

## ABSTRACT

Actions Speak Louder than Words: Men's Ideas and Women's Actions in Church History

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Evangelical organizations like the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) have recently made headlines for their strong positions against women in the pulpit. However, the debate on women in Church leadership is not a new one. The basis of the argument against women's ability to lead has evolved, stagnated, and then evolved again. This thesis will analyze primary sources from ancient, medieval, and Reformation eras, attempting to trace male attitudes toward women's abilities to lead. Specifically, this paper will focus on the primary sources analyzing Genesis's creation and fall stories. Additionally, it will include the stories of real women who have directly contradicted these men's theories about their capabilities. By analyzing the work of male philosophers, theologians, pastors, and female martyrs, anchoresses, and laywomen, I will aim to show how male opinions on women often change after encountering strong, capable women who challenge their previously held beliefs.

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ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS: MEN'S IDEAS AND WOMEN'S  
ACTIONS IN WESTERN EUROPEAN CHURCH HISTORY

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*To women everywhere who have experienced misogyny in their places of worship.*

## INTRODUCTION

From its inception, the Western Christian Church has largely excluded women from formal positions of authority. Different voices of authority at different times assert man's inherent right to church leadership through a wide variety of justifications. Some, such as the Vatican, cite letters from the Apostle Paul or Jesus's handing over of power to Peter as the reason for a gendered apostolic succession.<sup>1</sup> Some, like the Southern Baptist Convention, cite the apparent created differences between men and women as a reason for women's inability to lead in the Church.<sup>2</sup> These voices of authority, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Vatican have held onto a long-standing tradition of barring women from Church authority. Through many conventions, meetings, and resolutions, men from these organizations have decided, citing scripture and Church fathers, that women should not be ordained. However, these decisions have been made largely without women and their opinions on the matter. In this thesis, I explore what happens when men engage with capable women who contradict their longstanding ideas and philosophies.

For this thesis, I will analyze voices of authority: works from both men and women focusing on the creation and fall. I will analyze available writings from men, discussing women through the Ancient, medieval, and Reformation Periods. I will also explore the writings and experiences of women who assert spiritual authority in their respective circles. The works of these men and women reflect their ideas on the question of creation, the fall,

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<sup>1</sup> International Theological Commission, "Catholic Teaching on Apostolic Succession" (Vatican, August 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, "Resolution On Ordination And the Role of Women In Ministry," June 1, 1984.



and how these ideas affected women's ability to hold formal positions of authority in the church. As this is a multifaceted question, analysis of the texts will hold implications for the relationship between men and women in the church. I will trace three strands through the history of Western Christianity. First, to what extent ancient philosophy and ideas about women's bodies influenced Christian thinkers' interpretations of Genesis and assumptions about women's physical and spiritual inferiority. Second, I will explore how Christian women navigated these ideas to justify their ministry activities. Third, I will consider the ways that male thinkers reshaped their ideas as a result of their interactions with these women and their activities. These three threads are woven together through this thesis as it proceeds chronologically across the Western church's history. What we will find is men did not typically revolutionize their thinking of women after encountering powerful women in ministry. However, when confronted with women who directly contradict their ideas, they make exceptions for these women and are supportive of their work in the Church.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Ancient Voices on Women

The first followers of Jesus Christ, commissioned by Paul, spread Christianity to the Middle East, along the Mediterranean Sea, and other parts of the Roman Empire.

Christianity faced persecution under the Roman Empire and martyrs were seen as great witnesses to the Christian tradition, and according to Tertullian, “the martyrs’ blood was the seed of the Church.”<sup>3</sup> Early followers of the Church gained inspiration from martyrs and they served as encouragement for new converts. Martyrdom acted as a catalyst for the spread of Christianity throughout the Western world.

In many ways, the assumptions about what a woman could and could not do were rooted in Greek philosophy. In this chapter, we will see how closely Augustine derives his ideas about women from Aristotelian and Platonic concepts. I will begin with an exploration of Aristotle’s biological and anatomical ideas about women. We will see how his understanding of biology and anatomy shapes his ideal social hierarchy and expectations for women’s capabilities. Aristotle’s ideas about women influence much of the medieval and Reformation-era ideas about women, so it is essential to begin with an analysis of his works. Next, I will turn to Augustine and his ideas on women’s bodies and their proper role beneath men in society. I place Augustine’s ideas into the context of his own life, particularly his relationship with his mother, who influenced his faith. Finally, I will conclude this Ancient chapter with a study of Perpetua’s life and will analyze how her

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<sup>3</sup> Lawrence S. Cunningham, *The Meaning of Saints* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1980).

female body played a role in her martyrdom and how her actions challenged Augustine's ideas about women.

### *Aristotle's Philosophy and Women*

Aristotle's works laid the foundation for much of Western Europe's intellectual history. He wrote on a plethora of topics including physics, biology, zoology, metaphysics, logic, linguistics, ethics, and more.<sup>4</sup> His views profoundly impacted medieval scholarship and the Neoplatonism of the Early Church. For example, medieval physician, Albertus Magnus, in his *De Secretis Mulierum* says that he is writing for confessors who need a quick explanation of female nature so that they may counsel them through their penitence more sufficiently. He grounds his analysis of the biological nature of women on Aristotle. He explains that thus, "according to Aristotle in his 16th book *On Animals*, woman is a failed male, that is the matter that forms a human being will not result in a girl except when nature is impeded in her actions."<sup>5</sup> Pseudo-Albertus Magnus's use of Aristotelian ideology of women demonstrates the persistence of Aristotle's anatomical writings in medieval scholarship. Additionally, Pseudo-Albertus explains that he constructs these biological works for use by Confessors, showing how intertwined the fields of science and religion were in medieval society. Edward Grant notes in his *The Nature of Natural Philosophy in the Late Middle Ages*, that Aristotle's scientific works formed the "crucial core" of the

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<sup>4</sup> For complete works of Aristotle see: Aristotle, 1984, *Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume I: The Revised Oxford Translation*, Vol. 1. Bollingen Series, LXXI. Princeton.

<sup>5</sup> Pseudo-Albertus Magnus and Helen Rodnite Lemay, *Women's Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus' De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries* (SUNY Press, 1992).

Greco-Arabic science that entered Western Europe in the Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> As Grant also explains, Aristotle's treatises on biology are greatly intertwined with his conception of the structure and operation of society.<sup>7</sup> Because Aristotle held the view that women were biologically weaker, he ordered that women were to submit to men, who were biologically capable and strong.

Aristotle's ideal society would be one where women were perfectly subordinate to men. In his *History of Animals*, Book IX he writes:

Woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, at the same time is more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike. She is, furthermore, more prone to despondency and less hopeful than the man, more void of shame or self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive, and of more retentive memory. She is also more wakeful, more shrinking, more difficult to rouse to action, and requires a smaller quantity of nutriment. Females are weaker and colder in nature, and we must look upon the female character as being a sort of natural deficiency.<sup>8</sup>

Aristotle views women as inherently more emotional and more reliant on their appetites than men. While he suggests that women are more compassionate than men, he relates the ability to experience emotion more deeply to also being susceptible to other vices like being deceptive or void of shame. Aristotle attributes these qualities to women having a weak nature and existing in a "sort of natural deficiency."<sup>9</sup> By nature, Aristotle regards men

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Grant, "Science and Theology in the Middle Ages," *The Nature of Natural Philosophy in the Late Middle Ages (Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy)* 52, no. Catholic University of America Press (2012): 225-.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, "Book XI," in *The History of Animals* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 350AD).

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, "Book I," in *The History of Animals* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 350AD).

as superior to women. The deficiency of woman, according to Aristotle, means she holds a subordinate status to men in society.

Aristotle's views on the nature of women stem from his understanding of female anatomy. Because women are colder and weaker physically, their character must also be weaker and deficient. Aristotle addresses this physical deficiency in women in Book I of *History of Animals*:

On this account it is always very noticeable that the female is pale, and the blood-vessels are not prominent, and there is an obvious deficiency in physique as compared with males. Now it is impossible that any creature should produce two seminal secretions at once, and as the secretion in females which answers to semen in males is the menstrual fluid, it obviously follows that the female does not contribute any semen to generation; for if there were semen, there would be no menstrual fluid; but as menstrual fluid is in fact formed, therefore there is no semen.<sup>10</sup>

Aristotle attributes the vitality of men to their physical virility and their ability to produce semen, which he views as the only substance necessary for conception. According to Aristotle, women's passive role in conception mimics their passive role in society, to be subservient to men. For example, in book II of *On the History of Animals*, Aristotle states that "For the first principle of the movement...whereby that which comes into being is male, is better and more divine than the material whereby it is female. The male, however, comes together and mingles with the female for the work of generation." Therefore, the male plays an active role in bringing forth new life, whereas the female functions as an incubator for a developing fetus.

Women's biological role in nature, a passive, subservient receiver of male semen, is a basis for why women cannot be effective leaders. Again, Aristotle states that women are "weaker and colder in nature and we must look upon the female character as being a sort of

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<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, "Book I," in *The History of Animals* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 350AD).

natural deficiency.” As Merry Wiesner-Hanks explains, Aristotle viewed human anatomy and physiology on a single scale, describing women as imperfect or deformed males, a result of imperfection during conception and pregnancy.<sup>11</sup> Aristotle places heavy emphasis on women’s “passive” role during conception. As he says “the female does not contribute any semen to generation.”<sup>12</sup> Aristotle’s understanding of conception led him to believe women did not contribute to procreation. Thus, because women played a passive role in conception, they should continue to play a passive, submissive role in society.

However, Aristotle’s reason for women’s inability to lead is twofold. He additionally attributes women’s deficiency to their weaker souls. Aristotle explains that due to women’s physical weakness, they are also “more false of speech [and] more deceptive.” The view that the physical body and the soul were intertwined shaped his beliefs relating women’s character defects to her physical defects.<sup>13</sup> Charlotte Methuen expounds on this idea by explaining Aristotle’s metaphysical claim that “a woman as subject has lesser measure than does a man.”<sup>14</sup> She explains that women are associated with matter and men with form, with idea or reason, thus “a woman’s rational principle has less authority in her soul than a man’s rational facility has in his.”<sup>15</sup> Aristotle concludes that both sexes have a

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<sup>11</sup> Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks and Urmi Engineer Willoughby, “Organizing Material: Chronological and Thematic Approaches,” in *A Primer for Teaching Women, Gender, and Sexuality in World History: Ten Design Principles* (Duke University Press, 2018), 27–40.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, “Book I,” In *The History of Animals*.

<sup>13</sup> This view relating women’s character defects to their spiritual defects would be widely held until the Modern West.

<sup>14</sup> Charlotte Meuthen, “‘In Her Soul, a Woman Is Not Different from a Man’: How Scholastic Was Luther’s View of Women?,” in *Remembering the Reformation: Martin Luther and Catholic Theology*, ed. Salvador Ryan and Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017). 81.

<sup>15</sup> Meuthen, “In Her Soul,” 82.

soul capable of reason.<sup>16</sup> However, he contends that men are inherently created to rule over women because women are unable to “control themselves physically and psychologically through the exercise of reason the way men can.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, he affords women the ability to reason, but not the ability to reason as well as men and this is why they must be subject to men in society.

Further, Aristotle’s justifications for subjugating women stem from his philosophy of natural order. Velvet Yates draws out this philosophy of natural order by explaining that for Aristotle, nature is beautiful because of its order and that this order necessitates a hierarchy of living beings.<sup>18</sup> She adds that Aristotle views nature as teleological and that the *telos* of nature is the *telos* of human society or the fully actualized human male.<sup>19</sup> As Aristotle states “it is always very noticeable that the female is pale, and the blood vessels are not prominent, and there is an obvious deficiency in physique as compared with males.”<sup>20</sup> So, according to Aristotle, women fall short of *telos* due to their physical deficiency.

Additionally, in his *Politics*, Aristotle explains that women have “deliberative faculty, but it is without authority.”<sup>21</sup> Again, Aristotle affirms that women have some ability

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<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *The History of Animals*.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Velvet L. Yates, “Biology Is Destiny: The Deficiencies of Women in Aristotle’s Biology and Politics,” *Arethusa* 48, no. 1 (2015): 1–16. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Yates, “Biology is Destiny,” 5.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *The History of Animals*.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, 1991. (World Library, Inc., 350AD).

to reason and philosophize, however, it is deficient in comparison to men. Therefore, any humans who fall short of telos, such as women, fall short in the natural and social order, which are intertwined. Thus, women's physical female deficiencies, such as menstrual blood, signify ethical and intellectual deficiencies that justify their social subjugation. For Aristotle, the stratification of society is by gender. The ablest leader is the most reasonable and men are the most reasonable, thus men are the nature-ordained leaders of society. This view would continue into the Middle Ages.

### *St. Augustine's Theology and Women*

St. Augustine of Hippo's perspectives on creation, the fall, and women's ability to lead are rooted in a synthesis of Christian tradition, interpretations of scripture, and Platonic thought. St. Augustine used classical methods of thought in forming Christian theological concepts. He was a pioneer in biblical exegesis and laid the foundation for medieval and modern Christian teachings. Augustine's teachings are formulated from a synthesis of Christian, Roman and Platonic thought.<sup>22</sup> Though Augustine was born nearly six centuries after Aristotle's death and Augustine lived in a Roman Christian empire, rather than pagan Athens, Aristotle's ideas remained a foundational part of the classical training Augustine received. For example, Phillip Cary, in his book *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul* explicates that Augustine's doctrines of grace and free will are formed upon Platonist conceptions of happiness, wisdom, intellect, virtue,

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<sup>22</sup> Augustine's introduction to the Christian faith was formed in part by the Manicheans. He remained Manichean for 10 years before leaving the community when St. Ambrose introduced orthodoxy to him in Milan



purification, conversion, faith, and love.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Platonic ideas about gender infuse Augustine's teachings on women in the church. While Cary's work emphasizes Plato's influence on Augustine, he finds traces of Aristotelian philosophy in Augustine's work as well, demonstrating a continuity of ideas about women from the pagan philosophers into the works of early church fathers.

Augustine spent a large portion of his scholarly career determined to exegete the goodness of God and his creation, and combat Manichean dualism and Pelagianism.<sup>24</sup> This context is essential for understanding Augustinian theology. For example, Manicheist teaching opposed procreation. They allowed men to have wives or concubines but believed procreation to be evil, as it entrapped more divine spirits into matter. Elizabeth Clark explains that in opposition to this Manicheist idea, Augustine formulated an ethic that viewed procreation as the chief justification for sexual relations.<sup>25</sup> This perspective seeps into his analysis of women as purely useful to men for childbearing.

Additionally, Augustine spent time confronting the teachings of Pelagius. Pelagianism emphasized human's capacity to will and do good, held that rational adults were responsible for their own sins, and claimed that neither Adam, Eve nor the devil could be blamed for our wrongdoings. As Clark explains, in response to this claim, Augustine further developed the doctrine of original sin.<sup>26</sup> According to Augustine, while Adam and

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<sup>23</sup> Philip Cary, *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Ann Clark and Herbert Richardson, *Women and Religion: The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Ann Clark and Herbert Richardson, *Women and Religion: The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

Eve had been created with free will and in Eden possessed the ability to keep from sinning, once they sinned, they lost the ability to choose the good.<sup>27</sup> This view that human bodies exist in a state of original sin and are prone to irrationality and sin is evident across Augustine's works. This view is fundamental to Augustine's analysis of women as he views all women as inheriting the sinful and deceptive nature of Eve.

Examples of Augustine's theology of creation, sin, and the body are found in several of his works, including *Confessions*, *On the Trinity*, *The City of God*, and *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. Augustine's *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, a deep exegesis of the Book of Genesis, focuses largely on the relationship between Adam and Eve and the consequences of the Fall on humankind.<sup>28</sup> Edward Smither explains that Augustine wrote this exegesis to "serve the church" and "offer a more literal reading" reading of Genesis.<sup>29</sup> Augustine writes this commentary with his learned Christians in mind, serving as a tool for literate members of his congregation to learn the proper interpretations of Genesis.

Augustine believed that women possessed the *imago Dei*, but only in their rational souls. The *imago Dei* does not dwell in her physical body. Augustine expounds upon this early on in *On the Trinity*:

Woman does not possess the image of God in herself but only when taken together with the male who is her head, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she is assigned the role as helpmate, a function that pertains to her alone, then she is not the image of God. But as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself alone the

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<sup>27</sup> Clark and Richardson, *Women and Religion*, 59.

<sup>28</sup> Cary, *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul*.

<sup>29</sup> Edward L. Smither, "Augustine on Redemption in Genesis 1–3," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35, no. 1 (2014): 1–4. 4.

image of God just as fully and completely as when he and the woman are joined together into one.<sup>30</sup>

While Augustine suggests a means for women to achieve the image of God, he explains that women do not retain the image of God on an individual basis. Judith Stark asserts that Augustine believed women possessed the image of God, but fully so only when submitting to men. She explains that “for her part, only when a woman is joined to the man is she considered to be the image of God, just as only when the lower intellect is joined to the higher it is considered to be the image of God.”<sup>31</sup> However, by fulfilling her role as a helper to men, she can pursue holiness and the likeness of God through her relationship with a man.

Further, Augustine affirms that men retain the image of God even when men and women are joined together. In this sense, a woman does not hold the power to detract from man’s image in God, but can only possess the image of God when she allows the man to be her head, to lead her. Katherine Abetz contends that Augustine resorted to a masculine capacity of the “mind,” intending to include the woman's ability to renew her mind in the *imago Dei*, but not her physical sex. She concludes that while a capacity to contemplate God is shared by women and men, the way Augustine links this capacity with the *imago*

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<sup>30</sup>E. Hill, J.E. Rotelle, and Augustinian Heritage Institute, *The Trinity*, Augustinian Heritage Institute (New City Press, 1990), [https://books.google.com/books?id=i54tE8J83\\\_\\_QC](https://books.google.com/books?id=i54tE8J83\__QC).

<sup>31</sup>Judith Chelius Stark, “Augustine on Women: In God’s Image, but Less So,” *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, no. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press (2007): 215–241.

*Dei* is not symbolically inclusive of women.<sup>32</sup> His rhetoric does not link women's bodies and minds to the likeness of God; it simply acknowledges that women can also contemplate or renew their minds around God. This conclusion demonstrates that Augustine recognized women as inferior to men prior to the fall. While women do possess the ability to reason and contemplate God on their own, this ability will always be inferior to men's ability to reason and contemplate the Divine, simply because of how God created women.

St. Augustine's view of the creation of women was also linked with God's intended order for humanity. Edward Smither explains that Augustine wrote this exegesis to "serve the church" and "offer a more literal reading" reading of Genesis.<sup>33</sup> Augustine writes this commentary with his learned Christians in mind, serving as a tool for literate members of his congregation to learn the proper interpretations of Genesis. Augustine expounds on these implications and the proper relationship between men and women in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*:

The same first intellectual creature can also call it a principle, since it is the head of all those that God made. And because with all property the head is called the beginning, for this reason the Apostle did not say at that graduation that the woman was the head of some; but the man said it was the head of the woman. And the head of the male, Christ, and the head of Christ the God, and thus the creature is united to the Creator.<sup>34</sup>

Here, Augustine ties the creation of women to God's created hierarchy. He cites the Apostle [Paul] who says not "that the woman was the head of some; but the man said it was

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<sup>32</sup> Katherine Abetz, "Identity for Women: A Proposal for the Gendered Imago Dei Based on 1 Corinthians 11:1–16.," *Pacifica : Australian Theological Studies* 23, no. 1 (2010): 15.

<sup>33</sup> Smither, "Augustine on Redemption in Genesis 1–3." 1–4.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine and John Hammond Taylor, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Ancient Christian writers no. 41-42 (New York, N.Y: Newman Press, 1982).

the head of the woman.”<sup>35</sup> Since men were created first, women are subjected to them. Since Christ was created before men, he is the “head of the male.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, women’s submission to men parallels men’s submission to Christ. Since men are directly submitted to Christ, they enjoy a closer relationship with the Divine. Augustine justifies male headship over women in society and the Church with the order in which man and women were created and the spiritual hierarchy of men enjoying a closer, more whole relationship with God.

First, in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis* Augustine explains that women are created as less than men. However, further in his commentary he cites the fall in explaining how women have inherited their tempting nature from Eve. He poses, “What is the difference whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman. . . I fail to see what use woman can be to man, if one excludes the function of bearing children.”<sup>37</sup> In this statement, Augustine warns his male readers to beware of women’s tempting nature, even in relationships with their wives or the mothers of their children. He continues on to say that he does not recognize the relational benefit between woman and man, claiming that the only use women can provide to men is providing them with children. With this premise, Augustine goes beyond acknowledging the inequality in spiritual potential between women and men. He declares that each woman should be feared for she possesses Eve’s natural inclination to tempt.

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<sup>35</sup> Augustine and John Hammond Taylor, 1982, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 9:1-4.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 9:5-9.

Further, his analysis of Original Sin reveals insight into his characterization of Eve as a temptress. Because women and men exist in a fallen state, they are vulnerable to temptation. Augustine explains this view in the *City of God*:

For God, the author of natures, not of vices, created man upright; but man, being of his own will corrupted, and justly condemned, begot corrupted and condemned children. For we all were in that one man, since we all were that one man, who fell into sin by the woman who was made from him before the sin. For not yet was the particular form created and distributed to us, in which we as individuals were to live, but already the seminal nature was there from which we were to be propagated; and this being vitiated by sin, and bound by the chain of death, and justly condemned, man could not be born of man in any other state.<sup>38</sup>

Augustine affirms that God created man as good, but with free will. Augustine bestows the culpability of sin upon mankind. “His own will” indicates that man is responsible for his plight into sin through his own choices and actions. Again, this claim demonstrates Augustine taking a strong stance against Pelagianism in his theology. Augustine believes mankind was fully at fault for the Fall and this culpability has tainted all future generations in the form of Original Sin. Augustine continues, “for we were all in that one man...who fell into sin by the woman who was made from him before the sin.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, Augustine explains that all humans inherit the fallen nature of Adam and Eve. Because women and men inherit Original Sin, humankind is prone to temptation. This vulnerability, along with every women’s natural propensity to be a “temptress,” makes women a threat to men. Augustine portrays women as a threat to men’s virtue in his writings. What we will find later is that in his sermons on Perpetua, Augustine diverges from this pattern.

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<sup>38</sup> Augustine and Marcus Dods, *City of God*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 2014), accessed November 26, 2022, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45304/45304-h/45304-h.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

*Flesh and Blood Women: Perpetua's Martyrdom*

When we put the ideas about women's bodies in conversation with the lives of real women, a complicated picture emerges. Real women did not always fit the model of weak bodies and weak souls. For example, Perpetua's written account records her visions and her struggles with balancing motherhood and her strong faith. While she does not directly comment on the creation or the fall, her story provides insight into how the martyr viewed her own body and its relation to spiritual holiness. Imprisoned for her faith, she was executed when she refused to recant her beliefs. In the *Passion of the Holy Martyrs*, Perpetua transforms into a man:

Then there came forth against me a certain Egyptian, horrible in appearance, with his backers, to fight with me. And there came to me, as my helpers and encouragers, handsome youths; and I was stripped, and became a man. Then my helpers began to rub me with oil, as is the custom for contest; and I beheld that Egyptian on the other hand rolling in the dust<sup>40</sup>

In this scene of Perpetua's vision, she is preparing to fight against the beast, and she transforms into a man. As a man, Perpetua can access more physical and spiritual strength. As was the case with Aristotle, here again, courage was widely regarded as a masculine trait, not associated with women, so for Perpetua to be successful in her battle, she must physically and spiritually transform into a man to attain the male trait of courage.

Not only does she turn into a man, but the use of "contest" links Perpetua's experience with that of an athlete. In chapter six of her book, *Perpetua: Athlete of God*, Barbara Gold addresses the gendering of courage in Perpetua's story. Gold explains that

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<sup>40</sup> Perpetua, 203, trans. W.H. Shewring, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, (International Medieval Source Book: London), 203.

from the time of the New Testament, martyrs were cast as athletes.<sup>41</sup> For example, Paul in 1 Corinthians compares the apostles to athletes in the arena, and in 1 Timothy, he charges the Christian to run the great race of faith and take hold of eternal life.<sup>42</sup> Thus, as a martyr, Perpetua embodies a spiritual athlete. Athletes in the ancient world were exclusively male.<sup>43</sup> This embodiment as a spiritual athlete is masculine and further affirms Perpetua's gender transformation.

As Gold points out, the model or ideal athlete was male and embodied the virtues of fortitude, endurance, and courage - also qualities associated with males and not females.<sup>44</sup> To navigate this paradox, Perpetua transforms into a man and transcends the confines of her role as a woman. While it was commonplace for martyrs to carry on the metaphor of 'athlete' like Paul refers to in his letters, Perpetua's metaphor turns into reality. As Gold says, this metaphor of athletic context was used "both of a woman and by a woman herself."<sup>45</sup> Perpetua's use of this metaphor demonstrates how male concepts of courage and martyrdom impacted how women perceived themselves. Perpetua transformed into a man as she recognized bravery as a male virtue.

Further, to access additional strength, Perpetua must continue her transformation into a gladiator. By evolving into a male athlete, Perpetua gains additional power to fight the beast.

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<sup>41</sup> Barbara K. Gold, "Perpetua: Athlete of God," *Oxford University Press* New York (2018).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 12.



And a certain man came forth, of wondrous height, so that he even over-topped the top of the amphitheatre; and he wore a loose tunic and a purple robe between two bands over the middle of the breast; and he had on calliculae of varied form, made of gold and silver; and he carried a rod, as if he were a trainer of gladiators, and a green branch upon which were apples of gold.<sup>46</sup>

As a male gladiator, Perpetua receives training from the man wearing a “loose tunic and a purple robe,” Jesus.<sup>47</sup> By becoming a male gladiator, she receives direct training from Jesus and taps into the courage that would have shocked most male voices of authority.<sup>48</sup>

Perpetua’s life and writing mark that of an exemplary woman. She throws traditional gender roles to the wayside and sacrifices all of her Roman, familial values for Christ. Sarah Parkhouse expounds that Perpetua is not a typical martyr *exempla*, she is a *female martyr exempla*.<sup>49</sup> She cites specifically that Perpetua’s decisive triumph over the patriarchal system is demonstrated by her “father when he kisses her hands and throws himself at her feet, no longer calling her ‘daughter’ but *Domina*.<sup>50</sup> Perpetua trumps the traditional expectations of women by defying her father’s authority and physically turning into a male gladiator. In this vision exists the tension between a martyr, a role destined to death, and her role as a mother, a role bringing life. However, through her preparation for martyrdom, Perpetua transcends her gender and is no longer a daughter or a mother. Perpetua writes in her Passion that “as God willed, no longer did [her child] need to be

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<sup>46</sup> Perpetua, trans. W.H. Shewring, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, (International Medieval Source Book: London).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Gold, “Perpetua: Athlete of God,” 11.

<sup>49</sup> Sarah Parkhouse, “The Fetishization of Female Exempla: Mary, Thecla, Perpetua, and Felicitas,” *New Testament Studies* 63 4 (2017).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

suckled, nor did I take fever; that I might not be tormented by care for the child and by the pain of my breasts.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, Perpetua’s forgoing of her duties marks that God approved of her martyrdom. As Julia Weitbrecht says, “only in martyrdom do all social affiliations seem to be relativized or even annulled.”<sup>52</sup> Perpetua’s responsibility of motherhood paled in comparison to her calling to martyrdom. Her account demonstrates that women were spiritually and physically strong and relied on God to ordain their activities, rather than their male counterparts.

The life of Perpetua was well-known in the early church and well-known to Augustine, who wrote about her life and death in ways that seem to contradict his own teachings on women. In his sermon, *On the Birthday of the Martyrs Perpetua and Felicity* Augustine declares:

so the dragon was trampled on by the blessed Perpetua’s chaste foot and victorious tread, when the ladder by which she would get to God was set up and revealed. Thus the head of the ancient serpent, which had been the ruin of woman as she fell, was made into a step for woman as she ascended.<sup>53</sup>

Augustine does not shy away from acknowledging Perpetua’s femininity. He further emphasizes Perpetua’s role as a spiritual mother by alluding to Eve and Mary. He includes that her actions rectify Eve’s, the mother of humanity, falling into temptation. Additionally,

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<sup>51</sup> Perpetua, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*.

<sup>52</sup> Julia Weitbrecht, “Maternity and Sainthood in the Medieval Perpetua Legend,” in *Perpetua’s Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (Oxford University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199561889.003.0010>.

<sup>53</sup> Augustine, “Perpetua And Felicity Have Received The Reward Of Perpetual Felicity,” *The Value of Sparrows*, 2014. <https://thevalueofsparrows.wordpress.com/2014/02/09/sermon-perpetua-and-felicity-have-received-the-reward-of-perpetual-felicity-by-augustine/>.

as Katherine Milco notes, “chaste foot” or *pede casto* is a direct reference to Mary and her chastity.<sup>54</sup> Through this reference, Augustine connects Perpetua’s martyrdom to Mary’s motherhood.

However, Augustine views Perpetua’s masculine strength as a feature of her interior, spiritual experience, and not an actual transformation of the physical body. As he muses:

Why would (anyone) doubt that it was her soul that was in that likeness of a body, not her (actual) body, which retained its feminine sex continuously as she was lying on her bed while her senses were asleep, when her soul was wrestling in that likeness of a virile body?<sup>55</sup>

Aristotle poses that Perpetua’s physical body remained as a female, while it was her soul that transformed into a man. Milco also affirms that Augustine indicates Perpetua’s vision transforms her actual soul, while her body remains feminine.<sup>56</sup> Thus Augustine creates a dichotomy between mind and masculinity on one hand and flesh and femininity on the other. Because of Perpetua’s final vision where she does transform into a man, Augustine is able to construe Perpetua as “interiorly masculine.”<sup>57</sup> Her spirit takes on the virtue and courage of a man. This interior masculinity is significant because it elevates Perpetua’s spirit and character to the same level as a man’s. Thus, as Augustine previously argues that

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<sup>54</sup> Katherine E. Milco, “Mulieres Viriliter Vincentes: Masculine and Feminine Imagery in Augustine’s Sermons on Sts. Perpetua and Felicity,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 69, no. 3 (2015): 276–295.

<sup>55</sup> Augustine, “Perpetua And Felicity Have Received The Reward Of Perpetual Felicity.”

<sup>56</sup> Milco, “Mulieres Viriliter Vincentes,” 284.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 283.

“woman does not possess the image of God in herself,” through Perpetua’s soul transforming, she can more fully partake in the *Imago Dei*.

Because Augustine writes on the deficiencies of a woman’s physical body and routinely connects her physical weaknesses to her spiritual failures, it is fitting that his depictions of Perpetua in his sermons emphasize her mental and spiritual transformations. While in other treatises or works Augustine appears to attribute bravery as a masculine virtue, in his sermons on Perpetua, he seeks to demonstrate that bravery is both the province of men and women.<sup>58</sup> He utilizes Perpetua’s story as an exemplar for his congregation through the emphasis on both Perpetua’s masculinity in transforming into a combatant and her role as a life-giving mother.

Augustine’s own mother, St. Monica, would play a much more traditional role in the spiritual formation of her son. Augustine was incredibly close with his mother. In his *Confessions*, he writes Monica as a force in his conversion. As Eric Ziolkowski explains, Augustine’s presentation of Monica as a spiritual *exemplum*, “defies any attempt to reduce [Augustine] to one who unquestioningly presumed an ‘androcentric perspective’ which reduced woman to ‘body’ vis a vis the male eye.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, Augustine’s depiction of his mother in *Confessions* shows us that Augustine saw some women as capable of rational thought and intellectual conversation. Ziolkowski further points to the instance where Augustine set Monica against his all-male philosophical circle and during the dialogue she impresses him as a “virtual oracle of pure Christian piety,” whose words

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<sup>58</sup> Milco, 294.

<sup>59</sup> Eric J. Ziolkowski, “St. Augustine: Aeneas’ Antitype, Monica’s Boy,” in *Literature and Theology*, vol. 1, 9, 1995, 1–23.

appear to flow from a “divine source.”<sup>60</sup> Augustine viewed his mother with respect and believed she was virtuous and intelligent. This respect and belief in her ability to reason do not align with his traditional view of women; rather it demonstrates that Augustine truly believed some exemplary women to be worthy of respect for their ability to think. Further, Augustine also wrote to several women during his time as Bishop of Hippo. He discussed complex theological issues with Maxima and Seluciana, educated women within his congregation.<sup>61</sup> These discussions and correspondences demonstrate that Augustine was invested in women’s spiritual well-being and recognized some women as being able to hold lively intellectual discussions.

Thus, a combination of experiences with women in the Christian past, like Perpetua, women in his family like his mother, and women in his congregation, challenged the theological interpretations of Augustine on the abilities and virtues of the female sex. However, these women remained the exceptions. We recall that in his sermon on Perpetua, he spoke directly about the bravery and virtue of her martyrdom. One can assume Augustine viewed Perpetua as an extreme example and that he did not view all women as capable of her bravery. Augustine’s autobiographical work and direct correspondence with women reflect a more nuanced attitude towards women and their abilities than do his direct commentaries on scripture. His *Confessions* and correspondences with women reveal that in practice, his theology appeared to be a bit more fluid regarding women’s capacity to reason and develop intellect.

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<sup>60</sup> Ziolkowski, “St. Augustine: Aeneas’ Antitype, Monica’s Boy,” 9.

<sup>61</sup> Augustine, “Letters 156-210” (Augustinian Heritage Institute, Inc., 1990).

## Conclusion

Aristotle's intellectual and biological developments about women have influenced hundreds of years of theology. Augustine's intellectual development regarding women, as we have seen, has its roots in a synthesis of Platonic and Aristotelian thought, Church teaching, and biblical exegesis. Scholars' interpretations of Augustinian treatment of women and the *Imago Dei* vary. Anne Stensvold, whose research centers on Christianity and procreation, examines Augustine's treatment of Original Sin, creation, and the implications these have for women. Stensvold holds that Augustine argues that a woman's likeness to God is restricted to her rational soul.<sup>62</sup> She expounds on this notion by explaining that from his biblical exegesis, Augustine built on traditional Greek ideas about the female body as "lowly, chaotic, dark, and demonic" and while Augustine claims that men were created in God's likeness, women's godlikeness did not include the body. Because Augustine did not ascribe to the idea of a gendered soul, a woman's likeness to God was limited to her sexless soul. Men's godlikeness included the body and the soul.<sup>63</sup> Stensvold represents a modern scholarly voice critical of Augustine's thought on women but offers a more generous analysis of Augustine than scholars, like Judith Stark, who claims that Augustine does not afford the image of God to women as individuals.<sup>64</sup> Accounting for the real experiences with women in his life helps explain this dissonance. In

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<sup>62</sup> Anne Stensvold, "Christian Procreation According to Augustine," in *A History of Pregnancy in Christianity*, First. (Routledge, 2015), 31-39.

<sup>63</sup> Stensvold, "Christian Procreation According to Augustine." 31-39.

<sup>64</sup> Judith Chelius Stark, "Augustine on Women: In God's Image, but Less So," *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, no. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press (2007): 215-241.

the coming chapters, we will continue to see Aristotle's influence on ideas about women and their bodies, especially in the work of Aquinas. Aristotelian philosophy permeates throughout the medieval and Reformation eras, and its connection with women's roles in society will exist, albeit looser.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Aquinas and Capable Women

The exact timespan of the Middle Ages is debated amongst scholars, however, for this thesis, I will focus on the period lasting from the 6th century to the 16th-century Reformations. As such, the Middle Ages cover a large span of time, and to offer a blanket conclusion on the history of thought surrounding women in Church leadership for the entire period would be untenable. Instead, I will follow the previous format of the thesis, contextualizing the works of prominent figures in the history of western Christianity during the Middle Ages. I will conclude with how these people developed their ideas on the fall, the creation, and women's ability to lead in the Church.

The intellectual developments during the Middle Ages largely saw a continuation of ancient Greek thought in areas such as anatomy, medicine, math, and Christian philosophy. As Edward Grant explains, science and theology were never more closely intertwined than during the Middle Ages in Western Europe.<sup>65</sup> Science upheld the idea of women's anatomical inferiority. Thus science and theology mutually reinforced the notions of women's subjugation.

Prior to the 12th century, science lacked strong empirical foundations and consisted mostly of Aristotle's logical treatises, some medical works, two-thirds of Plato's *Timaeus*, and various series of Latin encyclopedias by Pliny, Solinus, Calciduys, and Boethius.<sup>66</sup> Due

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<sup>65</sup> Edward Grant, "Science and Theology in the Middle Ages," *The Nature of Natural Philosophy in the Late Middle Ages (Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy)* 52, no. Catholic University of America Press (2012): 225-.

<sup>66</sup> Grant, "Science and Theology in the Middle Ages." 225-252.



to this lack of scientific developments and continuations in philosophical thinking, the Middle Ages did not bring significant liberalization for women in the Church. As the historian Eleanor Common McLaughlin explains, the Middle Ages deepened the “androcentric and anti-female” tradition in a strongly patriarchal Germanic society.<sup>67</sup> The scientific progress made in the Middle Ages upheld the Ancient idea that women were deficient males and remained heavily intertwined with philosophical and theological developments.

In this chapter, I will begin by discussing one of the most important doctors of the Catholic church, Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas embraced Aristotelian thinking and his writings represent an attempt at the synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian doctrine. From Aquinas, I will move from discussing male ideas to discussing women’s thoughts and actions. I will begin with analyzing Hildegard of Bingen as a feminine, authoritative voice in the Middle Ages. I will draw out what contributed to her credibility and what circumstances allowed her to attain this level of authority in the medieval Church. Next, I will introduce Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, underscoring how they utilized their roles as an anchoress and lay pilgrim to ascertain spiritual authority. Once we have analyzed Aquinas’s scholarly work on women, Julian of Norwich’s life, Hildegard of Bingen’s contributions, and Margery Kempe’s work, we will be able to see once again the implications of men’s ideas about women’s bodies and spirits on women’s lives and also the converse: the effects of women’s actions and writings on men’s ideas. What we will find is Aquinas, who spent a large amount of time in monastic life without much exposure

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<sup>67</sup> Eleanor Commo McLaughlin, “Equality of Soul, Inequality of Sexes: Women in Medieval Theology,” in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary R. Ruether. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), 213–266.

to women or their ideas, stayed consistent in his theology on women, whereas women like Julian, Margery, and Hildegard who worked within the gendered frameworks of chastity and humility effectively countered limiting medieval attitudes towards women.

### *Thomas Aquinas' Theology and Women*

Aquinas is often regarded as the greatest of the Scholastic philosophers. From the age of five, Aquinas lived in monasteries, interacting mostly with other male scholars and monks. Around 1245, after taking his vows to join the Dominican Order, Aquinas moved to Paris to study under Albertus Magnus, another Aristotelian theologian.<sup>68</sup> Initially, the Roman Catholic Church rejected Aquinas's attempt to reconcile human reason with the Christian faith. However, about 50 years after his death, the church accepted his works and made him a saint.

As a philosopher, Aquinas followed Aristotle's methodology. However, in his works, we also see how Aquinas's theological content on women expounds upon Aristotle's foundations. As Elizabeth Clark mentions, the synthesis of Aristotelian biological theory and patriarchal teaching on women formed the intellectual foundation for Aquinas's own views. For example, Aquinas uses the Aristotelian categories of form and matter, as they apply to the concepts of maleness and femaleness, resulting in the idea that women are less complete than men.<sup>69</sup> Aristotle postulated that male supplied the form for the process and

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<sup>68</sup> Ralph McInery and John O'Callaghan, "Saint Thomas Aquinas," In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Summer 2018 ed. (Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Philosophy Department, Stanford University), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/aquinas/>. 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Clark and Richardson, *Women and Religion*.

the matter is contributed by the woman, who lacks soul.<sup>70</sup> In his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas relies on Aristotle's reasoning that a perfect conception will result in a male child; he explains that "the procreation of a female is the result either of the debility of the active power or some unsuitability of the material...as we are told by Aristotle."<sup>71</sup> Aquinas differs from Aristotle in that he qualifies this analysis with the claim that God provides humans with souls and that man is not in the position to do this.

However, regarding the composition of the soul and its relation to the body, Aquinas's thoughts heavily resemble those of Aristotle. Aquinas wrote extensively on the creation of man, human nature, and how humans should be ordered in the natural world. Aquinas's synthesis of Aristotelian metaphysics with Christian theology is evident in his discussion of human souls. He asserts in *Scriptum super Sententiis*, one of his earliest works completed in 1256 that:

In the first state of mankind the body was subject to the soul and nothing could happen in the body which would be contrary to the good of the soul, neither as to its being nor as to its operation; nor is this precluded by the fact that even then there was a diverse dignity of souls according to the diversity of bodies, since it is necessary for the soul to be proportioned to the body, as form to matter, and as mover to moved: and therefore woman, even as to her soul, was more imperfect than man.<sup>72</sup>

Essentially, in the first state, the pre-fall state, men and women's souls ruled perfectly over their bodily appetites. The body could not act out in a way that was contrary to the soul. Aquinas asserts that even in this state, pre-fall, the woman's soul existed as less perfect

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<sup>70</sup> Clark and Richardson, *Women and Religion*.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *THE SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*, vol. 2 (*Fathers of Dominican Province*, 1920), accessed November 26, 2022, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Aquinas and Charles H. Lohr, "St. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Sententiis* : An Index of Authorities Cited," (Amersham] Eng: Avebury, 1980).

than man's. So similarly to Aristotle, he holds that woman exists in nature as an imperfect or incomplete form of male. Clark affirms that Aquinas viewed Eve's subordination to Adam as a pre-fall condition, as before the fall Eve was predestined to be "governed by others wiser than themselves."<sup>73</sup> Additionally, Aquinas's claim that while God's image is found in women and men, it is more fully reflected in men, mirrors Augustine's argument that women are capable of wisdom and rationale, but not to the extent of men. However, Aquinas does not mean to say that women, as a gender, are not intended by God. Charlotte Methuen introduces the fact that Aquinas is aware that both men and women are necessary for procreation. Therefore, while compared to men, women may be seen as defective, since they are necessary for procreation, they must have a God-ordained purpose. Thus Aquinas viewed the entire female gender as intended by God, but recognized each individual woman as a defective conception.

Aquinas remains consistent in his beliefs that compared to men, women are spiritually and physically deficient. To understand his perspective fully, it is important to distinguish what Aquinas views as the source of a woman's spiritual imperfections. Aquinas says that in the pre-fall state of mankind there "was a diverse dignity of souls according to the diversity of bodies since it is necessary for the soul to be proportioned to the body."<sup>74</sup> Therefore, the soul must fit the matter of the body, and Aquinas reasons that "therefore woman, even as to her soul, was more imperfect than man."<sup>75</sup> Because Aquinas

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<sup>73</sup> Clark and Richardson, *Women and Religion*.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas Aquinas and Charles H. Lohr, "St. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Sententiis* : An Index of Authorities Cited," (Amersham] Eng: Avebury, 1980).

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Aquinas and Charles H. Lohr, "St. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Sententiis* : An Index of Authorities Cited," (Amersham] Eng: Avebury, 1980).

viewed the female body as inferior to the male body, he reasoned that the female soul must be made in proportion to her body, and thus her soul would be inferior as well. This idea about the soul's proportionality to the body derives from Aristotelian philosophy, further demonstrating the continuation of Aristotle's ideas into medieval attitudes towards women.

Like Augustine and Aristotle, Aquinas also holds that how women and men are created has implications for the proper ordering of society. Aquinas expounds upon the creation, the fall, and how it relates to a woman's proper position socially in his *Summa Theologica*. As Aquinas began writing the *Summa* in 1265, nine years after the completion of *Scriptum super Sententiis*, we can see how his ideas on women remain consistent in his later scholarship. Question 92 in the *Summa* centers on the creation of women and their rightful places in relation to men. For instance, he says:

[It is said by way of objection] 'Subjection and limitation were a result of sin, for to the woman was it said after sin (Gn. 3:16): "Thou shalt be under the man's power"; and Gregory says that, "Where there is no sin, there is no inequality." But woman is naturally of less strength and dignity than man . . . ' [But I say] Subjection is twofold. One is servile, by virtue of which a superior makes use of a subject for his own benefit; and this kind of subjection began after sin.<sup>76</sup>

Aquinas holds that the harsh subjugation of women in post-fall society is due to two causes. First, he agrees with Pope Gregory that the fall, the entrance of sin into the world is a partial cause of women's subjection. However, he argues that this resulting subjection is a "servile" subjection. This subjection is when a superior exerts power over a subject for the superior's benefit. Like a coercive King exerting power upon his subjects for his benefit, this subjugation is not voluntary and is an abuse of authority. Aquinas argues that this subjugation has resulted from sin. This subjugation is not ideal and is not God-ordained.

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<sup>76</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *THE SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*, qu. 92, art. 1, ad. 2, 1920.

In the second part of Aquinas's explanation, he draws out the God-ordained subjugation of women. Here, Aquinas explains that the subjection of women predates the fall and argues that this subjection existed in a perfect and ideal form.

There is another kind of subjection which is called economic or civil, whereby the superior makes use of his subjects for their own benefit and good; and this kind of subjection existed even before sin. For good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. *So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates.* Nor is inequality among men excluded by the state of innocence, as we shall prove.<sup>77</sup>

This subjection is God's intended order for creation. Aquinas describes the authority men exercise over women as a kind of benevolence. He asserts that women are naturally of less strength and dignity than man, so man holds authority over them for women's own good. He states "for good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves."<sup>78</sup> Helen de Cruz and Johan de Smedt reiterate that for Aquinas neither the existence of women nor the good, God-ordained, subjugation of women is the result of the Fall.<sup>79</sup> It is due to a deficiency in women's character and natural state that they must be subject to men because in men the "discretion of reason predominates."<sup>80</sup> Aquinas, therefore, holds that because women are less rational and spiritually deficient than men, it is just for them to be ruled over by men.

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<sup>77</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *THE SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*, qu. 92, art. 1, ad. 2, 1920.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt, "Introduction to the Symposium on Evolution, Original Sin, and the Fall," *Zygon, Journal of Religion & Science* 56, no. 2, Evolution, Original Sin, and the Fall (May 8, 2021): 447–453.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *THE SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*, 1920, qu. 96, art. 3.

Therefore, his account of the creation of women supports this view that men should not subject women for men's benefit, but for the good of women. In the following article of question 92 in the *Summa*, he states:

I answer that, It was right for the woman to be made from a rib of man. First, to signify the social union of man and woman, for the woman should neither use authority over man,' and so she was not made from his head; nor was it right for her to be subject to man's contempt as his slave, and so she was not made from his feet.<sup>81</sup>

This quote aligns with Aquinas' distinction between servile and "civil" subjection that he describes. Because Aquinas's ideal order would be one where the man rules civilly over the woman, and not out of coercion or abuse, it is fitting that Eve is made out of Adam's rib. Additionally, Aquinas mentions that woman being made from man's rib signifies the social union of woman and man. Aquinas's prescribed civil, social subjugation of women upholds this social union between man and woman.

However, Aquinas seems to hold that in heaven, when humans reach perfection, there will be no distinction between gender. For instance, he furthers his discussion on the human body and soul in *Scriptum super Sentiis*:

In the ultimate state, however, such is the subjection [of body to soul] that the quality of body follows the virtue of the mind; whence according to the diversity of merits one soul will be more worthy than another soul, and the body more glorious; whence there will not be a difference on account of diverse sex.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *THE SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*, 1920, qu. 92, art. 1, ad. 3.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas Aquinas and Charles H. Lohr, "St. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Sententiis*: An Index of Authorities Cited."

Aquinas explains that in the ultimate state, the body will once again exist in perfect subjection to the soul. However, the difference between the ultimate state and the pre-fall state is that there will not be a difference on account of sex, but that according to the diversity of merits, one soul will be more worthy than another soul. Thus, Aquinas holds that in the final state souls will be completely ordered as the body will exist in perfect harmony with the soul. Demonstrating consistency across his works, in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, completed in 1263, Aquinas asserts that one should:

not hold that among the bodies of the risen the feminine sex will be absent...for since the resurrection is to restore the deficiencies of the nature, nothing that belongs to perfection of nature will be denied to the bodies of the risen.

Aquinas explains that female bodies will exist in the resurrected state. However, they will exist without any deficiencies. De Cruz and de Smedt assert that Aquinas's claim that women will be resurrected as women, reflects their humanity even in a situation where procreation is unnecessary.<sup>83</sup> Because procreation will not be necessary after the resurrection, Aquinas must believe that women are useful and necessary outside of their ability to procreate. While Aquinas does regard women as inferior, his insistence that women will be resurrected as women indicates his belief that they are fully human and fully intended by God. This view contrasts with Aristotle's philosophy that women are

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<sup>83</sup> Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt, "Introduction to the Symposium on Evolution, Original Sin, and the Fall," *Zygon, Journal of Religion & Science* 56, no. 2, Evolution, Original Sin, and the Fall (May 8, 2021): 447–453.



only created after a certain sequence of unfortunate events occurs and results in an “incomplete male” being created.

Aquinas’s scholarship on women is important to examine because not only did the Catholic Church view his works as authoritative, but also because his works represent the ideas of a man who did not engage with the idea of capable, intellectual women. Aquinas spent a large majority of his life in monasteries, with monks, or with other intellectual men. He did not engage with the accomplishments or works of St. Hildegard of Bingen, which he would have been able to access. Rather, he relies on expounding upon Aristotle’s philosophy in his analysis of women and their abilities. His treatment of the *Imago Dei* and women resembles that of St. Augustine. However unlike St. Augustine, he does not make exceptions for exemplar women. Unlike St. Augustine, Aquinas did not interact with women who directly challenged his ideas, so it is fitting that he remains consistent throughout his life in his theology of women.

### *Flesh and Blood Women: Three Medieval Examples*

#### *Hildegard of Bingen*

Despite the influence of Aquinas on medieval theology, his was not the only voice regarding women in the church. Women in monastic communities often had access to scripture and other scholarship that allowed them to produce their own scholastic or artistic contributions. St. Hildegard is one of those monastic women who took advantage of her nobility, mystical experiences, and scholastic resources to produce her own work. Her work is unique because it is

diverse and broad. Analyzing St. Hildegard's commentaries will allow us to see how medieval ideas about women's bodies influenced real women's work and even how these ideas shaped women's ideas about themselves.

St. Hildegard was born around 1098 in Germany to noble parents and received an education at the Benedictine cloister of Disibodenberg.<sup>84</sup> From a young age, Hildegard experienced visions. However, it was not until age 43 that she consulted her confessor, who took the matter to the archbishop of Mainz, and consequently, a group of theologians confirmed the authenticity of her visions. She was then appointed a monk who assisted her in recording these visions and prophecies in her writings. Throughout her life, Hildegard composed poems, treatises on natural history and medicine, and extensive writings on prophecies and visions. Hildegard's work is one of the earliest records we have of female-written theology. Her ability to philosophize and compile complex material on a wide range of topics challenges the Ancient and medieval ideas of women that say women are irrational and unable to reason as effectively as men. It was through appealing to her humility, virginity, and close relationship with the Holy Spirit that Hildegard worked within the hierarchical system to gain authority.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> James Ginter, "Hildegard of Bingen's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, Ed., Jennifer Bain., Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 85–104.

<sup>85</sup> Emilie Schulze, "Hildegard: A Trailblazer?," *Musical Offerings, Cedarville University* 12, no. 2 (October 25, 2021): 63–75.

In her *Liber Divinorum Operum*, Hildegard transcribes ten of her visions.

In part I, vision 4, she records her visions of the cosmos, body, and soul. On the creation of man and woman she says:

Man—created in the image of God, sitting upon the judgment seat of the earth like another lord and governing all creation made on his own behalf—is the complete work of that God and very pleasing to him; each sex was made to be the helper and solace of the other, and The swellings of the flesh that project from the chest and are called breasts signify outwardly the fruitful abundance of the atmosphere and inwardly a person’s heartfelt desires; for as woman is weak and infirm in comparison to a man, so too the flesh’s delight has no strength in comparison to the powers of the soul.<sup>86</sup>

In this account of her vision, Hildegard describes a complementary relationship between man and woman. They are to act as a helper and solace for one another. This emphasis on the complementary relationship between men and women differs from Augustine’s statement from his *Commentary on Genesis*, “I fail to see what use woman can be to man, if one excludes the function of bearing children.” Hildegard focuses much more on the relational dynamic between men and women, holding that men and women could learn from each other.

Yet her view was not altogether different from her male predecessors. She makes a stark comparison between woman and man and soul and body. Hildegard says that the woman is weak compared to a man and then says “so too the flesh’s delight has no strength in comparison to the powers of the soul.”<sup>87</sup> She compares the woman’s weakness to the corporeal weakness of the flesh. Like the fleshly desires of one’s body hold no strength in comparison to the rational soul, a woman’s disposition is weak and sickly compared to that

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<sup>86</sup> Emilie Schulze, “Hildegard: A Trailblazer?,” 63–75.

<sup>87</sup> Schulze, Emilie. “Hildegard: A Trailblazer?” *Musical Offerings, Cedarville University* 12, no. 2: 63–75.

of a man. Yet, it is through this bodily weakness that Hildegard practices humility. As James Ginther explains, Hildegard connected her bodily condition and suffering to humility. Her bodily pain and weakness were a constant reminder of her imperfection and of her incapacity to fully perceive the meanings of her visions because of her body's defects.<sup>88</sup>

Hildegard's perspective does not argue for the advancement of women's role in society and the Church. She alludes to the idea that Man signifies the divinity of God, while a woman is made in the image of man, not God:

The man and women were thus complementary, in that one works through the other. Man cannot be called "man" without the woman, in the same way as the woman cannot be called "woman" without the man. Woman is the work of man, and man the consolation of the woman. Neither can exist without the other. Man signifies the divinity of the Son of God, in the same way that the woman signifies his humanity.<sup>89</sup>

As the medieval church fathers considered women unfit for theological teaching, Hildegard also viewed the ideal role of women in the Church as one of humility and not authority.<sup>90</sup> She did not intend to equalize men and women in the church, rather she used her position to minister directly to women, while unexpectedly also becoming a teacher for men. However, her ability to do so was grounded in her weakness rather than in overturning ideas about the female body. She did not argue for her strength but transcended her weakness. It is important to note here how Hildegard's understanding of the *Imago Dei* differs from the men whom we have previously studied. Unlike Augustine and Aquinas

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<sup>88</sup> Ginther, "Hildegard of Bingen's Theology." 85–104.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

who held that women do not partake in the full *Imago Dei*, Hildegard believed both women and men partook in the full image of God. This difference results from the fact that Hildegard incorporates masculine and feminine qualities into the Godhead. For example in her *Scivias*, she describes a feminine Divine or *Scientia Dei* that “is awesome in terror as the Thunderer’s lightening and gentle in goodness as the sunshine.”<sup>91</sup> The Divine, with its both feminine and masculine traits, bestowed this nature upon both women and men. Barbara Newman describes this duality as “For when God created male and female in His image, Hildegard remarks, he extended this duallikeness to the soul as well as the body.”<sup>92</sup> Thus, not only does Hildegard believe that man and woman partake in the *Imago Dei*, but she also emphasizes that the Divine is composed of feminine traits, meaning there is something inherently good and virtuous about femininity.

Hildegard aligns with Augustine and Aquinas in that women should live in perfect subjection to men. However, as Prudence Allen explains, Hildegard argues for a theory of sex complementarily while Aquinas argues for sex polarity on the level of nature.<sup>93</sup> Hildegard’s prescribed relationship between men and women is one where woman is in perfect subjugation to man. She explains that:

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<sup>91</sup> Barbara Newman, “Divine Power Made Perfect in Weakness: St. Hildegard on the Frail Sex,” *Cistercian Publications* 2 (n.d.): 1987.

<sup>92</sup> Newman, “Divine Power Made Perfect in Weakness.”

<sup>93</sup> Prudence Allen, “Two Medieval Views on Woman’s Identity: Hildegard of Bingen and Thomas Aquinas,” *Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion* 16, no. 1 (1987): 21–36.

Because of her weakness, woman looks to man for her care and ought to be subject to him and ever ready to serve; what their outwardly common way of life together signifies inwardly.<sup>94</sup>

Because of a woman's corporal weakness, she must rely on the strength of her male companion to care for her. Additionally, a woman's role in relation to a man is to be subject to him and exist in a perpetual state of being ready to serve. This prescribed relationship is not unlike those that we have seen from Aristotle, Aquinas, and Augustine. However, one aspect of Hildegard's visions displays some nuance to her perspective. While Augustine argues that woman does not take part in the fullness of the image of God until she fulfills her role of companion to man and mother of child, Hildegard mentions that "man holds the form of Christ's divinity and woman his humanity."<sup>95</sup> According to Hildegard, man is made in the divine image of God. However, she continues with "woman possesses the form of Christ's humanity."<sup>96</sup> Assuming Christ was both fully man and fully God while still maintaining perfection, Hildegard asserts that women are made in the perfect image of Christ, albeit in the perfect human form of Christ. With this description, Hildegard does not necessarily place man over woman in the spiritual hierarchy.<sup>97</sup> She rather maintains that

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<sup>94</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber Divinorum Operum*, trans. Nathaniel Campbell (The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), accessed November 26, 2022, <http://www.hildegard-society.org/p/liber-divinorum-operum.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Her work, *Solutions to Thirty-Eight Questions* was written alongside her great friend Guibert of Gembloux. This work addresses difficult questions in scripture and is a rare example of a woman's exegesis during the Middle Ages that was sought after by her male contemporaries.

they are both made in the image of God, but in different forms.<sup>98</sup> In Hildegard's *Heilkunde*, as Allen explains, Hildegard attempts to keep a "balance of valuation between the two sexes."<sup>99</sup> While man is stronger because of the greater presence of earth in his composition, women are more artistic because of the greater presence of air in their composition.<sup>100</sup> With these theories, Hildegard lays the basic claims of sex complementarity or the idea that women and men are different but equal. These theories tie into Hildegard's explanation of how while Christ's humanity and divinity were different components, his humanity was still indeed perfect. Unlike Augustine and Aquinas who held that women do not partake in the full *Imago Dei*, Hildegard believed both women and men partook in the full image of God. While she is informed by the philosophical and theological legacies which ascribe a lesser status to women, she pushes that status further into the fullness of humanity's image-bearing uniqueness.

### *Julian of Norwich*

While women like Hildegard pushed the boundaries of female ministerial work in the high middle ages, in the late medieval period the role of the powerful abbess had waned. Yet this did not push women out of serving the church, only into new spaces they carved out for themselves. Some, like Julian of Norwich, took claustration further by

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<sup>98</sup> For a more thorough explanation of Hildegard's theory on the nature of Adam and Eve, see Prudence Allen's article, "Two medieval Views on Woman's Identity: Hildegard of Bingen and Thomas Aquinas."

<sup>99</sup> Prudence Allen, "Two Medieval Views on Woman's Identity: Hildegard of Bingen and Thomas Aquinas," *Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion* 16, no. 1 (1987): 21–36.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

entering the anchoress' cell. Others, like Margery Kempe, reached for a more vocal, more public lay piety. Together, these two women show how medieval women worked within gendered confines to attain spiritual influence and authority.

Julian of Norwich was a renowned English mystic and anchoress during the Middle Ages.<sup>101</sup> Unlike other mystics, she recorded her visions herself. Julian attained authority by removing any sense of authorial self from her writings. As Elizabeth Dutton states, Julian, asserts credibility by removing the attention from herself. Julian advises the reader to turn away their attention from the writer. By doing so, Julian also removes a large portion of the gendered element from her writing. She assumes a posture of humility. Dutton explains that Julian insistently foregrounds herself as an aspiring, but struggling student to underscore that the servant's "restricted perception does not obstruct revelation - it is part of it."<sup>102</sup> By assuming this position of humility, her *Revelations* function as a devotional, allowing the reader to learn and experience along with Julian. Recognizing the gender limitations to authority and inherited ideas about female weakness, Julian appeals to her physical frailty in her writings as a means to encounter the Divine and attain spiritual influence.

Julian penned *Revelations of Divine Love* while cloistered and riddled with physical ailments.<sup>103</sup> It is during Julian's most physically weak moments that God reveals himself to

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<sup>101</sup> Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Julian of Norwich and a Trinity of the Feminine," *Mystics Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (2022): 68–77.

<sup>102</sup> Julian of Norwich and Elisabeth Mary Dutton, *A Revelation of Love* (New Haven (Conn.): Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>103</sup> St. Benedict writes of the second type of monk, the Anchorites or Hermits who have "learnt in association with many brethren how to fight against the devil" and can now live without the help of others to fight "against the temptations of mind and body." For example, Julian of Norwich attained such strength and became a monk of the second type, the Anchorites. Her life exemplified this idea that in medieval Christianity, women could access spiritual authority through asceticism.



her through the form of visions. Accessing God through her weakness is also what Hildegard does and speaks to in her writing. Both Julian and Hildegard use their female weakness as an avenue to credibility and spiritual authority. Liz Herbert McAvoy refers to these moments of intense suffering as “quasi-martyrdom.”<sup>104</sup> While she does not physically die for Christ, like Perpetua, she seeks to understand the suffering of Christ through her physical ailments. In the opening of her Revelations, she declares that God gave her a three-fold revelation. She says:

The first was a deep recollection of his passion. The second was a bodily sickness. The third was to have, of God’s gift, three wounds...As to the second grace, there came into my mind a desire of my will to have by God’s gift a bodily sickness. I wished that the illness might be so severe that it seemed mortal. This was so that I might receive all the rites of the Church and to think that indeed I was about to die. I wanted to experience every kind of pain, bodily and spiritual, which I would have if I were to die — every fear and temptation. I intended this because I wanted to be purged by God’s mercy and afterwards live more to his glory because of that sickness.<sup>105</sup>

Julian desires to experience physical sickness and pain so that she might better live a life more glorifying to God. McAvoy explains that the collapse of Julian’s suffering body into Christ’s has the effect of “transforming their merged corporeality into a female site of negotiation.”<sup>106</sup> In other words, Julian uses her female body to meet Christ and attain his wisdom and love more fully. Unlike Aquinas and Augustine who champion physical strength and correlate bodily health with spiritual health, Julian of Norwich provides a distinct insight into how men and women can encounter the Divine.<sup>107</sup> Julian’s account of

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<sup>104</sup> McAvoy, “Julian of Norwich and a Trinity of the Feminine.” 72.

<sup>105</sup> Julian of Norwich and Elizabeth Mary Dutton, *A Revelation of Love*.

<sup>106</sup> McAvoy, “Julian of Norwich and a Trinity of the Feminine.” 71.

<sup>107</sup> Julian cloistered herself in a room, went without food, and received revelations and visions from God. Because she relinquished her physical needs and completely

the body represents an example of a woman religious who transcended the limits of her sex to assert authority in her religious writings during the Middle Ages. Her themes are not gendered, instead, she expounds on how her ailments draw her closer to God, regardless of her sex.

### *Margery Kempe*

Unlike the Abbess Hildegard or the anchoress Julian, Margery Kempe was married for almost 20 years when she began experiencing visions of Christ.<sup>108</sup> After bearing 14 children, she requested to break off sexual relations with her husband and embark on a religious pilgrimage. Her husband obliged and after receiving endorsement of her pilgrimage from Julian of Norwich, Margery set off to Italy and the Santiago de Compostela in Spain.<sup>109</sup> Kempe eventually dictated her *Book of Margery Kempe* to two scribes, recounting her travels and mystic experiences. She recounts the night when it was revealed to her that she should abandon her sexual duties to her husband:

One night, as this creature lay in bed with her husband, she heard a melodious sound so sweet and delectable that she thought she had been in paradise. And immediately she jumped out of bed and said ‘Alas that ever I sinned! It is full merry in heaven.’ This melody was so sweet that it surpassed all the melody that might be heard in the world, without any comparison, and it caused this creature when she afterwards heard any mirth or melody to shed very plentiful and abundant tears of high devotion...And so she said to her husband, ‘I may not deny you my body, but

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humbled herself, she ascended the “ladder” to God’s perfect love. Thus, she was able to be an effective mouthpiece for God. It is also important to note that Julian of Norwich framed her teaching as simply relaying information from God. She did not assert that she was providing her own ideas or opinions to be received by the public.

<sup>108</sup> Clark and Richardson, *Women and Religion*.

<sup>109</sup> Raymond A. Powell, “Margery Kempe: An Exemplar of Late Medieval English Piety,” *Catholic Historical Review* 89, no. 1 (2003): 68–77.

all the love and affection of my heart is withdrawn from all earthly creatures and set on God alone.<sup>110</sup>

Kempe recalls that she receives a divine signal that compels her to jump from bed and tell her husband that she will set all of her love and affection on God and God alone. It is important to note that she says she ‘may not deny....my body.’ Conjugal rights marked every medieval church-approved marriage. A husband could not refuse his body to his wife and neither could a wife refuse her body. Kempe knows that she cannot deny her husband his conjugal rights without his agreement. However, she hopes that with this divine inspiration, her husband will be more willing to relieve her of her conjugal duties. We have seen this pattern of women appealing to divine intervention to forgo their social duties as mother and wife, such as the case with Perpetua who miraculously weened her baby days before her martyrdom.

Kempe also refers to herself as “the creature.” This self-imposed title indicates that she wants her readers to acknowledge the lowly view she holds of herself in light of God’s majesty. Additionally, Margery’s use of the third person indicates a desire to remove herself from this account; she wants her account to be shared and held as a serious, spiritual work. The use of ‘creature’ rather than ‘woman’ also functions to de-gender Kempe’s account. She wants her story to be accepted and regarded for God's work, not discounted for her status as a laywoman. Kempe effectively removes herself from the constraints of her gendered roles through her account of Christ’s appearances to her. Specifically, when Christ appears before Kempe in the Chapel of Saint John in the Church of Saint Margaret

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<sup>110</sup> Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe - Margery Kempe - Oxford University Press*, trans. Anthony Bale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), accessed November 26, 2022, <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-book-of-margery-kempe-9780199686643?cc=us&lang=en&>.

in Lynn on the Friday before Christmas, he offers her eternal absolution for her sins and continues the way forward which he opened up to her during his first appearance.<sup>111</sup> Kempe appeals to divine authority to authorize her attempts to transcend her gender.

Kempe feels she must be absolved of generational sin, the doctrine Augustine made popular in his writings. As Hope Phyllis Weissman suggests, this absolution is not only for Margey's committed sins, but also for the sins of Eve, the Original Sin, Eve's curse, the pains and duties of childbearing, the sins the Church had taught her were inherent to her gender.<sup>112</sup> Christ offers Kempe an escape from the earthly consequences of Eve's curse. Liz Herbert McAvoy explains, "Christ offers her the opportunity to ease the burden of Eve's sin by...bestowing upon her the gifts of tears which will forever link her with the Virgin Mother."<sup>113</sup> Through these encounters with Christ, Kempe "manipulates the irrevocability of her motherhood and loss of virginity to create for herself a means towards self-empowerment within a socio-religious hegemony which is also intent on frustrating her desire for autonomy."<sup>114</sup> Kempe uses Christ's endorsement to justify her abandonment of marriage and motherhood.<sup>115</sup> Only Christ can free Kempe from the limitations of her gender.

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<sup>111</sup> Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Motherhood and Margery Kempe," in *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Boydell & Brewer, 2004), 5:28-63.

<sup>112</sup> Hope Phyllis Weissman, "Margery Kempe in Jerusalem: Hysterica Compassio in the Late Middle Ages," in *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in Its Contexts, 700-1600*, ed. Mary J. Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk. (Norman, OK: Pilgrim, 1982), 208-215..

<sup>113</sup> Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Motherhood and Margery Kempe," 40.

<sup>114</sup> Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Motherhood and Margery Kempe," 40.

<sup>115</sup> Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Motherhood and Margery Kempe," 40..

Kempe's account pushes back against Aquinas and Augustinian notions that God could not use women as spiritually authoritative figures because of their inherent bodily and spiritual weaknesses. Instead, Kempe's encounters with Christ free her from her socially and biologically imposed duties so that she can pursue a pilgrimage with no hindrance. Kempe's writings shed new light on the character of God, new light not expounded upon by Augustine or Aquinas. Kempe's God does not operate within the gendered binaries of the medieval church. Kempe's Christ empathizes with the tired mother and the weary wife and does not deem women as useless to his cause because of their biological or social obligations.

### *Conclusion*

Remnants of Aristotelian philosophy shape Aquinas's notions on the female sex. When Aquinas and Augustine's writings are compared side by side, we see their experiences - or lack thereof - with women reflected. Augustine recognized the ability of exemplar women to contribute to intellectual discussion like his mother, Monica, or to display extreme physical strength like Perpetua. Thus, in his sermons and letters to women, he is often more flexible in his strict theology limiting women. Aquinas, on the other hand, lived in a convent and was limited in his experiences with women. He did not encounter these same exemplar women as did Augustine and his beliefs were shaped by Aristotelian scholars like Albertus Magnus and other male monks. This lack of interactions with women continually strengthened Aquinas's position on the subjugation of women and caused his general positions to remain consistent in his writings.

Regarding official practice in the church, Augustine's and Aquinas's views on the position of women reinforce each other. They both hold that naturally, women are weaker than men and that some form of the subjection of women is ordained by God. However, when we turn to the lives of real women in the medieval era, once again, we see a more complicated story.

St. Hildegard appealed to her chastity and humility as an abbess to attain credibility in the eyes of the public with her writings. While she emphasized mutual respect and care between wife and husband, she also acknowledged that she, as a woman, "because of her weakness" should be subject to men. So while her writings are authoritative, and she influences both men and women in the medieval Church with her spiritual strength and knowledge, the ideas she has about women's place in society reflect the ideas of Augustine and Aquinas. Hildegard's story demonstrates that while women could push back against men's ideas, they could not escape these ideas which often shaped their work around ideas of female subjugation.

Julian of Norwich's story highlights that women also attained spiritual authority through writings. Julian achieved credibility and influence by transcending her physical gender. By enduring extreme sickness, the anchoress demonstrates physical and spiritual perseverance. However, Aquinas or Augustine would probably explain Julian's strength by explaining that monasticism allowed for the holiest living and by forgoing the things that made her "female" like motherhood, marriage, and sex, Julian transcended gender. And yet, Kempe's story would probably provide the most trouble for Aquinas and Augustine and their ideas. Kempe experiences visions and encounters with Christ, but does not have any inherent credibility due to her lay status. However, through a vow of chastity and approval

from her husband, she leaves her life as a mother and wife to pursue a pilgrimage. Kempe directly appeals to Christ to free her from the confines of her gender's duties. While she views herself as weak and incapable, the difference in Kempe's theology versus that of Aquinas and Aristotle is that she believes Christ to be capable of strengthening her and using her for his Kingdom.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Reformation and Women

The 16th Century was marked by the age of discovery and the Renaissance. The age of discovery was characterized by Roman Catholic Church-funded missions to bring Christianity to the New World.<sup>116</sup> Financing these missions required the Church to increase sales of indulgences, one of the chief complaints of protestant reformers. The Renaissance brought forth attempts to build upon and revitalize ideas and achievements from classical antiquity. Scholastic developments of the Renaissance enabled scholars to read scriptures in their own vernacular.<sup>117</sup> Martin Luther would capitalize on this aspect of the Renaissance, developing his teachings and ideas and sharing them with the public.

In this section, we will begin with Martin Luther. I will first analyze his later commentaries on Genesis from 1545 to establish his argument regarding women. Then, I will briefly refer to an earlier Lutheran commentary on Genesis to demonstrate his shift in perspectives throughout his life. Then I will discuss two female reformers, Katharina Schütz Zell and Argula von Grumbach, and their contributions to the Reformation, looking at how their interactions with Luther can offer a more informed conclusion on Luther's treatment of women. Schütz Zell, along with von Grumbach and Marie Dentiére justified their call and obligation to speak publicly in the theology of the priesthood of all believers.<sup>118</sup> As Sujin Pak explains, in defense of their ministries, Argula and Katharina echoed the teachings of the Protestant reformers and scripture to argue their right to public

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<sup>116</sup> Sujin G. Pak, "Three Early Female Protestant Reformers' Appropriation of Prophecy as Interpretation of Scripture," *Church History* 84, no. 1 (2015): 90–123.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.



interpretation of scripture.<sup>119</sup> Through analysis of these women and their stories, I will demonstrate how women found ways to circumvent men's limiting ideas of women and their bodies. Next, I will discuss Calvin and his general stance on women, their bodies, and their abilities. I will reference Jeffrey Wyatt's article explaining how women lived in Calvin's Geneva, as we do not have a large record available of Calvin's interactions with women. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by analyzing Luther's interactions and Calvin's lack of interactions with women. I will explain how Luther's commentaries on Genesis shift after spending a decade as a father and a husband. Further, I will expound upon how Calvin's scholarship and theology remained consistent throughout his life.

### *Martin Luther on Women*

Martin Luther is widely considered the father of the Reformation. He nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenburg door in 1517, sparking the Protestant charge against the Catholic Church. While this is a simplified, even mythological version of the Reformation's origins, Luther looms large over the movement as his work had significant implications for lay Christians around Europe.<sup>120</sup> He translated the Bible into German vernacular, introduced the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, and influenced the drastic shift towards opposition to monastic living across Western Europe.<sup>121</sup> Additionally, Luther wrote

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<sup>119</sup> Sujin G. Pak, "Three Early Female Protestant Reformers' Appropriation of Prophecy as Interpretation of Scripture," *Church History* 84, no. 1 (2015): 90–123.

<sup>120</sup> For more on the complex origins of the Reformation, see Stephen P. Thompson's, *The Reformation*. Greenhaven Press, 1999.

<sup>121</sup> With the idea of the priesthood of all believers, Luther removed the need for papal authority to interpret scripture. Women were no longer subject to the pope or papal hierarchy, instead their new authoritative figure became their husbands.

extensively on a wide variety of theological topics. For this paper, I will focus on his later works on Genesis, as they convey many of the theologian's ideas regarding the created order for men and women as well as demonstrate how his personal experiences with women resulted from and reinforced these ideas. Then, I will place these alongside Luther's writings in response to two leading female figures of the Reformation, Katharina Zell, and Argula von Grumbach. When these two sources are placed together, a complex picture of Luther's ideas and practices regarding women's roles emerges.

First, we will examine Luther's *Commentary on Genesis*, written in 1546 in which he discusses the creation of man and woman and the fall. Luther completed this work after almost two decades of married life; this commentary reflects his more mature thoughts on women. He explains:

And the object of Moses in this particular point of his divine instruction is, to show that this sex also had great concernment, in that state of animal but innocent life, in which Adam was created, and in that state of a spiritual and eternal life also, which he expected.

For the female sex was necessary for the generation and multiplication of the human race.

Hence it follows that if the woman had not been deceived by the serpent and had not sinned, she would have been in all respects equal to Adam.<sup>122</sup>

Here, Luther establishes two main points. First, he states that women were created for the procreation of the human race. He explains that this role was inherently good. Secondly, he claims that if Eve had not been deceived by the serpent and eaten the fruit, she would be "in all respects equal" to Adam. As Merry Wisener-Hanks and Karrant Nunn underscore in

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<sup>122</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 1 (The Project Gutenberg, 1546), accessed November 25, 2022, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/48193/48193-h/48193-h.htm>.

their sourcebook, *Luther on Women*, Luther holds that prior to the fall women could essentially rule over themselves.<sup>123</sup> Luther explains that women could act autonomously before the fall. In this sense they were created with equal autonomy, however, his argument that “had woman not been deceived by the serpent and had not sinned, she would have been in all respects equal to man” is problematic as it contradicts his earlier claims. For example, from 1523 to 1524 in his commentaries on Genesis, Luther held that women’s subjection to men was instituted by God as the intended order for creation.<sup>124</sup> However, in this later commentary, we see Luther argue that prior to the fall, “[women] were in all respects equal to Adam.” This contradiction marks a difference in the works of young, not yet married, Luther and the works of married, father of six, Luther. While it is empirically improbable to prove that Luther’s theology on women shifted due to his marriage and other interactions with women, we certainly see a shift in his attitudes towards women in his writings and lectures as he continues to encounter capable, learned women.

While Luther’s later interpretations on Genesis suggested that women and men were equally autonomous before the Fall, he still argued that women were physically and spiritually weaker than men, demonstrating Augustinian, and thereby Aristotelian, influences on his theology. Wisener-Hanks and Nunn also highlight the idea that Luther was convinced from the moment of Creation that Eve was a lesser being than Adam.<sup>125</sup> It seems that even in his later years, after six children and marriage, Luther found himself

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<sup>123</sup> Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>124</sup> Mickey Mattox, “Luther on Eve, Women and the Church,” *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*, Marquette University (2017): 251–270. 257.

<sup>125</sup> Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*. 12.

stuck between more progressive approaches to the treatment of women and more traditional, patriarchal approaches. For example, In the *Enarrationes*, a series of lectures given between 1534 and 1545, Luther attempts to explain to his students how his earlier interpretations of Genesis can be reconciled with his later views. He explains that the inferiority he speaks of in his *Declamationes* on Genesis, sermons delivered from 1523 to 1524, solely refers to the physical weakness of women and not her subjection.<sup>126</sup> In his *Enarrationes*, he refers to Eve as a “heroic woman” and a “most excellent creature” but qualifies these praises with “nevertheless she was a woman [and] she seems to be a somewhat different creature from the man, in that she has both different members and a much weaker constitution”<sup>127</sup> Here, Luther appears to tell his students that while women were weaker than men, prior to the Fall women and men shared full partnership in rule over creation. Even while women may be physically weaker than men, in these lectures, Luther wants to emphasize to his students that he did not see women’s weakness as a reason for her subjection and reiterated Eve as a woman capable of reason and goodness.

Luther’s later conclusion that Eve loses her equality with Adam when she is deceived by the serpent differs from Calvin’s conclusions on the fall. Discussed in the following section, Calvin asserts that female submission to male headship is God-ordained and that God instituted the system pre-fall. Karrant Nunn and Merry Wisener-Hanks point to this difference in their sourcebook, *Luther on Women*, when they explain Luther’s thinking that through Eve’s participation in the Fall, women became subordinate to their

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<sup>126</sup> Mattox, Mickey, “Luther on Eve, Women and the Church,” 251–70. 257.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

husbands.<sup>128</sup> It is after the Fall that, as a part of God's punishment, women were ordered to obey and stay alongside their husbands in all things.<sup>129</sup>

Luther's conclusions on the fall, in his later *Commentaries on Genesis*, frame his prescribed social and spiritual hierarchy:

For her now being subject to her husband is the punishment laid upon her of God since sin and on account of sin; as are also all her other troubles and perils, her labor and pain in bringing forth children, with an infinite number of other sorrows. Woman therefore is not now what Eve was at her creation. The condition of woman then was inconceivably better and more excellent than now; she was then in no respect whatever inferior to Adam, whether you consider the endowments of her body or those of her mind.<sup>130</sup>

First, Luther reiterates his claim that a woman's subjugation to her husband is a direct result of the fall, a punishment for her sin. He refers to women's punishment as being subject to their husbands. In their article, *Women in Martin Luther's Life and Theology*, Albrecht Classen and Tanya Amber Settle explain that Luther's theology necessitates that women obey their husbands and that this submission is a direct consequence of Eve's initial sinful act.<sup>131</sup> Before the fall, Adam and Eve were equally autonomous. Secondly, Luther says that currently, "women, therefore, is not now what Eve was at her creation." Thus, before the fall, women's natures were infinitely better than they are today. He explains that prior to the fall women were as capable as Adam. The fall not only corrupted men and women's relationship, but also the nature and character of women.

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<sup>128</sup> Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*. 15.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Luther, Martin, *Commentary on Genesis*.

<sup>131</sup> Albrecht Classen and Tanya Amber Settle, "Women in Martin Luther's Life and Theology," *German Studies Review* 14, no. 2 (1991): 231–60.

While Luther held that the fall corrupted man and woman's relationship, compared to Aquinas and Aristotle, he provides a more complementary understanding of the relationship between man and woman. Luther continues his commentary on Genesis with an explanation of women's rightful role alongside men. He holds:

“Now, as nature is corrupted by sin, woman is necessary, not only for the multiplying of the human race but also for the companionship, help and protection of life. For domestic government needs the ministration of women. Nay, such is our wretchedness by the fall of Adam, that, to our shame and sorrow be it confessed, we have need of woman as a remedy against sin.”

While sin has tainted the dynamic between men and women, women can still provide companionship and help to men outside of bearing children. The domestic order requires women's participation. Here, Luther starkly contrasts the ideas of Aquinas and Augustine who generally do not view women as worthy companions for men. Luther highlights that women have a function beyond childbearing in their relationships with men.

Additionally, Luther underscores the use of marriage as a protection against sexual sin. This emphasis on marriage as the highest calling contrasts with Aquinas's arguments and the general medieval sentiment that chastity was the holiest path. Luther explains marriage as a two-pronged preventative measure for sexual sin. First, women's own sexual nature, according to Luther, occupied the center of their being, influencing their every decision. To fulfill this burning passion, as Luther explained that a women's weakness made it more difficult to control their desires, they married.<sup>132</sup> However, also according to Luther, women were prone to tempt men into illicit sexual activity. Therefore by marrying,

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<sup>132</sup>Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women*, 12.

men could not be tempted into promiscuity. Thus, Luther held that the married state was the ideal state for everyone.

Luther's language of 'domestic government' refers to a shift in spiritual and social ordering that the Reformation brings. Prior to the Reformation, men, and women religious existed on a similar spiritual plane, priests and clergy members existed above lay people, and then the sainthood, and then God presided over all. This domestic government refers to the governing of the nuclear family.<sup>133</sup> Lyndal Roper coined the term 'Holy Household,' referring to Luther's proposed domestic order in Reformation Augsburg.<sup>134</sup> With the Reformation, husbands asserted authority over the spiritual development of their household, including their wives.<sup>135</sup> This transition from the formal priesthood to the priesthood of all believers meant that men replaced the papacy in caring for their wives' spiritually. For the domestic government to maintain its order in the chaos of a pre-fall world, women must fulfill their roles as caretakers and subordinate assistants to their husbands.

Luther constructed his commentary on Genesis during the last ten years of his life, after years of marriage and fatherhood. His later commentaries mark a shift in his attitudes towards the fall and women's abilities. Historian David M. Whitford writes that Luther's later commentaries, written in 1545, reflect a more experiential attitude towards women.<sup>136</sup> Luther's later writings differ from his earlier writings of Eve which fault Eve for the fall

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<sup>133</sup> Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals, in Reformation Augsburg*, Oxford studies in social history (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1989).

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Amy E. Leonard, and David M. Whitford, *Embodiment, Identity, and Gender in the Early Modern Age*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020.

and explain women's subjugation as a pre-fall condition. For example in his earlier commentaries on Genesis 2:24, written in 1524, before his marriage to Katharina von Bora, Luther says:

They, therefore, will be one flesh/ that is, they will have one possession, one home, one family, field, conversation, education of sons, wealth, poverty, glory and all things in common, whatever pertains to life in the flesh, except that the husband ought to rule [dominare debet] in the wife.<sup>137</sup>

While he comments on the mutuality between man and wife, he also adds an important qualifier that the husband "ought to rule in the wife." This commentary on Genesis reflects young Luther's position on women's subjugation pre-fall. Younger Luther believed that Eve was subject to Adam before the fall. As Mickey Mattox notes, in Luther's earlier readings, a "familial hierarchy was intended from the beginning."<sup>138</sup> This theological point demonstrates that Luther's stance on women's roles did not remain fixed. After being a father and a husband, his view shifts in later commentaries on Genesis where he establishes that the subjugation of women resulted as a punishment of the Fall. Luther's shifts in perspective towards women are distinct from Calvin's which remains constant throughout his theological career.

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<sup>137</sup> Ruth Tucker, *Katie Luther, First Lady of the Reformation : The Unconventional Life of Katharina von Bora* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2017).

<sup>138</sup> Mickey Mattox, "Luther on Eve, Women and the Church," *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*, Marquette University (2017): 251–270..



*Katharina Schütz Zell*

As Luther and other reformers supported the closure of convents, women in the Reformation era had limited opportunities to access authority through monasticism.<sup>139</sup> Unlike Perpetua's martyrdom or Hildegard's asceticism, women in the Reformation era drew more heavily on scripture as a source of authority. For example, Katharina Schütz Zell was a powerful female voice during the Protestant reformation, relying on her knowledge and use of scripture to justify her authority. She wrote several treatises and served the church in Strasbourg alongside her husband, pastor Matthew Zell. One of the first respectable women to marry a pastor after clergy began taking wives, Schütz Zell and her husband partnered in ministry until his death, after which she continued to serve. She was the first of a new kind of Christian woman – the pastor's wife.

While Schütz Zell did not publish a commentary on Genesis, making it difficult to directly compare her views on women to those of Luther and Calvin, it is still possible to gain insight into how her understanding of men and women's creation shaped notions of gender hierarchy in the church. For example, in 1524, Schütz Zell penned a letter to the women suffering in the community of Kentzigen. This letter was Katarina's first work to appear in print and was directed towards the women in Kenzington, a city where a vassal of the Habsburgs was attacking and persecuting Protestants. In her introduction to an edition of Katharina's letter, scholar Elsie McKee writes that in this letter we see the early stages of the development of Schütz Zell's use of female and male imagery.<sup>140</sup> She exhorts and

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<sup>139</sup> Notable exceptions include monastic women in Catholic regions such as Caritas Pirckheimer, Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks 1991, *Luther on Women*, 12.

<sup>140</sup> Katharina Zell and Elsie Anne. McKee, *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

comforts the women with references to several biblical and theological references. Schütz Zell writes:

So I beg you, loyal believing women, also to do this: take on you the manly, Abraham-like courage while you too are in distress and while you are abused with all kinds of insult and suffering. When you may meet with imprisonment in towers, chains, drowning, banishment and such like things...meditate on strong Abraham, father of us all.<sup>141</sup>

Here, Schütz Zell charges the women in Kentzington to stand firm amidst harsh treatment. She orders these women to take on the “manly” attribute of courage. As McKee notes, this instance will be the only time in her entire corpus that Schütz Zell applies this masculine language as an ideal for women.<sup>142</sup> This reference to courage as a masculine trait represents a continuity from Perpetua’s time, who transformed her gender to access this manly courage and strength. Schütz Zell alludes to possible punishments that these ladies may have to endure and believes they are capable of enduring them. What we see here is a contrast in male attitudes towards women and what women actually believe themselves to be capable of. Schütz Zell knows that her sex can withstand harsh physical and spiritual treatment even if it is explained by mediating on “strong Abraham” or taking on “manly courage.”

Later in her letter, Schütz Zell balances this masculine language with feminine imagery for God. She exhorts her readers with comparisons of God to a nursing mother:

As He [Christ] said to His disciples: “I will not abandon you as orphans, I am coming to you; a little while and the world will not see me, but you will see me because I live and you will also live. These words are a reminder that He will not abandon you, nor forget you, as He also says in the prophet: “as little as a mother

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<sup>141</sup> Zell and McKee, *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer*, 51.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 51.

may forget her suckling child, so little may I forget you; and if she does forget her child, still I will not forget you.”<sup>143</sup>

Schütz Zell aims to speak a language that her readers can understand. She writes to mothers and wives, so these references to the feminine traits of God allow the woman of Kenzingen to better understand the God that Schütz Zell is exhorting them to follow in the midst of these hardships. This feminine imagery also demonstrates that Schütz Zell recognizes femininity as good and godly. She sees the loyalty and attentiveness of a mother as akin to the care of God. As Sujin Pak writes, Katharina extensively meditated and wrote about the motherhood of Christ.<sup>144</sup> Katharina underscored the inclusiveness of women in biblical texts and defended women’s call to ministerial work.

Schütz Zell’s writings do not focus on women’s intellectual or physical limitations like the other exegetical works from Luther, Calvin, Augustine, etc. However, she does work within the gendered constructs that have been established by the ideas of Luther, Calvin, and Augustine. As an educated woman and a pastor’s wife, she asserts authority through her status, ability, and connections to the mainstream male Protestant voices. Schütz Zell sees herself as an exemplar; she is a successful mouthpiece for God in spite of her gender, not because of it. As Wiethaus says in his article, *Female Authority and Religiosity in the Letters of Katharina Zell and Caritas Pirckheimer*, Katharina constructs her authority by describing herself as unlike any other women she knew.<sup>145</sup> She says “I acted faithfully and straightforwardly not according to the norms of a woman, but

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<sup>143</sup> Zell and McKee, *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer*, 54.

<sup>144</sup> Sujin G. Pak, “Three Early Female Protestant Reformers’ Appropriation of Prophecy as Interpretation of Scripture,” *Church History* 84, no. 1 (2015): 90–123.

<sup>145</sup> Ulrike Wiethaus, “Female Authority and Religiosity in the Letters of Katharina Zell and Caritas Pirckheimer,” *Mystics Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1993): 123–35.

according to the infused norm given to me by God through His spirit.”<sup>146</sup> She does not consider her actions of piety or faithfulness as necessarily customary to the female sex but employs nongendered language by referring to these virtues as norms “infused” by God.

Katharina works within her gendered barriers through complete loyalty to male reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and of course her husband, Matthias Zell. As Wiethaus explains, Schütz Zell’s distinctive perception of separation from other women is bolstered by this unwavering allegiance to the male reformers.<sup>147</sup> This perspective demonstrates that despite all that Katharina does in engaging in theological debates of her time, still sees herself as an exception. She is shaped and formed by the ideas about women and their bodies and capabilities. She writes directly to women to encourage them, but in the same breath recognizes courage as ‘manly’ and not characteristic of women. On the other hand, Katharina also uses feminine language to talk about God, alluding to the idea that some of God’s best, caring attributes are feminine. Like Luther, Katharina’s ideas and actions are also contradictory.

Katharina’s work and theology is in itself a pushback against the claims of Luther, Augustine, and Aquinas that argue women should remain as homemakers and mothers - or in the case of Augustine and Aquinas - they should pursue the holiest calling of celibacy. However, that Katharina ventures to write about and interpret Scripture publicly - and is respected for it - rivals the Aquinian and Augustinian thinking that a woman’s nature would inhibit her from asserting spiritual authority.

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<sup>146</sup> Ulrike Wiethaus, “Female Authority and Religiosity in the Letters of Katharina Zell and Caritas Pirckheimer.” 128.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 128.

## *Argula Grumbach*

Like Katharina Zell, Argula Grumbach defended her obligation to speak and write publicly on theological matters with Scripture. Peter Matheson writes that Argula von Grumbach is one of the most visible women involved in the European Protestant reformations.<sup>148</sup> She is one of the few women from the Reformation era from whom we have a cohesive collection of letters. She was noble, educated, and effectively ran the Von Grumbach household. Similarly to Zell, von Grumbach also evoked feminine images of God and underscored the inclusiveness of women in the biblical text. As Pak explains, by evoking feminine biblical images, von Grumbach modeled gender-inclusive exegesis.<sup>149</sup> She also publicly spoke out against injustices, justifying her authoritative stances with Protestant theology which necessitated that anyone and everyone speak out against discrimination.

It was, in fact, a fierce controversy that led to the Argula's rise to fame throughout Germany in 1523. Von Grumbach befriended a student, Arascius Seehofer, who had been studying under Luther in Wittenberg. Arascius returned to his school, the University of Ingolstadt, and was accused of spreading evangelical, protestant opinions amongst his peers. Consequently, Arascius was denounced, imprisoned, and forced to recant his views

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<sup>148</sup> Peter Matheson, "Argula von Grumbach (1492–1554/57): A Woman with the Word," in *Women Reformers of Early Modern Europe: Profiles, Texts, and Contexts*, edited by Kirsi I. Stjerna. (1517 Media, Fortress Press, 2022), 13–22.

<sup>149</sup> Sujin G. Pak, "Three Early Female Protestant Reformers' Appropriation of Prophecy as Interpretation of Scripture." 90–123.

or risk the death penalty.<sup>150</sup> Outraged at this treatment of Aracsius, von Grumbach penned a letter to the faculty of the University of Ingolstadt:

But neither the pope, nor the Kaiser, nor the princes have any authority over the Word of God. You need not think you can pull God, the prophets, and the apostles out of heaven with papal decretals drawn from Aristotle, who was not a Christian at all. I am not unacquainted with the word of Paul that women should be silent in church [1 Tim 1:2] but, when no man will or can speak, I am driven by the word of the Lord when he said, “He who confesses me on earth, him will I confess and he who denies me, him will I deny” [Matt 10, Luke 9], and I take comfort in the words of the prophet Isaiah [3:12], “I will send you children to be your princes and women to be your rulers.”<sup>151</sup>

Argula asserts an authoritative tone using scripture as a basis for her reprimands against the University of Ingolstadt. She accused the university of appealing to Aristotelian philosophy above God and the prophets. Von Grumbach also appeals to the idea of the priesthood of all believers by declaring to the university that the pope and the Kaiser do not have authority over the Word of God. Argula’s appeals to reformation ideals bolster her rapport with the Reformers, gathering their support in her brigade against the Chancellor at Ingolstadt.

In her response to the faculty at Ingolstadt, von Grumbach demonstrates to her reader that she is well-read and researched in the scriptures. By addressing 1 Timothy 1:2, a classic passage used to argue against women in church leadership, she weaves logical credibility into her argument. She explains that while she is familiar with the passage, von Grumbach feels compelled by other passages in the Bible, specifically Matthew 10 and Luke 9 where Jesus explains that whoever confesses him on earth, he will confess. She also references the prophet Isaiah’s words when he says that he will send women to be rulers. Von Grumbach used strongly gendered examples of scripture to justify her obligation to

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>151</sup> Peter Matheson, “A Life in Letters: Argula von Grumbach (1492—1556/7),” *Early Modern Women* 4 (2009): 27–60.

speak out against this injustice. And as Peter Matheson explains in his *A Woman with the Word*, Argula's strategy worked. Von Grumbach's pamphlets resonated so strongly that only Luther and Karlstadt distributed so many editions at the time.<sup>152</sup> Von Grumbach's use of popular reformation ideals and her strategic use of scripture resulted in her attaining confidence and popularity amongst her male reformer counterparts.

Luther and Argula first began exchanging letters in 1520. Unfortunately, all of Argula's letters to Luther have been lost.<sup>153</sup> We still have some of Luther's letters to Argula, but the strongest indicators of his attitudes towards Argula are mainly found in his letters to friends and fellow reformers. In a letter to his friend, fellow German reformer, George Spalatin, addressed February 1st, 1524, Luther writes that he "[is] sending [Spalatin] the letters of Argula Von Grumbach, Christ's disciple, that you may see how angels rejoice over a sinful daughter of Adam, converted and made into a daughter of God."<sup>154</sup> From this correspondence, we see Luther viewed Argula as a "disciple of Christ" and an obedient virtuous daughter of God. It is important to highlight that Luther emphasized Argula's faithfulness to a fellow male counterpart. His support of Argula speaking out publicly to the University of Ingolstadt contradicts his views that, as a result of Eve's sin, women should remain in a subordinate position to men, not speaking out authoritatively in society. However, Luther makes an exception for Argula. He recognizes her as a capable force for

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<sup>152</sup> Matheson, "Argula von Grumbach (1492–1554/57): A Woman with the Word." 13–22.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>154</sup> Martin Luther, Georgiana Malcolm, and Karl Zimmermann, *Luther's Letters to Women*, Correspondence English Selections (London: Chapman & Hall, 1865), accessed November 26, 2022, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008733884>.

the Reformation work. I will explore this further below, showing how Luther also encouraged Schütz Zell's work in his letters.

While her Protestant supporters did not point to her gender to discredit her work, the Bavarian dukes at Ingolstadt and other dissenters were not so gracious. The chancellor, Leonard von Eck described von Grumbach as a *teufelin*, a female devil.<sup>155</sup> Others remained anonymous and hid behind rhymes and cartoons, referring to Argula as “Argy Bargy Grumbach” even going as far as to say that her sympathy for “the curly-haired Arascius suggested she was “on heat, perhaps...for this eighteen-year old chap.”<sup>156</sup> In these insults, we see remnants of the ever-pervasive and potent philosophy of Aristotle and Augustine. Augustine's idea that women were predisposed to be more sexually tempting and promiscuous underscores these insults against von Grumbach and her intentions. As Ulrike Zitzsperger mentions in her article, *Mother, Martyr and Mary Magdalene: German Female Pamphleteers and their Self-images*, women like von Grumbach who participated in the Reformation debates, had to justify their lay status, their reasons for involvement, and their ability to engage in public debate.<sup>157</sup> Zitzsperger hypothesizes that women like Zell and Grumbach needed to go beyond acknowledging that they were aware of Paul's writings or that they wrote because no other man would; she argues that female lay pamphleteers developed ‘explanatory’ self-images which became more and more complex the longer the women wrote. Women in the Reformation era needed to develop personal narratives that bolstered their credibility with the public. While these women were able to utilize certain

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<sup>155</sup> Peter Matheson, “Argula von Grumbach (1492–1554/57): A Woman with the Word,” 13-22.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>157</sup> Ulrike Zitzsperger, “Mother, Martyr and Mary Magdalene: German Female Pamphleteers and Their Self-Images,” *History* 88, no. 3 (2003): 379–392.



avenues to attain public authority, they had to jump through hoops that their male counterparts did not.

### *John Calvin on Women*

Today, John Calvin is most widely known for the system of theology which bears his name, its strong doctrines of predestination, God's absolute sovereignty in the salvation of the human souls of the 'elect,' and the eternal damnation of individuals outside the elect. During the Protestant Reformation, Calvin was a reformer in Geneva. Not much is known about his personal life, but we do know that in 1540, Calvin finally caved to his friends' pressure to marry.<sup>158</sup> However, she died in 1549 and he never remarried. Unlike Luther, he did not write extensively to or about his wife and we know little of their relational dynamic.

Beginning in 1536, Calvin began to publish his reformation work and by 1541, Calvin headed the Geneva Church and introduced new forms of church government and liturgy. He continued to write extensively on exegetical works like the Commentary on Genesis, the work we will look to for his ideas on the creation, the fall, and its implications on gender relations in the church.

Aligning with Aquinas and Augustine, Calvin views women as only partial bearers of the *Imago Dei*. On the creation of humans, Calvin says:

Let us make man; nor was it necessary to be repeated in creating the woman, who was nothing else than an accession to the man. Certainly, it cannot be denied, that the woman also, though in the second degree, was created in the image of God;

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<sup>158</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, trans. John King, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1847), accessed November 26, 2022, <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01/calcom01.iv.html>.

whence it follows, that what was said in the creation of the man belongs to the female sex.<sup>159</sup>

In this analysis, Calvin affords women the image of God. However, he holds that women only hold the image of God in the second degree. As Nico Vorster explains, Calvin suggests that women are created in the image of God only so far as internal, spiritual affairs are concerned.<sup>160</sup> However, in the matter of external affairs, since women are subjected to men, women do not reflect the glory of God to the same degree as men. All other attributes that are given to man during creation, Calvin claims, are also bestowed upon women.

Effectively, Calvin holds that men and women are equal in spirit. This differs from Aristotle's point that women's spiritual and bodily weaknesses were intertwined. While Calvin believed women were physically weaker than men, he afforded them equal spiritual strength. In her *Gender Equality and Gender Hierarchy in Calvin's Theology*, Mary Potter affirms that although Calvin "grants women the same created dignity as men, central to his theology is the "uncompromising view that women are innately inferior to men."<sup>161</sup> For example, we know that Calvin declared women created in the image of God, "though to a lesser degree." This 'lesser degree' of God's image, manifests itself in Calvin's prescribed gender hierarchy. While Calvin attempts to offer spiritual equality to women, his views are ambivalent. He fundamentally believes that women are made in the image of God, but to a

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<sup>159</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1847.

<sup>160</sup> Nico Vorster, "John Calvin on the Status and Role of Women in Church and Society," *Journal of Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (2017).

<sup>161</sup> Mary Potter, "Gender Equality and Gender Hierarchy in Calvin's Theology," *Signs* 11, no. 4 (1986): 725–739.

lesser degree than men. This view is similar to Aristotle's view in *Politics* that women are able to be rational and virtuous, but always to a lesser extent than men.

Calvin continues by explaining the role of women in marital relations. He explains:

Now, since God assigns the woman as a help to the man, he not only prescribes to wives the rule of their vocation to instruct them in their duty, but he also pronounces that marriage will really prove to men the best support of life. We may therefore conclude that the order of nature implies that the woman should be the helper of the man.<sup>162</sup>

With this explanation, Calvin affirms that a woman's God-ordained role is to be the helper of a man in marriage. It is in a marriage that men will realize that their best support in life comes from women. He adds that due to the order of nature, that is the manner in which man and woman were made, woman holds the role of helper of man. In this statement, Calvin does not assert that women are necessarily inferior to men, but he does affirm that their God-ordained calling is to be the wife and helper of man. This perspective aligns with Luther's anti-monastic views. Reformers sought to elevate marriage as the highest calling and abolish the idea that chastity or monastic living was a viable option for the Christian. While similar to Luther, an important distinction is that Calvin views the subordination of women to be fundamental to their very nature. He saw women's submission to their husbands as good and God-ordained. While Luther acknowledged that women were weaker than men pre-Fall, he did not so heavily emphasize women's subjugation to men before the Fall and emphasized women's freedom and agency prior to Eve eating the fruit.

Similar to Aquinas, Calvin viewed the creation of women as God-ordained, intentional, and purposeful. He differs from Aquinas in his analysis that woman is given to

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<sup>162</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1847.

man as a companion and not just a child-bearer. In his commentary, Calvin distinguishes between the pre-fall and post-fall dynamic between man and woman:

The vulgar proverb, indeed, is, that she is a necessary evil; but the voice of God is rather to be heard, which declares that woman is given as a companion and an associate to the man, to assist him to live well. I confess, indeed, that in this corrupt state of mankind, the blessing of God, which is here described, is neither perceived nor flourishes; but the cause of the evil must be considered, namely, that the order of nature, which God had appointed, has been inverted by us...and both, with one consent, would cultivate a holy, as well as friendly and peaceful intercourse.<sup>163</sup>

Effectively, Calvin is replacing the proverb that woman is a “necessary evil” with the view of woman as a necessary “companion and associate to man.”<sup>164</sup> Calvin explains that women hold the role of assisting men to live well. He credits the inversion of God’s desired plan to the fall. He says that if creation had remained in its pre-fall state, harmony would prevail in marriage. It is important to note that Calvin uses the first person ‘us,’ meaning humanity in general, to describe how nature became inverted. In this analysis of Genesis, Calvin does not point fingers at who sinned first or blame Eve for the entrance of sin into the world. Nico Vorster also draws out the idea that Calvin, unlike some of his contemporaries, does not view Eve as more culpable for the fall.<sup>165</sup> This difference is significant because it supports Calvin’s claim of spiritual equality between the two sexes.

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<sup>163</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1847.

<sup>164</sup> Mary Potter, “Gender Equality and Gender Hierarchy in Calvin’s Theology,” 725–739.

<sup>165</sup> Nico Vorster, “John Calvin on the Status and Role of Women in Church and Society.”

Like Luther, Calvin also writes on the importance of the structure of the domestic household, demonstrating again, Lyndal Roper's idea of the Holy Household in action.<sup>166</sup> In his commentary on Genesis, Calvin describes the ideal order of the household:

For if the integrity of man had remained to this day such as it was from the beginning, that divine institution would be clearly discerned, and the sweetest harmony would reign in marriage; because the husband would look up with reverence to God; the woman in this would be a faithful assistant to him.

If man had not sinned, marriage, a divine institution, would be perfectly harmonious. This harmony would be maintained by the hierarchy of man submitting to God, and woman submitting to men. Again, this hierarchy has resulted from the idea of the priesthood of all believers. Prior to the Reformation, the priests submitted to God's authority, and both men and women submitted to the authority of the priest.<sup>167</sup> Both Calvin and Luther emphasize in their writings that now the ideal spiritual hierarchy exists within the domestic sphere, with men presiding over the spiritual development of women.

Although Calvin holds that men and women are created spiritually equal, Calvin does not think this equality translates into marriage roles. However, unlike Aquinas and Augustine, Calvin emphasizes the relational aspect of marriage. Calvin underscores that ideally, marriage should be filled with consent, peace, and harmony. However, he does constrain women to their 'God-ordained' role as helpers to their husbands. For instance, he explains:

On this main point hangs another, that women, being instructed in their duty of helping their husbands, should study to keep this divinely appointed order. It is also the part of men to consider what they owe in return to the other half of their kind,

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<sup>166</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*.

<sup>167</sup> Beth Allison Barr, "Three's a Crowd: Wives, Husbands, and Priests in the Late medieval Confessional." In *A Companion to Pastoral Care in the Late Middle Ages (1200-1500)*, ed. R.J. Stansbury. (Boston: 2010 Brill), 213-234.

for the obligation of both sexes is mutual, and on this condition is the woman assigned as a help to the man, that he may fill the place of her head and leader.<sup>168</sup>

Here, again, Calvin reiterates the idea that women helping their husbands is a divinely appointed order, that is not a result of the fall. We know that in contrast, in the Middle Ages, the virtue of chastity was often elevated above marriage. For instance, Hildegard, Margery, and Julian of Norwich chose to pursue celibacy, transcending the confines of their gender and attaining holiness through chastity. However, some of the themes Calvin refers to in this analysis represent continuity from the medieval era. Calvin explains that men should consider how they can care for and support their wives, once again emphasizing that the obligation of both sexes is mutual. Potter also highlights Calvin's insistence on the equality of women and men in conjugal rights and responsibilities.<sup>169</sup> This emphasis on conjugal rights represents a continuance of medieval ideas in Calvin's writings. Calvin does not distinguish between the importance of the role of the man and the woman's assigned role. However, he does give man the role of leadership by explaining that the obligation for man is to fill the place of a woman's head and leader. In contrast to Aquinas and Augustine, Calvin emphasizes the complementary nature of the two sexes. He argues that men should not abuse their power over women, but rather women and men should exist in a peaceful hierarchical marriage with men presiding over women.

Calvin removes the blame for the fall from Eve, but still manages to impose subjugation upon Eve and all other women. Calvin continues to underscore this spiritual equality of men and women even in his discussion of the fall. He states:

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<sup>168</sup> John Calvin, 1847, *Commentary on Genesis*.

<sup>169</sup> Mary Potter, "Gender Equality and Gender Hierarchy in Calvin's Theology."

One thing more is to be noted, that, when the woman is here called the help of the man, no allusion is made to that necessity to which we are reduced since the fall of Adam; for the woman was ordained to be the man's helper, even although he had stood in his integrity.<sup>170</sup>

Eve was created prior to the fall to be Adam's helper, and as Calvin argues, to be subject to Adam. Here, Calvin reiterates the idea that a woman is called the help of the man not on account of the fall, but because God ordained it that way. However, in this analysis, Calvin labels the fall as 'the fall of Adam.' He does not label the fall as caused by Eve. Calvin continues to underscore this spiritual equality of men and women even in his discussion of the fall, yet he still subjects women to men.

Calvin continues to absolve Eve from the guilt of the fall in his exegesis. He further expounds:

Because the desire of knowledge is naturally inherent in and happiness is supposed to be placed in it; but Eve erred in not regulating the measure of her knowledge by the will of God. And we all daily suffer under the same disease, because we desire to know more than is right, and more than God allows.<sup>171</sup>

Calvin explains that Eve erred in not regulating her desire for knowledge. He does not attribute her decision to her weak mind or body but instead explains that everyone, man and woman experience this same temptation daily. This shared temptation contrasts with Aristotle's views of bodily weakness, who believed women were more prone to falling into their fleshly desires. Calvin insists on the spiritual equality of women and men in his doctrine of sin and "[rejects] the views that differentiate between women and men as sinners." Calvin argues that the disease of sin has affected all of mankind. So unlike Luther,

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<sup>170</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*.

<sup>171</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*.

Calvin adheres to the idea that God has ordained the subjugation of women prior to the fall. However, his conclusions about women's role in society and the household are largely similar to Luther's. With his exegesis, he still keeps women from power, just with a different logic than Luther.

Calvin's biblical exegesis in his commentaries is ambivalent. While in his analysis of Genesis, he affirms the equality of men and women, he confirms the submission of women to men in the Christian tradition.<sup>172</sup> While he does affirm the spiritual equality of men and women, he leaves in place the traditional gendered hierarchy that has existed in Christian patriarchy for thousands of years. It is important to note how Calvin's reasons for women's submission to male authority differ from those reasons given by medieval and Ancient thinkers. Calvin does not relate spiritual weakness to women's physical or bodily weakness, like Augustine and Aquinas reference. Like Potter mentions, Calvin's affirmation of the "radical spiritual equality of women and men does represent an advance" over the single, hierarchical perspective of celebrated Renaissance philosophers.<sup>173</sup> Calvin ascribes to female submission because he believes this is God's ordained way of creation. He views it as an example of God's providence, and not the spiritual or bodily weakness of women. This represents a shift from thinkers like Aquinas and Augustine who barred women from power on the grounds that women were spiritually and intellectually deficient compared to men. Calvin believed women were spiritually equal to men and also capable of intellect, but also believed that in His divine providence, God ordained them to live under man's authority.

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<sup>172</sup> Mary Potter, "Gender Equality and Gender Hierarchy in Calvin's Theology," 725–39, 737.

<sup>173</sup> Potter, "Gender Equality and Gender Hierarchy in Calvin's Theology." 725–39.



## *Conclusion*

In this chapter we have analyzed the interactions between authoritative male voices and powerful women during the Reformation era. We have observed Luther and Calvin's theology on women and have analyzed how Luther's later ideas shifted after years of marriage and fatherhood. In her doctoral dissertation, Sini Mikkola explores whether Luther's perspectives shifted according to historical or textual contexts. She outlines the importance of analyzing not only his textual theories but also his attitudes toward women in practical, real-life situations.<sup>174</sup> We have seen that in their writings, Calvin and Luther hold tightly to their views that women are to be subordinate to men in all facets of society. However, in Luther's direct interactions with powerful women in the Reformation like Argula von Grumbach and Katharina Zell, he appears to be tolerant of their transgressions from their proper roles in support of the reformer's theological ideas.

For example, we know Katharina Zell as a rare example of a woman entering the theological and scholastic realm, writing extensively on a broad range of subjects. Based on Luther's claim in his writings that women should not exert any sort of authority over men due to the curse on Eve after the fall, it follows that Luther would have discouraged her from her ventures into theological writings. However, he wrote to Katharina Schütz Zell in December 1524, five months after Schütz Zell had published her first work with doting words of encouragement.<sup>175</sup> He writes:

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<sup>174</sup> Sini Mikkola, "In Our Bodies the Scripture Becomes Fulfilled': Gendered Bodiliness and the Making of the Gender System in Mature Luther's Anthropology (1520–1530)" (Presented at the Ph.D. thesis, Helsinki, Finland: University of Helsinki, 2017).

<sup>175</sup> Unfortunately, Katharina's letter which Luther responds to, was lost, so we do not know the full picture of this correspondence.

To the virtuous lady, Katharin Schützn, my dear sister and friend in Christ, in Strassburg. Grace and peace in Christ! My dear! That God has so richly given you his grace so that you not only personally see and are acquainted with His kingdom, which is concealed from so many people, but also that He has given you such a husband, through whom you daily and unceasingly are better able to learn...<sup>176</sup>

Luther addresses Katharina as virtuous and a dear sister and friend in Christ. He addresses her as his equal and does not admonish her for speaking and writing on ecclesiastical matters. Instead, he praises her for her ability to discern and be acquainted with the Kingdom of God. Luther does reference her husband, but not with an admonishing tone. He instead speaks of her husband as a source of learning for Katharina, which aligns with his idea of the Holy Household and the argument that men are responsible for their wives' spiritual nourishment.

However, in a separate letter, Luther engages in a theological discussion with Katharina, demonstrating that he believed her alone to be capable of intellectual debate. He wrote to her on the difference between divine love and human love. He attempts to comfort her with a reminder that "love will have the upper hand with us."<sup>177</sup> Most importantly, he does not address Katharina as simply a wife but addresses her with "meine liebe frau" (my dear woman), words that signify equality and respect.<sup>178</sup> While Luther's writings may indicate that he did not believe women as equally capable of reason and intellect, his interactions with Katharina proved that in practice he made exceptions.

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<sup>176</sup> Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*. 56.

<sup>177</sup> Martin Luther, Georgiana Malcolm, and Karl Zimmermann, *Luther's Letters to Women*, 14.

<sup>178</sup> Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women*, 56.

Luther's writings on marriage also do not perfectly align with his real-life marriage with Katie von Bora. For example, he famously addresses his wife, Katie von Bora as "Herr Katharina" and even admits "my wife can persuade me anything she pleases, for she has the government of the house in her hands alone."<sup>179</sup> As Ruth Tucker underscores, Luther emphasized male headship, but with Katie, he had a marriage of relative equality, frequently demonstrating mutual decision-making in his letters with her. In practice, Luther exhibited a less strict position on the issue of female subjugation. Luther's flexibility demonstrates how theory and practice impact each other. When Luther encounters capable women like Zell and Grumbach, he must account for how or why these women can effectively push back against his idea about their bodies and capabilities. So while Luther's writings condemn female leadership in the home and society, the reality of his life reflects a more complicated position.

However, Luther's theology, in comparison to Calvin, also provides more flexibility for women. Because he believed in the equality of women and men prior to the fall, it follows that he would be more likely to be supportive of his female counterparts like Katharina Zell. One important qualifier to Katharina's specific situation was that Luther knew her husband, Matthew Zell, was in full support of Katharina's endeavors. Had Matthew publicly spoken out against his wife's theological ventures, Luther would almost certainly not have been as cordial with Katharina. However, we can recall that Luther addressed Schütz Zell individually without reference to her married status in his second letter to her, indicating that he viewed her as individually capable apart from her husband. Additionally, Argula von Grumbach was also married and supported by her husband.

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<sup>179</sup> Ruth Tucker, *Katie Luther, First Lady of the Reformation : The Unconventional Life of Katharina von Bora* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2017).

However, we know von Grumbach was outspoken and radical while speaking out about the injustices at the University of Ingolstadt. Her behavior also did not reflect the traditional, male-headed, hierarchical model that Luther proposed in his writings. Nevertheless, Luther supported and encouraged von Grumbach, speaking highly of her in his correspondence with his fellow male reformers, showing again his flexibility on gender hierarchy.

While we do not have large records of Calvin's interactions with women, we can look at how strictly he enforced his theology in Geneva. As Jeffrey Watt notes, once the Reformed faith was solidly established in Geneva, Calvin did not support an active role for women in spreading the faith and certainly disapproved of them proselytizing in public.<sup>180</sup> For example, he writes a letter to a fellow reformer in Geneva about a "contentious encounter" with Marie Dentière in 1546, a former nun who was keen on preaching in her local community in Geneva. It did not matter to Calvin that Dentière was married, living in proper relational harmony with her husband. He explains that Dentière "complained about [our] tyranny, that it was no longer permitted for just anyone to chatter on about anything at all."<sup>181</sup> With this letter, Calvin showed that even if a woman were in proper alignment with Reformed ideas, he did not approve of women publicly sharing their faith. Unlike Luther, Calvin did not demonstrate such flexibility in his written ideals in his public encounters with women.

Assessing Luther from the dual perspective of theory and practice is feasible as we have an extensive account of Luther's practice, his behavior, and his treatment of the women in his life. Calvin on the other hand, as Merry Wiesner-Hanks puts it, was

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<sup>180</sup> Jeffrey R. Watt, "Women and Religious Expression in Calvin's Geneva," in *Embodiment, Identity, and Gender in the Early Modern Age* (Routledge, 2020).

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

“thoroughly reticent” when it came to his interactions with women<sup>182</sup> While we do not have the same volume of documented encounters between Calvin and women, we can look to his governance of Geneva as an indicator of how, in practice, Calvin treated spiritually authoritative women. For instance, he publicly confronted Dentiére, an outspoken former nun, when she attempted to proselytize in Geneva. However, as many of Luther’s interactions with women were in private or in writing to a friend, Luther’s interactions and Calvin’s cannot be compared on the same grounds. What we can conclude about Luther is that his later writings reflected a more nuanced, complex view of women. In the time between his earlier writings on Genesis and his later writings, he married, corresponded with, and affirmed women in authoritative positions in Reformation work. In Luther’s life, his actions towards women were not always consistent with his writings on women. In Calvin’s life, his writings are ambivalent. However, we can see that in his life, at least in the governing of Geneva, he was inflexible with his idea that women should not exert spiritual teaching or authority in any way over men.

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<sup>182</sup> Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women*, 52.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

This thesis has traced three strands through the history of Western Christianity. First, I analyzed to what extent ancient philosophy from Aristotle and ideas about women's bodies influenced Christian thinkers on interpretations of Genesis and women's physical and spiritual inferiority in the medieval and Reformation eras. Secondly, I explored the ways in which Christian women circumvented these ideas and paved their own paths to ministry and spiritual authority. Finally, I considered the ways in which male theologians reshaped their ideas after interacting with capable women. In doing so, I argued that encounters with women do not radically shift the thinking of these men. However, when these male theologians are faced with women who directly challenge their conceptions of what women are capable of, they make exceptions and support these women and their work. Thus, the line between theory and practice is not sharply drawn but is blurred. Theory affects practice, but the practice also has challenged and shaped theory.

For instance, Katharina Schütz Zell and Hildegard's writings are deeply grounded in traditional theology that says women should be subordinate to men based on their physical weakness. According to their published works, Schütz Zell and Hildegard even believe that members of their sex should be subordinate and silent. However, they saw that the present reality necessitated action. Lutheran theories and Reformation ideals on the role of women infiltrated Schütz Zell and Grumbach's writings, however, these women acted and spoke and wrote anyway.

What we have seen is writers, pastors, and theologians do not write commentaries and sermons in a vacuum. When women demonstrate that they are indeed capable thinkers

and speakers, men are faced with the reality that their written words and thoughts about female capabilities do not align with reality. Personal relationships, rather than theology, often more accurately reflect an individual's own beliefs.

For instance, in the life of Augustine and the works of Augustine we see a discord between his written beliefs and his public actions. While Augustine draws on much of Aristotle's misogynistic scholarship, arguing that women's subjugation results due to her deficient intellect and body and the idea that women do not partake in the full *imago dei*, his relationship with his mother do not reflect strong adherence to this belief. He admiringly refers to his mother as a "virtual oracle of pure Christian piety," after her participation in his all-male philosophical discussion. He alludes to her intelligence by saying that her words and thoughts appeared to flow from a "divine source." Augustine makes exceptions to his own theology in the case of his mother. He recognized her as being able to contribute to intellectual discussion and views her as virtuous. He fails to follow his own warning to regard all women "whether a wife or a mother" as "Eve the temptress that we must beware of."<sup>183</sup> Augustine makes exceptions for his own mother but also speaks highly of Perpetua. Augustine spoke of Perpetua's bravery and virtue in her martyrdom. He cites her as an exemplar for his congregation to follow. While Augustine maintains a consistent perspective of women in his writings, his interactions with real women in life reflect that his actual beliefs were more ambivalent.

Luther's life and scholarship also display a similar pattern. In his formal commentaries and treatises, he is mostly fixed in his mindset regarding women and their capabilities. However, his personal relationships and later sermons reveal a more complex

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<sup>183</sup> Luther, 1546, *Commentary on Genesis*.

reality. For instance, he addresses Katharina Zell with high regard in his correspondence with her. He also celebrates the work of Argula von Grumbach in his correspondences to his fellow male reformers. It is important to note that Schütz Zell and von Grumbach otherwise fit into Luther's ideal role for a woman, as they were wives. However, while they were wives, they were outspoken and public with their work. We also know that from Luther's correspondence to Schütz Zell, he addressed her using a title that was typically used amongst friends, emphasizing how Luther recognized her as an equal.

Additionally, in his writings, Luther maintained his stance on the hierarchical aspect of marriage. Yet once again, his marriage with Katharina von Bora reflected a more complex application of these ideas. Luther referred to Katharina in terms of equality. He refers to her as effectively running the "government of the house," a marked difference from his proposed domestic household with the man at the head of the domestic government. So while Luther's writings condemn female leadership at home, his relationship with Katharina von Bora reflected a more complicated position. It is also after a decade of marriage with Katharina that Luther composes a revised *Commentary on Genesis*. While it is impossible to prove a causal link between his marriage and his revised opinions on Genesis, his later commentary reflects more positive views of Eve and poses that the subjection of women was a result of the fall. Luther's life and theology do not align with each other. This disharmony in his ideas and his actions demonstrates how in reality Luther made exceptions for strong women who directly challenged his theology.

The life and work of Calvin and Aquinas display a different pattern than Augustine and Luther. We can recall that Aquinas spent a large portion of his life living in monasteries or living with monks. He learned under Albertus Magnus, a fellow Aristotelian scholar, and



was largely sheltered from lay or religious women. We know that Aquinas lived a century after Hildegard and did not engage with her works or the idea of a learned, intelligent woman being capable of spiritual authority. Additionally, Aquinas's stance on women in his formal writings did not significantly shift throughout his life. From his *Scriptum super Sentiis* to his *Summa*, Aquinas maintains consistency in his theology of women. Aquinas does not make exceptions for exemplar women like St. Augustine and Luther.

Although heavily opposed to monasticism Calvin kept his domestic sphere very private and closed off from the public sphere. We recall that Calvin married begrudgingly, at his friend's constant pestering, in 1540.<sup>184</sup> His wife, Idelette died in 1549 and Calvin never remarried. We do not know much about their relational dynamic and Calvin does not refer to their marriage in his published writings on women. Additionally, we do not have many records of correspondence between Calvin and women. Thus, for this thesis, using Wyatt's article, I analyzed one of Calvin's letters to his fellow reformer on Denti re proselytizing in Geneva. Calvin's actions remained consistent with his writings on women. He repeatedly writes that women should not preach or speak publicly, even if it is supporting the cause of the Reformed Church. His treatment of Denti re aligns with his writings as he admonished Denti re for speaking publicly. Calvin's actions and his writings are largely consistent with each other. Unlike St. Augustine and Luther who are flexible in their implementations of theology, Calvin's actions align with his words.

What we have found over the course of this thesis is that regardless of what men say they can do, women know what they are capable of and find ways to influence and lead in their communities. Even while medieval male theologians ignored women in their

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<sup>184</sup> Fran ois Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

writings, religious fervor spread amongst women like Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich. Although Katharina Schütz Zell and Argula von Gromabch were aware of Luther's writings about a woman's proper role in society as a silent housewife, they publicly spoke out and composed letters and theological treatises. We have also seen that the treatment of women in men's theology does not necessarily progressively improve over time. Rather, theology shifts with education and experience. These stories of men and their ideas and women and their reactions to men's ideas tell an important story for today's theologians and church leaders. When theology is challenged by real, flesh and blood servants of the church, it is reshaped and revised. Theory bends to practice. Theology is informed by life. It is for this reason that it is important to include women and other historically marginalized groups in these conversations of theology and church leadership. A group of diverse voices provides a stronger, more all-encompassing account of the human experience. A comprehensive understanding of the human experience increases the likelihood that the decisions being made are for the benefit of all.

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