

“HOW TO BEHAVE IN THE HOUSHOLD OF GOD” INSIGHTS FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

1. “Women and the Church”

The title of this conference is “Exercising Authority: Women and the Church.” I’d like to begin by drawing your attention to the conference subtitle, namely, “Women and the Church.” What are we talking about when we speak of women and the church? Thankfully, I think it’s safe to assume that everyone here knows what a woman is, although as you know, we live at a time in which knowledge of what a woman is can no longer be taken for granted in the world around us. Not many years ago, who would have thought that there would possibly be a documentary made entitled “What Is a Woman?” that would document all sorts of serious adults who would be totally incapable of answering that question?

Nevertheless, again, I trust that everyone here knows what a woman is, so let’s consider instead the final word of that subtitle, “Women and the Church.” What is the “church”? In its basic sense, the word “church” (Greek *ἐκκλησία*) simply refers to an assembly or gathering together of people. In the Greco-Roman world of biblical times, for example, the legislative assembly of eligible citizens was an *ἐκκλησία*, a “church” in English. Since *ἐκκλησία* is a *general* term for an assembly of people, the NT writers often make it clear *which particular assembly* they’re talking about. For example, St. Paul writes “To the church (*ἐκκλησία*, i.e. “assembly”) of God that is in Corinth...” (1 Cor 1:2).¹ In other words, Paul makes it clear that he’s writing not just to any old assembly, but to the assembly which belongs to God and which is assembled in a particular geographical locale. To summarize: in Christian usage, the word “church” basically refers to the local gathering of Christians who have assembled for the Divine Service.²

Why does this matter? It matters when we return to the conference subtitle, “Women and the Church.” When we discuss women and the *church*, we’re talking about the place and role of women within a larger *assembly* of people that consists of many members. Since the church is an *assembly*, we can ask some of the same questions about it that we might ask of other assemblies. For example: is there any built-in order to the parts of the assembly when they come together? Is there any rhyme or reason to the functioning of its parts? Does it matter how the various parts of the assembly relate to one another, or not?

As we ponder these questions, it may be helpful to place ourselves outside the Christian context for a moment and consider a different kind of assembly such as the military. The military has a built-in order that’s necessary for its functioning. This is evident from the fact that the Greek word for “order,” *τάξις*, is originally a military term that means “drawing up in rank and file” or “battle array,” which suggests “many elements moving in harmony according to each element’s...assigned place in the general scheme.”³ The term *τάξις* can be used to refer to the ranking of soldiers in a military hierarchy, but also concretely to “the organisation [sic] of a unit in battle order, around its commander and under its standard. He usually led from the centre [sic]

¹ Unless otherwise noted, English translations of Scripture are taken from the ESV.

² The same idea lies behind our familiar term, “congregation.” The word explains itself: it refers to *the gathering of people* that has assembled in a particular place for the Divine Service. Note the basic definition of the church given in the Augsburg Confession: “It [the church] is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel” (AC VII:1).

³ David C. Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church: The Vision of St. John Chrysostom*, revised and expanded 20th anniversary edition (South Canaan, Pennsylvania, St. Tikhon’s Monastery Press, 2017), 75–76.

of front line for battle, with his soldiers around him.”⁴ In a military *τάξις*, the success of the unit depends on each soldier staying in his assigned place and doing his job. The orderly ranking and arrangement of the constituent parts do not make for the inferiority or inequality of some parts; rather, it actually enables the harmonious cooperation of the whole.⁵ One of the earliest Christian bishops outside the NT, Clement of Rome, elaborates on this point as he reflects on the ordering of the Christian assembly:

So let us serve as soldiers, brothers, with all seriousness under [God’s] faultless orders. Let us consider the soldiers who serve under our commanders—how precisely, how readily, how obediently they execute orders. Not all are prefects or tribunes or centurions or captains of fifty and so forth, but each in his own rank [*ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ τάγματι*] executes the orders given by the emperor and the commanders. The great cannot exist without the small, nor the small without the great. There is a certain blending in everything, and therein lies the advantage. Let us take our body as an example. The head without the feet is nothing; likewise, the feet without the head are nothing. Even the smallest parts of our body are necessary and useful to the whole body, yet all the members coalesce harmoniously and unite in mutual subjection, so that the whole body might be saved.⁶

From these examples, it is clear that the church, like any assembly of various parts, must have an order, a *τάξις* that allows for its proper functioning. As in the military, not everyone in the church has the same position or role, but these differences do not betray any inequality. Instead, this order provides for the beautiful, complementary functioning of the various parts of the assembly in one harmonious unit. But now we must go a step further. Since the church is an assembly, what can we say about its particular character? What *kind* of assembly is it, and what does this tell us about its various parts and the way they fit together? To answer these questions, we turn our attention to the language and practice of the earliest Christians, beginning with the NT itself.

2. The Church as “Body” and “Household”

What kind of order or *τάξις* characterizes the Christian assembly? The military is not the only example of *τάξις* in the world—Clement of Rome mentions the order of the human body, but there is also the order of day and night, the arrangement of the stars, the order of the seasons, and more in the natural world.⁷ In the NT, although military terms are occasionally used in reference to the church, the military order is not played out extensively in relation to the ordering of the Christian assembly. Two other types of orders, however, are prominent. The NT writers regularly

⁴ John W. Kleinig, “Ordered Community: Order and Subordination in the New Testament,” in *Women Pastors? The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective*, third edition, edited by Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 123–24.

⁵ According to Ford, Chrysostom’s concept of *τάξις* can be boiled down to two fundamental characteristics: “first, a general sense of the harmony/conciliarity of a variety of elements cooperating together; and second, a certain orderly ranking or hierarchy of the constituent parts, which in fact is crucial in enabling and promoting the harmonious cooperation of the various elements” (*Women and Men*, 75).

⁶ 1 Clement 37 (translation and Greek text taken from *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, third edition, edited and translated by Michael W. Holmes [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007], 94–95).

⁷ Chrysostom sees many “orders” in the world that are necessary for its well-being, ranging from orders in creation like those mentioned above, to the order of body and soul, the order of government, and even a certain order within the Godhead itself (see Ford, *Women and Men*, 75–91).

characterize the *τάξις* of the church by means of two primary images: 1) the human body, and 2) the household.

Let us consider the human body first. The comments of Clement of Rome that we heard above regarding the parts of the human body are no doubt based on St. Paul's language, in particular from 1 Corinthians 12. There, he writes to the Christians assembled in Corinth: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor 12:12, 27). Not all parts of the body are the same, and not all have the same function, yet each part and its unique function is necessary for the harmonious functioning of the whole body. Indeed, if the whole body were an eye, it would certainly see well, but it would not be able to hear or smell anything. Similarly, if the whole body were an ear, it would certainly hear well, but it would not be able to move or do any work with its hands. In fact, if all members of the body were the same and all did the same things, there would be no "body" at all. In his own words, Paul concludes: "If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body" (1 Cor 12:19–20).

The example of the human body demonstrates that an orderly hierarchy of parts and differences of function do not betray any ontological inferiority or inequality. The head, for example, sits in a position of authority on the top of the body and is given the function of governing the rest of the body. But even so, the head is merely one part of the body, and the other parts of the body are nothing other than *parts of the same body*. There is an obvious ontological identity among all its parts. Yet this ontological identity exists within a *τάξις*, an order, in which the parts are arranged in a particular way with unique functions. The fact that the hand cannot see doesn't make it inferior to the eye, just as the eye's inability to grasp anything doesn't make it inferior to the hand. This observation should help us understand that when we speak of different roles for men and women within the Christian assembly, our minds should not immediately jump to notions of inequality. For example, the notion that a prohibition against women reading the Scripture lessons within the Christian assembly betrays women's inferiority makes as little sense as the notion that the ear's inability to grasp anything makes it inferior to the hand. To take the example one notch further, it would make little sense to say that, in the name of equality between your feet and your eyes, your feet will now be given the ability to see. In reality, the ability to see wouldn't make your feet *equal* to your eyes—it would simply make them *identical with your eyes!* So, the *equality* of all the parts of the body is preserved, not by every part doing the same things, but by each part doing very well the things that it is uniquely suited to do. If we forget this, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that men and women can be made "equal" by ensuring that women do all the things that men do. But rather than elevating women and making them *equal* to men, such thinking practically threatens to *turn women into men* and to undermine any unique gifts that God has given to women *as women*.⁸

⁸ On this point, Paul Evdokimov writes: "Egalitarian education is gratifying, but provides no true instruction capable of introducing woman as woman into the human community. The need for equality makes woman aggressive, and it sets her up as a rival. Woman becomes the equal of man, but the potential of her specifically feminine affectivity exhausts itself, and she is in danger of losing her essence as a result" (*Woman and the Salvation of the World: A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Women* [Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994], 183). On a similar note, Anthony Esolen opines: "[T]he sexes are not interchangeable. For what is interchangeable is of no importance. I can interchange one battery in a robot for another, precisely because the particular battery does not matter. There is also no sense of beauty attached to what may be replaced without harm. We do not say, of an air by Mozart, that the beauty of a particular run of notes depends upon their being replaceable with any old run. We say

In the interest of time, let's move on to the other primary NT image for the Christian church, namely, the "household of God." Here, we turn again to St. Paul, who writes to Timothy: "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God..." (1 Tim 3:14–15). Here, the Christian assembly is simply equated with God's household. In another place, Paul addresses members of the church in Ephesus: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God..." (Eph 2:19–20).

Indeed, the language of the church as God's "household" is such a pervasive feature of early Christian vocabulary that it is simply assumed in the NT and rarely explained in detail. St. Paul writes to the Galatians: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal 6:10). When Paul gives instructions to Titus about the sort of men he should be appointing as elders (i.e., pastors) in every town, he says that "an overseer ["bishop," i.e., "pastor"], as God's steward, must be above reproach" (Titus 1:7). The word "steward" here is *οἰκονόμον* in the Greek, literally meaning "a household manager." That is to say, in the church, God is the Father of the household, but he appoints men as pastors to be his "household managers." In 1 Timothy, Paul draws out these implications even more explicitly. The correlation between the earthly household and the Christian assembly as God's household lies behind his insistence that an "overseer" (again, "bishop," i.e., "pastor") must "manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" (1 Timothy 3:4–5). The correspondence is clear: a man who does not manage his *earthly* household well cannot be expected to have better luck when it comes to managing *God's* household, the church.

St. Paul is not the only NT writer to speak in these terms. St. Peter writes in his first epistle: "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God" (1 Pt 4:17), meaning the church. Moreover, the explicit language of the church as "household" only scratches the surface of the NT's witness to this reality. Consider the fact that early Christians consistently thought of and referred to one another as "brothers" and "sisters." This language is no mere metaphor; it is not simply a nice way of saying that we all get along. For early Christians, to call someone a brother or sister was a way of identifying them as a fellow member of the *household of God*. It was a confession that through Holy Baptism, God has become *our Father*. Since in Baptism we have "put on Christ," we are now *identified with him* as "sons of God," and therefore we are truly brothers and sisters in relation to one another with God as our common Father.

The reality of household relationships even defines the way that St. Paul instructs Christians to relate to one another within the assembly: "Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity" (1 Tim 5:1–2). Ultimately, early Christians learned this way of speaking and thinking about one another from Jesus himself, who in more than one place states that the deepest reality of household relationships is found in the church, the community of his disciples. For example, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus stretches out his hand toward his disciples and proclaims, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (see Mt 12:48–50).⁹

instead that the art is so well crafted, we cannot imagine it otherwise" ("Sexual Being," in *Touchstone* [September/October 2021]: 28).

⁹ Many more examples could be given from the NT, such as John's frequent reference to the believers to whom he writes as "little children." Moreover, St. Paul refers to St. Timothy as his "child" in the faith no fewer than

As Christians today, we are certainly familiar with this biblical language of the church as God's household, but how often do we stop to consider deeply what it means? How often do we consider that when we "come to church," that is, when we gather with the Christian assembly in a given place, we are, in fact, gathering *as the household of God*, in which we relate to God as Father, to the pastor as his representative "household steward," and to one another as brothers and sisters? Allow me to suggest that, at a time when many earthly households are struggling to find the cohesion and order that allows them to function well *as a household*, and at a time when the very reality of "men and women" and therefore "brothers and sisters" is under attack, our congregations would do well to take this biblical language for the church very seriously. What does it mean, concretely, to assemble as God's household? As we have heard above, St. Paul assumes that there is a particular way in which "one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God." What then is this "way"?

3. Concrete Examples in the NT

We will seek to answer this question by way of a brief survey of the relevant NT data before attempting to draw a few conclusions. We turn first to 1 Timothy, the letter in which St. Paul speaks explicitly of the way one ought to behave in the household of God. In chapter 3, Paul tells Timothy that he hopes to come to him soon in person. However, in case he is delayed, he is "writing these things to [Timothy]" so that he "may know how one ought to behave in the household of God" even if he isn't there to deliver these instructions personally (1 Tim 3:14). When he says he is "writing these things" about behavior in the household of God, he's referring back to what he has just written, the block of text beginning with 1 Timothy 2:1 and going through 3:13. Paul has spent the last chapter and a half laying down specific instructions to the different members of God's "household." He begins with instructions for the men: "I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling" (1 Tim 2:8). This is how the men ought to behave in the household of God. The section concludes with standard expectations for the behavior of bishops and deacons in God's household (1 Tim 3:1–13).

In between come the instructions for the women: "[W]omen should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works. Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, the Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control" (1 Tim 2:9–15). In Paul's view, this is how women ought to behave in the household of God.

It may be helpful to attempt a summary at this point. Three main patterns of behavior emerge for women in God's household: 1) They are to adorn and decorate themselves with modesty and good works rather than costly clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics; 2) They are to remain

three times (see 1 Cor 4:17; 1 Tim 1:2; and 2 Tim 1:2); he refers to other individual Christians as his "children" (see Gal 4:19 and Philemon 1:10), and he even refers to himself as the "father" of entire assemblies of Christians through the gospel (see 1 Cor 4:14–15). Given the dominance of this "household" language for the Christian assembly in the NT, it is no wonder that the historic Christian denominations have traditionally referred to their pastors—those who represent God the Father as his "household managers" within the Christian assembly—with the honorary title, "father." Martin Luther implicitly recognizes the reality of the church as God's household when he explains that the fourth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," applies also to pastors or "spiritual fathers," that is, "those who govern and guide us by God's Word" (LC I:158).

quiet within the Christian assembly—an instruction that clearly does not prohibit women from singing hymns or congregational responses, but specifically from taking a position of leadership within the assembly, such as reading the Scriptures, preaching, and the like; and 3) The bearing and rearing of children is mentioned as the woman’s particular glory, here somewhat cryptically as the means of woman’s salvation. These three patterns of behavior seem to provide the basic NT understanding of the place of women within the order or *τάξις* of God’s household.

Indeed, these three patterns of behavior show up with remarkable consistency throughout the NT epistles, even if all three features do not always appear together. For example, in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul again instructs that “the women should keep silent in the churches [assemblies]. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says” (1 Cor 14:34). Unsurprisingly, this instruction is part of Paul’s larger concern that everything in the assembly be done “decently and in order [*κατὰ τάξιν*]” (1 Cor 14:40).

Several parallel passages speak more directly to women’s behavior in the domestic sphere, but contain nearly identical instructions. For example, to summarize Paul’s instructions in Titus, older women are to be reverent in behavior, teaching and training younger women in what is good, that is, to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, working at home, and submissive to their own husbands (see Titus 2:3–5). Even if these instructions pertain especially to home life, Paul certainly envisions a context—perhaps very naturally the Christian assembly—in which this godly training of younger women by older women would regularly take place. Similarly, St. Peter instructs wives to be subject to their own husbands, and to let their adorning be the imperishable beauty of good works and quiet submission to their husbands rather than flashy clothing and jewelry (see 1 Pt 3:1–6). Again, in Ephesians 5:22–24, wives are instructed to submit to their own husbands as to the Lord, in imitation of the church’s submission in everything to Christ, its head. In Colossians 3:18, the only specific instruction given to women is: “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” It is apparent that such instructions were extremely common features of apostolic catechesis when it was directed specifically to women.

4. Concrete Examples in the Post-Apostolic Church

In the concluding portion of my paper, I’d like to explore how the identity of the church as God’s household persisted in the consciousness and practice of the church of the first few centuries, and what insights we may be able to draw for today. A brief survey of evidence from early church orders, liturgies, and other writings makes one thing clear: if our culture is having a difficult time distinguishing between men and women, the church of the first few centuries—with its conviction that it gathered *as God’s household*—had no such difficulties.¹⁰ Indeed, the harmonious distinctiveness of men and women was practically reinforced week after week in the assembly, not only by way of teaching but also in the concrete practices of the church.

One early church order, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, provides an extended example. It begins by identifying the members of the church as those “who have received boldness to call the

¹⁰ In a survey of women’s roles in the history of the church, William Weinrich writes: “It is...evident that a distinction of functions between man and woman in the church relates in some way to actual distinctions in creation. Against the Gnostic, to maintain a distinction of male and female function was to confess a creation theology that respected the concrete, fleshly differences between man and woman” (“Women in the History of the Church: Learned and Holy, But Not Pastors,” in *Women Pastors? The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective*, third edition, edited by Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 189–90).

Almighty God Father,” and thus as “children of God” (4).¹¹ The next two chapters give unique instructions to men and then to women about how they ought to behave (5–11). The reality of the church as household (and body) is implicit in that the instructions to women address them as “our sisters and our daughters and our members” (11). Expectations follow for the men that are appointed as bishops or “heads” in every assembly (11). “Household” language is ubiquitous here. The bishop is “your father after God;” he “rules in the place of the Almighty” and is to be “honoured [sic] by you as God” (34). Each layman is to reflect on whether he loves other laymen, and also whether he “loves the bishop and honours and fears him as father and lord,” while the bishop is likewise asked whether he “loves the laity as his children, and cherishes and keeps them warm with loving care, as eggs from which young birds are to come” by way of teaching and admonishing, and, when necessary, rebuke (24).¹² There is an explicit reference to the “household” passage in 1 Timothy 3: “For if his [the bishop’s] household in the flesh withstand him and obey him not, now shall they that are without his house become his, and be subject to him?” (12). Again, we see that the bishop’s management of his “household in the flesh” is considered a prerequisite to his management of its corollary, the household of God or perhaps implicitly the “household of the Spirit.” Yet the *τάξις* of the church extends far beyond the bishop. The deacon is understood to stand “in the place of Christ,” while interestingly the deaconess is to be “honoured [sic] by you in the place of the Holy Spirit.” The presbyters are “in the likeness of the Apostles,” and even orphans and widows have their place in the *τάξις*: they are to be “reckoned by you in the likeness of the altar” (34). When the *Didascalia* describes the concrete reality of the worshipping assembly, it uses the language of Paul in 1 Corinthians 14, commanding that the assemblies be held “with all decent order.” What does this mean? In the *Didascalia*, this means first of all that the “brethren” have appointed places to sit within the assembly. The presbyters sit together with the bishop in their midst, the lay men sit in another “part of the house,” and the women sit in still another part. Furthermore, the young sit apart or stand if there is no room, and those advanced in years also sit apart. Why? The Lord “likened the Church to a fold,” and oxen, sheep, and goats lie down and rise up and feed “according to their families, and none of them separate itself from its kind” (50).

The arrangement of men and women in their own places was a common feature of early Christian assemblies. As a matter of fact, there are members at my congregation in MN who recall such a seating arrangement within their lifetimes. However, in the early church, this arrangement not only reflected the order of a household, but it also enabled the sharing of the “holy kiss” in a respectable manner, removing any possibility of the kiss presenting an opportunity for sexual gratification rather than being a holy kiss shared among the members of the Christian household. Although the “holy kiss” or the “kiss of peace” has fallen out of practice today, it was a regular feature of early eucharistic liturgies, being mentioned in the NT no fewer than five times. Another early church order, the *Apostolic Tradition* ascribed to Hippolytus, offers a representative example of instructions regarding this kiss: “Whenever the teacher ceases to give instruction the catechumens should pray by themselves, separated from the faithful, and the women should stand

¹¹ References to the *Didascalia* are to the page numbers of the translation of R. Hugh Connolly reprinted by CrossReach Publications (2016).

¹² See also the following section, in which the fatherly character of the bishop is identified with the duties of his office, in and through which the Father enlivens his Christian children: “But do you honour the bishops, who have loosed you from sins, who by the water regenerated you, who filled you with the Holy Spirit, who reared you with the word as with milk, who bred you up with doctrine, who confirmed you with admonition, and made you to partake of the holy Eucharist of God, and made you partakers and joint heirs of the promise of God” (37).

and pray by themselves. . . . The faithful should greet one another, the men with each other and the women with each other. They kiss each other on the mouth.”¹³

Early Christian texts also frequently repeat the biblical injunction requiring silence of women in the worshipping assembly.¹⁴ But it must be stressed again that such injunctions in no way reflect an attitude of inferiority regarding women. This was simply the good order by which the church, as a body and as the household of God, would function well. Women did not need to speak in the church in order to have an irreplaceable position within the Christian assembly. Many other avenues of service within the household were available to women, in particular ones that contributed to her fulfillment of the Pauline exhortation to be adorned with good works. Christian women were very active in honoring widows, visiting the sick, attending to the needy, caring for prisoners, managing their households as centers of productivity, and more.¹⁵ Indeed, the *Didascalia* finds such works of mercy rooted in the example of women in the gospels:

For our Lord and Saviour also was ministered unto by women ministers, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the daughter of James and mother of Jose [sic], and the mother of the sons of Zebedee, with other women beside. And thou also hast need of the ministry of a deaconess for many things; for a deaconess is required to go into the houses of the heathen where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick, and to minister to them in that of which they have need, and to bathe those who have begun to recover from sickness (61).

I would like to suggest that these patterns of behavior indicate that—returning to the image of the body—women’s place in the *τάξις* was simply understood to be more akin to the womb and the hands rather than the head. Women in the church had the role of nourishing the life that was born in the church and strengthening the bonds of love therein by their dedication to works of mercy. These works of mercy naturally found their most basic expression within the home by honor for the husband and love for the children, but they extended from there to all those in need, especially in places where men were not able to go. It is true that the head is responsible for governing and speaking for the body, and women are not given this place within the *τάξις*. But if the life begotten in the church were not nourished within the matrix of woman’s loving self-giving, the head would have no body to lead and no body for which it might speak. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that the *Didascalia* also speaks of the church in glowing terms as “the bride adorned for the Lord God” and as “your mother the Church, the living and lifegiving” (53).

In this connection, it is noteworthy that, with overwhelming regularity, admonition to proper behavior *precisely as husbands and fathers or wives and mothers* forms the basic catechesis offered to men and women by the apostles and early church orders in the subsequent centuries. Clearly, for the apostles and those after them, marriage and childbearing was the basic context in which the vast majority of Christians were expected to participate in the church’s life and learn to take up their crosses and follow Jesus. In view of this, might it not be the case that for both men and women, the most pressing question may not be what kind of position they may attain in the church, but first how they are receiving the apostolic catechesis related to family life? It is surely

¹³ 18:1–4 (translated by Alistair C. Stewart, second edition [Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2015], 124).

¹⁴ See Weinrich, “Women in the History of the Church,” 190.

¹⁵ See Alan Kreider’s summary of women’s roles in the early church in *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 104–06, although he mistakenly interprets certain aspects of these roles as a manifestation of women’s inferiority.

significant that, as we have seen, the apostle Paul considers the good management of a household to be a prerequisite to the bestowal of the management of God's church upon a father. Less well known, perhaps, is Paul's requirement in the same letter that those who are officially enrolled as widows in the church have previously given evidence of their faith within the domestic realm: the only widow to be enrolled is one who, among other things, has been "the wife of one husband," and has "a reputation for good works," has "brought up children," "shown hospitality," "washed the feet of the saints," "cared for the afflicted," and "devoted herself to every good work" (1 Tim 5:9b–10). What of the younger widows who are still of childbearing age? Paul writes: "I would have the younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander" (1 Tim 5:14).

Might we even go so far as to say that these persistent apostolic instructions regarding a woman's respect for her husband, her care and nurture of children, and her management of the home, constitute—at least to the greatest degree possible—her unique place within the *τάξις* of God's household? With this question, we may recall the earlier observation that the quest to make women do everything that men do has a tendency practically to turn women into men and erase the unique distinctiveness that God has given to women. Abigail Favale, a contemporary Roman Catholic scholar on gender issues, makes a similar point in a provocative essay entitled "Rethinking Women's Reproductive Health."¹⁶ She writes:

[M]y main contention is this: What is often presented as women's 'reproductive health' actually pathologizes natural biological realities that are unique to women, namely: fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth. There is an underlying, hidden premise at work in this paradigm of pathology, which prevails in both feminist rhetoric and the medical establishment: women, to be 'healthy' and 'free,' must function, biologically speaking, as much like men as possible. What is uniquely *female*, then, is pathologized, seen as a condition that needs to be treated, a problem that needs to be solved.

I would like to suggest that in the NT, the features that Favale identifies as *uniquely female*—the capacity for fertility and childbirth—far from being pathologized, are glorified and elevated, being filled with theological significance. Indeed, the Scriptures make it clear that the marriage between Christ and the church is what we might call "ultimate reality." Yet God has graciously given us concrete means by which ultimate reality may be manifested to us on earth, however dimly. And no means is more potent in this regard than that of married life. If the "ultimate reality" is the church's life-giving submission to Christ, her bridegroom, women have the unique capability to manifest this reality to the Christian assembly through their humble submission to their own husbands on earth. Indeed, just as a man is uniquely capable of manifesting God the Father and the man Christ Jesus to the Christian assembly in his own concrete maleness, so also a woman is uniquely capable of manifesting the submissive but life-giving receptivity of the church (understood as bride and mother) to the Christian assembly in her own concrete femaleness.

Far from demonstrating her inequality and inferiority, then, woman's capacity to conceive and bear life within her own body is her peculiar glory. And a true glory it is—children are of much more value than worldly business and bank accounts. They are, as John Chrysostom says, "our principal wealth."¹⁷ On this point, we conclude with the candid remarks of Alice von

¹⁶ Found at <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/rethinking-womens-reproductive-health/>, accessed 7/15/2024, 9:27 pm.

¹⁷ Quoted in Ford, *Women and Men*, 126.

Hildebrand given in an interview near the end of her life in 2022. When the interviewer asked, “So, is feminism a rejection of yourself as a woman?” von Hildebrand responded:

No. It is a systematic rejection or refusal to understand what is a woman’s mission... You can say that to be a male is an honor and to be a female is not. They’re not understanding that to conceive and to give birth to a child is something infinitely more important. ... [D]on’t forget that all accomplishments of men will be destroyed at the end of time, everything will be burned, but every woman who has given birth to a child came to eternity. And therefore, today, in my feeling, what is most important is for women to rediscover the beauty and greatness of their mission. I’m proud to be a woman. I have not chosen it, but I’m proud to be. I beg God every day, “Give me the grace to live up to my dignity as a woman.”¹⁸

To Christ be all the glory, now and forever.

¹⁸ Found at <https://crisismagazine.com/opinion/true-femininity-an-interview-with-alice-von-hildebrand>, accessed 7/15/2024, 10:57 pm.