy to thwart the spontaneous progress of the gospel. It appears that young women are a prime target for him. They have a very difficult task; it is a big job for young wives and mothers. Paul is laying down some very demanding challenges here. Osiek and MacDonald again give us insight at this juncture.

"With a greater awareness of the activities of children and the efforts typically made on their behalf, we begin to see that the experience of giving birth and the rearing of infants and children must have been a more common focus of energy and topic of conversation in early Christian households and house churches than our texts would often lead us to believe. Every new birth would bring new challenges and responsibilities to households and house churches. Women—both slave and free—were at the center of all of this, from assisting at births to nursing and caring for infants (and quite possibly rescuing abandoned infants) and overseeing the

rearing and education of children. They were mothers, wet nurses, nannies, older women giving advice to younger women caring for children, and widows caring for orphans. In keeping with conventional expectations, women were educators of children in the home. This education would involve teaching children the Gospel, and, in an atmosphere in which private homes were transformed into house churches, this teaching exercise would no doubt involve groups of children. Although it is only hinted at in the texts, the very nature of the domestic setting of early church meetings suggests that the teaching of children should be recognized as a key aspect of women's ministry in this period."<sup>29</sup>

When you take into account what we previously learned—the death of a high percentage of children, the complication of slavery, unbelieving and abusive husbands—this is no small set of tasks. For many, this was extra tough. There was a lot of pressure on young women, yet their role was critical to the churches. Does this infer that these younger women focused exclusively on the home? No. It simply says that the home is to be their first priority, their central task. In fact, the assumption is that out of the home grow good works and enterprising activity, which can contribute financially. Households of the day were often an enterprise—managing slaves, a business downstairs, etc. (Remember the ideal of Proverbs 31.)

As a young woman you may be asking at this time: What if I can't do it all? You may find it overwhelming even in ideal circumstances. And few young women have ideal circumstances. But remember, life is a development process, and we need to think of reaching these ideals as a process. The first priority is to get your household firmly in place according to the "household codes." Then use it as a base—for good works and enterprising activities. Focus on the family in early years. Your capacity should increase year by year. Lay a good foundation. Have an open home. Increase hospitality skills and your commitment to good works. Increase enterprising activity.

I want to make a special comment about older women at this stage in the argument. In the Titus 2:3–5 passage, older women are to encourage the younger women. The task of younger women getting solidly on this life path is often very difficult. Some use this passage to argue that women are to be teachers in the churches just like men. Some translate "encourage" as teach, yet that is not the sense here at all. The word actually carries the sense of to advise, to train in a way as to bring discipline and order. The older women are to help the younger women lay these very difficult foundations in the households with great care.

The main challenge to younger women then is this:

1. Do a good job of building a strong, well-managed, loving household that cannot be used by Satan to upset other households, and ultimately the churches.

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<sup>29</sup> Osiek and MacDonald, *op.cit.*, p. 94

2. This means understanding you are a target, and in one sense, the most vulnerable “point of attack.”
3. Your role is key to building a solid core in our churches. That is a big challenge.

**Corollary Thesis 4:** Women had many leading roles in the early churches—roles with wide-ranging influence—yet they carried them out consistent with the “household codes,” respecting the leadership of men in their families and in the churches.

It is clear in the New Testament that women had leading roles in the churches. But what exactly were they? And what were they not? Why did I choose the term “leading women”? Where does it come from? It does not seem to be a biblical term. Let’s begin with looking at this concept of leading women in the book of Acts.

<sup>4</sup> Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. Acts 17:4

Who were these women? What did it refer to in the culture? What made them “leading women”? The term literally means to be leaders of a tribe or people; to have prominence, to have the first place, the place of honor; (TDNT);<sup>30</sup> the first citizen; “princeps civitatis,” eminent citizens (LSJ).<sup>31</sup> What made them stand out? We must understand the patron/benefactor system of the day to fully grasp this. They also can be seen in Acts 13:50. There they were called “women of high standing.” *High standing* literally means nobility, honorable, high ranking (LSJ),<sup>32</sup> higher social stratum (TDNT).<sup>33</sup> The story of Lydia in Acts also adds to our understanding (Acts 16:11–15, 40). What do we observe here? Philippi was a leading city (vs. 12). Paul went to the river again. Lydia was among the prominent (leading women) there. She was a dealer in purple cloth. She had her own household. She was a successful businesswoman in a leading city. Who were these women? What did it refer to in their culture? What made them “leading women”? Phoebe helps complete our understanding of their role in society and culture.

<sup>1</sup> I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, <sup>2</sup> so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. Romans 16:1–2

Notice Paul refers to Phoebe as a benefactor. The term *benefactor* (protstai) in Romans 16:2 literally means protectress, patron (EDNT).<sup>34</sup> It was the

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<sup>30</sup> Kittel and Gerhard, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> Liddell and Scott

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Kittel, *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (EDNT)

classic Athenian term for a citizen who was a patron. In the Greco-Roman world the patron (benefactor)-client relationship was central to most business as well as social relationships. In describing patron-client relationships, Osiek and MacDonald write:

“They are characterized by simultaneous exchange of different kinds of resources, economic and political on one side, and ‘promises of reciprocity, solidarity, and loyalty on the other’”<sup>35</sup>

These relationships carried with them such bedrock concepts as these: long-range credit and interpersonal obligation; they were not fully legal but more informal; they involved issues of honor and shame; they involved major networks of elite families; and they were private when involving individuals and public when involving groups.

There were three kinds of clients: those who were received in private, those received with others, those received all together in one group (never trustworthy). Osiek and MacDonald continue on.

“Both private and public patronage were activities in which women were deeply involved. ...There is ample evidence of women’s participation in business. Women who had the legal status *sui iuris*, that is, they were not under the *potestas* of a man, could conduct their own transactions.... The social and political patronage of elite women can be well documented. First, of course, women often served as patrons for other women.”<sup>36</sup>

“The exercise of women’s patronage was not limited to the elite, however. The evidence from Pompeii reveals women active in a variety of businesses and trades. They rented out and leased buildings and sold various commodities. ...This kind of evidence is important for seeing the wide range of possibilities for women’s personal patronage. All of these nonelite women who had accumulated even a modest amount of wealth and connections could be active in patronage relationships.... Women’s patronage of unofficial groups is an activity that bears directly on our understanding of their patronage in early Christianity.... This selection of evidence makes clear that both personal and public patronage were widely practiced by women in much the same way that it was practiced by men”<sup>37</sup>

Examples of their patronage include: a guesthouse and wall around a temple; guilds, associations, and private societies; programs for poor children; supporter for those holding public office; an entire public bath complex, theatres and temples; and patrons of cities. Paul identifies three types of patron-type women in his network: Priscilla (Prisca), evidently of

<sup>35</sup> Osiek and MacDonald, *op.cit.*, p. 195

<sup>36</sup> Osiek and MacDonald, *op.cit.*, p. 199

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 201–203, 209

some nobility or money; Phoebe, directly stated as a benefactor to him; and Nympha, who hosted a church in her house. And don't forget Lydia—from among the leading women, had her own business and her own house. Paul clearly established “patronage networks,” which will be developed in Thesis 5. We will look more at Phoebe in Thesis 5, but for now you can see three key things in Romans 16:1–2: She is a servant of the church at Cenchreae; she is a “benefactor of many and of myself”; and he talks about her as a leader. In Acts 18 Prisca is clearly leading in the correction of Apollos. And Nympha has her own house, in which she thus serves as a benefactor to the movement by hosting a church in her house.

So were women leaders in the churches? Another way to say it is that there were “leading women” in the churches. They hosted house churches and led in many aspects by use of their homes and patron roles. They taught younger women. They had some kind of “deaconish” leadership role. They ministered as couples, counseling, planting churches, and leading. Paul honored them and encouraged the churches to respond to their lead in asking what they needed. Again, we will see more about women as co-workers in Thesis 5. But, men were to lead the churches. How could women lead in this way and still “be silent in the churches”? How can Paul talk to them like this and yet tell them to keep silent in the churches? Let's return one more time to that key household text passage in the Pastorals.

<sup>11</sup> Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. <sup>12</sup> I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. <sup>13</sup> For Adam was formed first, then Eve; <sup>14</sup> and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. 1Timothy 2:11–12

This passage takes us back to the foundations of God's created order and deals with this issue of disorder in households. Several things, at least to our issue at hand, are clear: Women are to focus on good works and men are to focus on teaching. This is consistent with God's created order. In God's created order, women are often Satan's entry point to distorting the teaching. The picture, then, is most likely this. Prominent (patron, benefactor-type) women hosted churches in their homes. They led many aspects of the service and needs of that community. They most likely hosted the evening, maybe even the meal part of the weekly common meeting. But very clearly, when they retired from the meal to a more formal time, then men led. Once again, Osiek and MacDonald come through with incredible insight from their research.

“The order of the meal must have followed that of the familiar banquet or symposium, with eating first, followed by either entertainment or philosophical discussion. The reading of Scripture and of apostles' letters, followed by preaching or discussion or both, must have replaced this part of the ordinary banquet.... The banquet tradition of turning to others (for example, philosophers) to speak after the meal lent itself quite naturally to having someone other than the host lead the second part of the

assembly order, the reading and reflection on written texts.... The two functions of presiding and teaching were seen as distinct, probably until sometime in the second century, when the model of the teaching presbyter bishop developed.”<sup>38</sup>

Elizabeth Clark, in her book *Women in the Early Church: Message of the Fathers of the Early Church*, comes to similar conclusions.

“In a word, then, when Paul says ‘I do not permit a woman to teach,’ he is talking about public instruction that involves arguing in front of people and about the teaching that befits the priesthood. But he does not rule out her exhorting and giving advice in private. For if this had been ruled out, he would not have applauded Priscilla for her actions.”<sup>39</sup> pp. 159–160

Why should men lead? What is the logic to this? Why is this in there at all? The answer is back in the logic of the household texts in Christ’s design for his churches—his households of faith. Solid households are needed—a family of families. Men need to step up. They need to represent their families in the community of faith. They must lead to have strong families.

As far as leadership goes, two other types of women’s roles fit into the “leading women” idea: women who assist and widows on the list. Women who assist (1 Timothy 3:11) can be interpreted as “women who assist” deacons, or deacon’s wives, or deaconesses. None of the three interpretations can be proven, but all of them are clearly leadership positions in the churches. And the widows who are put on the list would most likely be viewed as leaders of some type—hosting a house church, overseeing a group benefactor ministry, etc.

In our own churches we started a leading women’s group. Who are they? What is their purpose? They are leaders’ wives; prominent women in the city—patrons—who are in our churches; women who assist; and any other woman we recognize as leading in some significant way that we think is right to recognize. They meet regularly as a team with our senior leadership. They sit in and listen at important meetings with all of our leaders. They serve as key hosts. They shape the women in the church. They are the Phoebes, the Priscas, the Lydias—the women who assist.

**Corollary Thesis 5:** Women were key agents of expansion; in fact, they were involved in every aspect of church planting, from participating in the formation of the churches themselves to strategic involvement in the complex apostolic network led by Paul: benefactors, church hosts, co-workers, “apostolic-type couples,” envoys for Paul, etc.

We began with the thesis that women are very important, if not central, to the spontaneous expansion of the church. With this final thesis

<sup>38</sup> Osiek and MacDonald, op.cit., pp. 161–162.

<sup>39</sup> *Women in the Early Church: Message of the Fathers of the Early Church*, by Elizabeth Clark



we come full circle. We will look at how they actually were involved in the progress of the gospel—what roles they actually played in that expansion, how it all worked together. We need to begin by understanding how key the household was to Paul’s overall strategy. Let’s begin by reading a few passages to lay the foundation for this answer.

<sup>4</sup> I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,  
<sup>15</sup> so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup> (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) 1 Corinthians 1:14–16

<sup>15</sup> Now, brothers and sisters, you know that members of the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; <sup>16</sup> I urge you to put yourselves at the service of such people, and of everyone who works and toils with them. <sup>17</sup> I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence; <sup>18</sup> for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. So give recognition to such persons. 1 Corinthians 16:15–18

<sup>8</sup> Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord, together with all his household; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptized. Acts 18:8

What is going on here? Why are these names important? Paul personally baptized three. Why? They were key to his strategy to establish the churches in Corinth. Crispus was head of the synagogue and homeowner (Acts 18:8). Gaius was a homeowner and host to Paul and the whole church (Rom. 16:23). Stephanas and his entire household rendered their services to the ministry. Phoebe is another important example (Romans 16:1–2). She was a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, near Corinth. She was a wealthy benefactor. She delivered the letter to the church at Rome. She was able to help lay a foundation for Paul’s coming. Why would he send her? What was he up to? Romans 15:18–19, 22–24 provides the answers. Paul sent Phoebe to lay the foundation for his visit. The letter was to establish the church more fully (Romans 16:25–27). She was to deliver the letter and explain his plans. And he gave her a bridge to all the key people in Rome—many of whom were benefactors/householders themselves. She was to be shown honor by them, which means she could handle herself in that situation. The more you read through these situations, the more you see how central the household and the benefactor-type householder were to Paul’s strategy. Roger Gehring’s book *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* is very helpful at this point.

“Although Paul directly reveals his house-to-house missional approach only in Corinth, we have no reason to doubt that he practiced this as he established churches in other cities as well. The perspective given here by Paul regarding the Corinthian situation is more or less confirmed in Acts 18:1–8.... This thesis is

supported by the so-called *oikos* formula in the book of Acts (10:1–2, 22; 11:12b–14; 16:14–16; 16:30–34; 18:8).... The *oikos* formula confirms therefore that it was typical of the Pauline missional approach in any given city to initially target individuals from higher social levels. In this way Paul was able to win homeowners, along with their entire households, for the gospel and to set up a base of operations in their house for local and regional mission.”<sup>40</sup>

“This means not only that Paul used the house as a base of operations for missional outreach but that the Christian house itself as a sociological entity became evangelistically active in a twofold manner. Whereas Paul and his co-workers place the main ministry emphasis evangelistic proclamation, households had an evangelistic impact on others around them through their personal confession of faith and through the attraction of their community life together (cf. Rom. 12:1–2; 1 Thess. 4:10–11; 1 Cor. 6:1–11; 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1; Phil. 2:12–16; Col. 4:2–6).”<sup>41</sup>

“Indeed, Judge (in *The Social Identity of the First Christians*) identifies forty affluent upper- or higher-class individuals in Acts and the Pauline Epistles who supported the activities of Paul in a variety of ways with their houses.”<sup>42</sup>

Now that this foundation is laid, let’s look at all aspects of participation by women in the missionary activity of the early churches. We have many examples of women being “agents of expansion. First we have Euodia and Syntyche (Philippinas 4:2–3). These two women were important co-workers of Paul. He addresses them in the context of the Philippian letter in which he confronts them on their conflict and the damage they can cause to the onemindedness of the church. In his description of them we learn a lot about their role as “agents of expansion.” He commends the fact that they “struggled beside him” in the progress of the gospel. They must have been key to him and experienced great sacrifice themselves.

Priscilla, as a partner to Aquilla, was a significant “agent of expansion.” They were in the benefactor category—he was a businessman and she had some royalty in her line. Her name is sometimes Prisca and is sometimes listed first because of being a prominent woman. Her name is first in the dialogue with Apollos, showing women can counsel and teach men in the right context. His name is first when addressing them as a church in their house since he is the primary householder. All in all, she must be considered as a woman who played a very key role in the spontaneous expansion of the churches and in Paul’s strategy. Peter Lampe, in his masterful study on the churches in Rome toward the end of the second

<sup>40</sup> *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity*, by Roger W. Gehring, (Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) pp. 186–187.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190

century, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, helps shed light on how key they were as a couple.

“The couple worked in Ephesus as Paul’s missionary *vanguard* (Acts 18:18–21, 24–26; 19:1). The same is conceivable for Rome, where Paul wished to gain a foothold with his gospel. Paul allows them to be greeted first, and he praises them as his “fellow workers” (Rom. 16:3f.). They have again assembled a community in their home (v. 5). The return of the couple to Rome could be conceivable as a “strategic” move previously agreed upon with Paul.... Aquila, a businessman, had moved at least three times during his life, Pontus—Rome—Corinth—Ephesus. Why not a fourth move? He was the apostle’s fellow worker. (v. 3).”<sup>43</sup>

Many other women served as “agents of expansion.” The following passages give us a sense of just how many and far reaching were the women who served in vital roles in the network of Paul’s missionary enterprise.

<sup>10</sup> Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. <sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. 1 Cor. 1:10

Again you can see a woman householder having a leadership identity over people who are in her sphere as a householder—this is implied by the *oikos formula* that covers all similar addresses by Paul.

<sup>6</sup> Greet *Mary*, who has worked very hard among you. <sup>7</sup> Greet Andronicus and *Junia*, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. <sup>8</sup> Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. <sup>9</sup> Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. <sup>10</sup> Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. <sup>11</sup> Greet my relative<sup>e</sup> Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. <sup>12</sup> Greet those workers in the Lord, *Tryphaena and Tryphosa*. Greet the beloved *Persis*, who has worked hard in the Lord. <sup>13</sup> Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet *his mother*—a mother to me also. <sup>14</sup> Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers *and sisters*<sup>f</sup> who are with them. <sup>15</sup> Greet Philologus, *Julia*, Nereus and his *sister*, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. <sup>16</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. Romans 16:6–16

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<sup>43</sup> *Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries: From Paul to Valentinus*, by Peter Lampe (Continuum, 2006) p. 158.

There are 24 names mentioned in this greeting. 16 are men and 8 are women—again 1/3 of Paul’s working team or future team were women.

1. Mary—a hard working co-worker
2. Junia—part of an “apostolic couple” like Aquila and Prisca
3. Tryphaena and Tryphosa—twin sisters as co-workers
4. Persis—a hard working co-worker
5. A key mother
6. A team of 2 men, one of his sisters, and another woman co-worker

Thus we can conclude that agents of expansion include...hard working women co-workers, apostolic like couples, key mothers, brothers and sisters, teams of men and women, and even twin sisters. Let’s hear from Osiek and MacDonald one more time.

“There is strong evidence suggesting that the women named as leaders in Paul’s letters engaged in activities that contributed directly to the expansion of the movement. Such terms as “sister,” “deacon,” “coworker,” or “apostle,” which are used to describe these women, are not unambiguous. But when taken together and compared to their usage (or the use of masculine equivalents) to describe men, including Paul himself, we are left with a very strong impression of missionary activity.”<sup>44</sup>

Women were key to Paul’s strategy. They were key to establishing and multiplying the churches locally—household base, good deeds, hosting churches as they multiplied. They were key to establishing and multiplying the churches globally—co-workers, apostolic envoys, etc. Their “agents of expansion” activities included:

- Hosts of churches—Phoebe, Nympha
- Co-workers in expansion, new churches—Euodia and Syntyche
- “Apostolic type” couples—Aquila and Priscilla, Andronicus and Junia
- Apostolic envoy—Phoebe

Who was on Paul’s team?—Of the 99 people he touched, probably 38 were actually on his team: 1/3 were Timothy and Titus types (ministers of the gospel), 1/3 were women, and 1/3 were benefactors (maybe closer to 1/2). Which parts did women play?

- Timothy, Titus types, elders—*men*
- Co-workers—planting churches, teaching, exhorting, counseling, planting churches as couples, *men and women*
- Benefactors—host churches, envoys with authority, planting churches, *men and women*

When all is said and done, we have established our basic thesis: Women had a significant and strategic contribution in the spontaneous

<sup>44</sup> Osiek, MacDonald, op. cit., p. 228

expansion of the Church in the first 3 centuries. In fact, their contribution, when fully understood, could even be seen as central; yet it is quite different from what has been imagined in the egalitarian/patriarchal debate of the last 40 years.

We cannot succeed without women being fully engaged—being everywhere, if you will. We will not remain strong, we will not spontaneously expand, if our women do not understand their roles and responsibilities accurately.

I want to make a brief comment on single women. Women find themselves in a single state at many different stages of their lives. Some are young and single. Some are single as benefactors and businesswomen—for many different reasons. Some are single as older women who have lost their husbands. This is just to mention three reasons. Their service can take many forms: co-workers as single women unencumbered, businesswomen and wealthy benefactors, and widows who are put on a support list who serve the ministry of the churches full time in an undistracted way. So even though the individual household—a family—in one sense is at the heart of the role of women in the spontaneous expansion of the gospel through the multiplication of these small, simple churches, many and various roles of great significance are played by single women.

It is also important, in conclusion, to set forth a call to leaders of networks of churches. You must develop an overall understanding of this teaching of Christ that was delivered by the Apostles to the churches if we expect to lay solid foundations in the churches under our stewardship. As I stated at the beginning of this paper, there has not been a comprehensive study on the role of women in the spontaneous expansion of the churches over the last 100 years, as the gospel burst forth into the Global South. It is critical that we commit ourselves to carefully laying foundations in our movements that are consistent with the teaching of Christ, delivered by the Apostles to the churches. We will not have strong, multiplying, intergenerational churches that turn the word upside down, as in the first 300 years of the Early Church, if we ignore this critical teaching.

And finally, I would like to make a call to women of this generation. It is important for you to know that I am sympathetic to the international women's movements, which have circled the globe over the last 100 years.<sup>45</sup> The struggle for women's education and women's rights and social justice advances are critical not only in societies that are repressive of women but in abusive homes as well. Yet you must remember who you are in Christ and recognize that the only true answer for the lost world around you is the progress of the gospel, and that happens through the multiplication of strong, simple churches—kerygmatic communities—whose stability rests upon your work within your own household.

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<sup>45</sup> Two very important narratives on women's movements written over the last ten years include Estelle Freedman's *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (Ballantine, 2002), which focuses on the global nature and progress of these movements, and *Equal: Women Reshape American Law*, by Fred Strebeigh (Norton, 2009).