



Tracing the Footsteps of Women in the Early Church: Their Role and Disengagement in Church History

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Abstract

Women played a crucial role in the development of the early church, yet their tangible contributions have often been ignored or hidden within the official narratives of church history. This article seeks to trace the roles of female congregants such as Phoebe, Priscilla, Lydia, and others who served as house church leaders, ministers, and missionary partners in early Christian communities. Through a historical-critical approach, engagement with primary and secondary literature, and contextual hermeneutical analysis, this study exposes the patriarchal bias embedded in church historiography and offers a theological correction. It is hoped that this research will provide a theological reflection for the contemporary church to be more inclusive of women's leadership, so that the legacy of early Christian women can inspire today's church to build a more just and equitable community.

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INTRODUCTION

Early church history is often filled with narratives of male figures such as Peter, Paul, John, and the Church Fathers.¹ However, in the New Testament texts, it is not only male figures who appear; female figures also played vital roles in the history of the early church, such as Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2), Priscilla (Romans 16:3-5), Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), and many others whose roles are only implied. Unfortunately, the official historical narrative often excludes or ignores their roles, thus creating a gender bias in the understanding of church history.² Therefore, this article is an attempt to explore more deeply how women were involved in the development of the early church and why this invisibility occurred.

¹ Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 10.

² Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 15.

Before discussing this further, it is important to consider the extent of women's involvement in the life of the early church, the forms of their contributions, and how church historiography has depicted or even erased these roles and contributions. This is important not only as an academic project but also as a reflection for the contemporary church, which continues to grapple with the issue of women's involvement and leadership.³ Thus, by rediscovering this hidden history of the church, this article aims to offer a fresh theological and pastoral perspective. In mapping this research, the author divides it into four main sections: first, identifying female figures in Scripture; second, discussing the biases of church historiography; third, examining corrective efforts from a feminist theological perspective; and fourth, presenting pastoral implications for the church today. This framework is expected to help construct a more complete alternative narrative.

The dominance of masculinity in the construction of church history is not only a reflection of the patriarchal context of ancient times, but is also maintained by the writing of church history that tends to be exclusive. As Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza emphasizes, biblical texts and church traditions have undergone a "patriarchal editing" that has rendered women virtually invisible.⁴ Women who were originally missionary partners with the apostle Paul, such as Junia, who is called an apostle (Romans 16:7), have experienced a blurring of identity by interpreters who have changed Junia to a masculine name, such as "Junius" in some translations.⁵

This narrative shows us that women's involvement in the early church was not a modern invention, but a reality that had existed from the beginning. Even when we read the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters, we will find women's roles as house church hosts, evangelists, helpers of the poor, and even community leaders. For example, Lydia was not only a wealthy seller of purple cloth, but she was also the head of the first Christian community in Philippi.⁶ This evidence should be strong enough to dismantle the constructions in church historiography.

³ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 45.

⁴ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 78.

⁵ Bernadette Brooten, "Junia...Outstanding among the Apostles (Romans 16:7)," *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, ed. Leonard Swidler and Arlene Swidle (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 141.

⁶ Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 109.

Septemmy E. Lakawa's study of this case highlights the importance of rereading church history with a contextual and gender-sensitive lens.⁷ Lakawa's assertion concludes that Indonesian church history has largely ignored the role of women, despite their active involvement in education, missions, and social service since the missionary era. Churches in Indonesia need to learn from this history to cultivate a spirituality that includes women's voices, both in theological reflection and structural leadership. Beyond simply striving for gender justice, rereading church history and women's perspectives is part of the process of restoring the narrative of faith. The theological concept of the body of Christ as consisting of many members (1 Cor. 12:12-27) should open up an inclusive space for women's roles as integral members of the faith community. Women are not merely complements but also co-workers with God in God's mission of salvation in the world. Therefore, if the church ignores this narrative, it also betrays the full biblical witness.

Therefore, a more comprehensive reading of church history must involve reconstructing the narrative based on an interdisciplinary approach. This approach could include feminist literary criticism of biblical texts, an examination of early church history, and the integration of pastoral insights responsive to women's contemporary realities. This is not intended to replace the primary narrative, but rather to enhance it by incorporating previously overlooked dimensions.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with a library research method. This approach was chosen because it is appropriate for exploring the historical and theological representation of women in the early church through analysis of biblical texts, church historiography, and feminist theological works. The primary sources used include biblical texts in the New Testament and the writings of the Church Fathers, while secondary sources include theological books and theological scholarly journals relevant to the research. The library research allows for an in-depth exploration of the ideas and socio-theological constructs that shape the marginalization and erasure of women's narratives in early Christian history.

The data analysis was conducted using a critical-feminist hermeneutic approach, developed by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and enriched by an intersectional approach in gender and religious

⁷ Septemmy E. Lakawa, "Contextual Ministry in the Indonesian Church," in *Theology and Indonesian Context*, ed. Rinaldy Damanik (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2002), 102-118.

studies.⁸ This hermeneutic approach not only aims to understand the text historically but also to dismantle the power structures that cause women's invisibility in the official church narrative. Thus, this research is both deconstructive and constructive: deconstructing the patriarchal historiographical legacy while simultaneously constructing a new, more just and equal understanding within the body of Christ. In line with this approach, the author positions women's experiences and voices as the locus theologicus—the legitimate and valuable place for reading divine reality. Technically, this research also refers to the methodology of gender studies and theology, as developed by Letty M. Russel and Musa Widyatmodjo.⁹ Sources were selected purposively, based on their relevance and actuality to the theme of women's involvement in the early church. The validity of the study is strengthened by comparing narratives from various church traditions and paying attention to the socio-cultural context in which women served.

DISCUSSION

Women's Churches in the New Testament

The presence of women in the New Testament is not merely incidental, but reflects the historical reality of women's active involvement in the life and growth of the early church. For example, Phoebe is referred to by Paul as "diakonos" (servant/congregation) and "prostatis" (protector or supporter), terms indicating an authoritative role within the Christian community at Cenchreae (Romans 16:1-2).¹⁰ These terms connote spiritual leadership and ministerial responsibilities no less important than those of male leaders in the community.

Additionally, there is Priscilla and her husband Aquila, who are mentioned as Paul's coworkers in Romans 16:3-5. Not only are they mentioned as coworkers, but they even taught Apollos, an eloquent preacher, the way of God more accurately. Interestingly, Priscilla's name is often mentioned before her husband Aquila's, which culturally indicates a possible recognition of Priscilla's spiritual leadership or greater influence in the ministry. This serves as a sign or confirmation that women could be influential teachers and evangelists in the early church.

⁸ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 15-19.

⁹ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 4-6; Musa Widyatmodjo, "Feminist Theology and Its Challenges in Indonesia," *Jaffray Journal* 11, no. 2 (2013): 112-125.

¹⁰ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 24-26.

Lydia also serves as an important example. She is said to have been a purple cloth merchant from Thyatira who heard Paul's preaching and was baptized along with her household (Acts 16:14-15). She even made her home a meeting center for the Philippian church.¹¹ This demonstrates women's involvement not only in receiving the gospel but also in providing resources and space for the development of the Christian community. Lydia was not merely a sympathizer, but an active participant in supporting the spread of the gospel through her abilities. Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, Paul acknowledges women who prophesied and prayed in the congregation. This demonstrates that women were indeed actively involved in the congregation's liturgy from the beginning, although their presence was often reframed by patriarchal interpretations of church history.

Other figures such as Mary (Mark's mother), Junia (who is called "famous among the apostles" in Romans 16:7), and Nympha (Colossians 4:15) show that female leadership in the early church was not exceptional, but part of a broader pattern. It is particularly noteworthy that she is called an apostle, the highest office in the early church structure,¹² which suggests that any restrictions on female leadership were more a product of post-New Testament patriarchal social construction.

Traditional historiography often ignores or downplays the significance of these figures. Yet, in many cases, they were key drivers in the development of early Christian communities. The presence of women at that time was not unusual, and in fact, they held a larger role within early Christian communities than in other religious institutions of the time. Furthermore, the early church structure was charismatic-participatory, rather than hierarchical, allowing women to be directly involved in ministry, teaching, and shepherding the congregation. This model will provide a theoretical foundation for a more inclusive reading in the contemporary context, particularly on the issue of women's leadership in the church.

This argument is further reinforced by Musa Widyatmodjo and Septemmy E. Lakawa in the Indonesian context, arguing that women not only have a historical role, but also a legitimate

¹¹ Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 41.

¹² Beverly R. Gaventa, "Women in the Church: New Testament Perspective," *Interpretation* 49, no. 1 (1995): 30-42.

theological and pastoral one.¹³ The contemporary church needs to reread the New Testament with a critical and contextual lens, so that women's legacy in the church is not continually excluded from the larger narrative of Christianity. Thus, figures such as Phoebe, Lydia, Yunia, and Nympha represent concrete representations of women's involvement in the ministry and leadership of the early church. Therefore, their narratives need to be restored to their rightful place in church historiography, not only for the sake of historical justice, but also to support the transformation of the contemporary church toward equality and inclusiveness.

The Invisibility of Women in Church Historiography

Early church historiography was predominantly written by men from the spiritual and intellectual elite, who tended to focus on the structure of the church hierarchy and male figures such as bishops, presbyters, and male martyrs. Eusebius of Caesarea, for example, known as a Church Father, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, barely mentions women explicitly, except in passive roles such as martyrdom or faithful followers.¹⁴ This imbalance indicates a strong masculine bias in church history writing, either intentionally or as a reflection of the patriarchal culture of the time.

The concept of patriarchy in Greco-Roman culture also reinforced the narrative of church history that marginalized women. In Greco-Roman society, public roles were dominated by men, with women relegated to the domestic sphere.¹⁵ Therefore, as the church developed, and even today, gender-based roles became part of the institutionalized church structure. This ultimately had a direct impact on how church history was written, with only men's roles deemed significant enough to be recorded.

In addition to the cultural context, the development of early church theology, which tended to be hierarchical and clerical, also limited the scope for women's participation. For example, in the Pastoral Letters, we see a standardization of leadership structures that tended to be exclusively male (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). Ultimately, this excluded women from decision-making positions. This view was then inherited in the Western church tradition for centuries. Not only

¹³ Musa Widyatmodjo, "Feminist Theology and Its Challenges in Indonesia," *Jaffray Journal* 11, no. 2 (2013): 112-125; Septemmy E. Lakawa, "Women's Leadership in Indonesia in the Context of the Local Church," *Kurios: Journal of Theology and Christian Religious Education* 8, No. 2 (2021): 91-103.

¹⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. G.A. Williamson (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 37.

¹⁵ Carolyn Osiek dan Margaret Y. MacDonald, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 14-15.

throughout history, but even in classical systematic theology, women's roles were often overlooked. Theologians such as Tertullian and Augustine frequently held negative views of women. Augustine, for example, portrayed Eve as a symbol of human weakness, which opened up the possibility that women were more susceptible to sin and therefore unsuited to church leadership.¹⁶

However, this dominant narrative has begun to be challenged in the last decade through feminist approaches. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Karen Jo Torjesen are two figures who have challenged this patriarchal historiography.¹⁷ Fiorenza introduced the *her-storiography approach*, which seeks to rewrite church history from a female perspective, emphasizing that many women were active in ministry and mission but never found a place in official historiography.

In Indonesia, efforts to trace the history of women in the church are also still very limited. A study by Septemmy Lakawa and Elsa Puspa shows that women's narratives are often obscured by church traditions imported from the West and colonial era.¹⁸ Ultimately, local churches carry on a patriarchal legacy that positions men as spiritual leaders and even as the sole determinants of textual and historical interpretation. This has led to the neglect of women's contributions to evangelism and social service in the early days of Christianity in Indonesia. Yet, the numerous appearances of women in Scripture demonstrate that women were not merely complements to male narratives but active subjects in the proclamation of the Gospel. However, in later church histories, their roles are reduced to mere symbols or moral allegories, with no recognition of their factual historical role. This is a form of erasure perpetrated not only by historians but also by church institutions that control the production of discourse.

Contemporary feminist theology emphasizes the importance of reconstructing the historical narrative of the church. Letty M. Russell states that the church should be a space of *inclusion*, not *exclusion*.¹⁹ By opening up the old archives, women are placed equally in the

¹⁶ Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 192-193.

¹⁷ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 24-25; Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 22.

¹⁸ Septemmy E. Lakawa, "Women's Leadership in the Context of the Local Church," *Kurios: Journal of Theology and Christian Religious Education* 8, no. 2 (2021): 91-103; Elsa Puspa, "The Social Construction of Women in Church History," *Ledaleo Journal* 14, no. 1 (2016): 44-58.

¹⁹ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 34-36.

proclamation of the Gospel and can become community leaders. Thus, the narrative of women's invisibility is not merely a thing of the past but directly impacts the formation of contemporary church identity. Therefore, if church history continues to be written from a single, patriarchal perspective, the church will continue to reproduce inequalities in ministry and leadership. Therefore, rewriting history by considering women's voices is not only a corrective measure but also a prophetic one that demands structural repentance within the body of Christ. Furthermore, a feminist reading of the text is not only an advocacy effort but also a spiritual restoration for the church community. When women are given space to read and interpret the Bible from their experiences, liberation and transformation can occur. This process opens the church to become a just, inclusive, and liberating space for spiritual interaction, as envisioned in the eschatological vision of the church as the living body of Christ.

A Theological Analysis of the Marginalization of Women

It's important to recognize that this marginalization is not just a historical event, but also a profound theological problem. The theological traditions that developed throughout church history often absorbed and legitimized patriarchal social structures that placed women in subordinate positions. In this context, a crucial question arises: does the theological heritage we receive today contain structural biases we are unaware of? If so, how can we reinterpret the doctrines and biblical interpretations that have shaped the exclusion of women?

One of the fundamental doctrines often used as the basis for human equality in Christian theology is the concept of the *imago Dei*, that humans are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). However, in the practice of historical theology, the understanding of the *imago Dei* is often reduced to a masculine perspective, emphasizing Adam as the normative representation of humanity. This reduction obscures the recognition that women are also a complete and equal image of God.²⁰ Therefore, in this reflection, the importance of theological correction of the gender-biased understanding of the *imago Dei*, where the equality of men and women is not merely a moral affirmation, but a theological reality rooted in creation.²¹ This means that the marginalization of women is not only a social injustice, but a betrayal of the essence of

²⁰ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 25-27.

²¹ Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 55.

God who created all humans equally. It is a betrayal of the image and likeness of God that exists in both men and women.

In the Indonesian context, it is crucial to address depatriarchalism in church interpretation and practice. Musa Widyatmodjo emphasized that the church's still highly hierarchical and masculine structure has limited women's participation, not because of biblical theology, but because of cultural interpretations inherent in the church.²² This means that the task of contemporary theologians is not only to uphold tradition but also to critically reexamine it in light of the love and justice of the Gospel. This means that every biblical passage must be read within its cultural and social context, and with attention to other voices in Paul's writings that praise women.

Thus, it is important to recognize that theology is never socially neutral. It is always shaped by context, ideology, and power. Therefore, an intersectional approach to theological studies is essential. A framework that considers how gender, race, class, and other social factors intersect in shaping women's experiences in the church is essential. Elisabeth Gerle stated that theology must be a space for advocacy, not domination.²³ This is done so that the church does not lose its relevance as a community of justice and love. The marginalization of women not only impacts women themselves but also the integrity of the entire body of Christ, which means rejecting part of itself. As Leonardo Boff stated, the church should be a home for all, not an ivory tower inhabited only by select men.²⁴ Churches and theological institutions need to create space for reinterpreting theology in an egalitarian and liberatory spirit. This project does not mean replacing the Bible, but rather rereading sacred texts with the eyes of love, justice, and equality. In the Indonesian context, this could begin with gender-inclusive theological education and leadership spaces that are open to all, including women and marginalized groups.

The Socio-Political Context of the Early Church

The early church developed within the highly patriarchal environment of the Roman Empire, where the social and political structure placed men as the primary rulers and decision-makers within the family and wider society. This patriarchal system not only restricted women's social mobility but also placed them in a subordinate position, both legally and culturally. For

²² Musa Widyatmodjo, "Teologi Feminis dan Tantangannya di Indonesia," *Jurnal Jaffray* 11, no. 2 (2013): 115.

²³ Elisabeth Gerle, "Feminist Theology and The Challengers of Globalization," *Theological Studies* 62, no. 4 (2001): 785-800.

²⁴ Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 112.

example, women had no say in political or religious decisions in the public sphere, often relegating them to second-class citizenship.²⁵ This situation naturally influenced how women were treated and viewed in the early church, which was also a small and vulnerable community within a larger society that discriminated against them.

In this socio-political context, women who appeared in the early church often faced prejudice and marginalization, both from outside society and from within the faith community itself.²⁶ Nevertheless, they played a crucial role in the development and preservation of the early church. Their presence demonstrated the existence of space for women's participation, albeit within social boundaries that were still strongly patriarchal. Furthermore, women as church members in the Roman era often had to struggle not only against gender discrimination but also the threat of political oppression and religious persecution. Therefore, in several historical accounts, Christian women are found not only as victims of oppression, but also as figures who steadfastly defended their faith and served under conditions of great risk.²⁷ This situation makes it clear that women at that time were not passive supporters, but active participants in the mission of spreading the Gospel.

Given the prevailing phenomenon, within the context of patriarchy and political domination, the official church historical narrative has emphasized men, while women are rarely or even completely absent from the record. This situation was further exacerbated by the Church Fathers' writing of history within a patriarchal culture.²⁸ As a result, traditional interpretations of biblical texts tend to overlook their significant roles and contributions. Therefore, feminist theology and gender studies seek to reconstruct this narrative to provide a fair space for women in church historiography.²⁹ Furthermore, archaeological research and apocryphal texts also provide a richer picture of women's presence in the early church. For example, several manuscripts from early Christian communities in Egypt and the Mediterranean region depict women as respected

²⁵ Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 120-125.

²⁶ Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22-25.

²⁷ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 230-234.

²⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 5-8.

²⁹ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 16-18.

community leaders and teachers.³⁰ This confirms that women were not merely marginal, but integral to the development of theology and practice of the early church. However, over time, this role has been narrowed as the church's institutionalization has become increasingly formal and hierarchical in the following centuries.³¹

In the Indonesian context, the study of women in the early church is relevant as a reflection for today's women, who also face the challenges of patriarchy and marginalization. Indonesia still exhibits gender imbalances in church leadership. This certainly requires theological reflection, where the church, as an alternative community, provides a safe space for women to play a significant role, which is an important resource for the development of progressive theology and religious practice.³² Therefore, the church today needs to adopt a critical historical approach and interdisciplinary studies, so that women can be reconstructed as active agents in the development and spread of the Gospel. Recognizing this context will open up opportunities for the contemporary church to re-examine the position of women in the body of Christ, reject marginalization, and encourage equal involvement in various aspects of church and community life.

Contextual Hermeneutic Reading

Contextual hermeneutic reading is an interpretive approach that considers the social, historical, cultural, and political context surrounding the text. In studying the role of women in the early church, a contextual hermeneutic approach will uncover the reasons for patriarchal domination that have erased women's contributions to Christian history. Thus, this approach invites readers to explore hidden meanings and develop a more inclusive understanding of New Testament texts that contain the imprint of influential women.

In the Indonesian context, the church needs to consider local cultural dynamics. A contextual reading will be key to opening up broader opportunities for women in the church. Therefore, it is necessary to adapt feminist hermeneutics to the unique Indonesian context so that theological reflection is truly relevant and able to address local challenges.³³ Furthermore, it can

³⁰ Joan E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria: Philo's Hypothetica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 97-100.

³¹ Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdal: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003), 110-113.

³² Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 55-57.

³³ Musa Widyatmodjo, "Teologi Feminis dan Tantangannya di Indonesia," *Jurnal Jaffray* 11, no. 2 (2013): 118.

also examine how political and social conditions limit the expression and documentation of women's contributions, which may be far greater than those recorded in the texts.

However, the application of contextual hermeneutics is not without challenges. One major challenge is resistance from conservative church traditions that uphold literal and patriarchal interpretations as primary authority.³⁴ Furthermore, theologians need courage to critique long-entrenched legacies, which are sometimes seen as threats to the church's stability. Therefore, constructive dialogue between conservative and progressive approaches is essential for contextual hermeneutics to function harmoniously. A contextual hermeneutic reading also opens up space for interfaith and intercultural dialogue, particularly in a pluralistic society like Indonesia. Because this hermeneutic is sensitive to cultural and historical contexts, this approach can be used to reconcile diverse religious views and practices in a spirit of inclusivity and mutual respect.³⁵ This provides a strong foundation for building a healthy ecumenism and supporting women's empowerment within various faith communities. Ultimately, contextual hermeneutics is not simply about rereading history, but also about building a more just and inclusive theological future.

Application

The stories of women in the early church are not simply historical records to be forgotten, but serve as a mirror and an important source of inspiration for the church today. Women like Phoebe, Priscilla, and Lydia demonstrate that the early church did not ignore the role of women in ministry and leadership. Reflecting on their roles raises critical questions for the contemporary church: to what extent has the modern church recognized and valued women's contributions to various ministries? Furthermore, how does the church provide space for women to participate in leadership and decision-making?

In the Indonesian context, the contemporary church faces significant challenges in recognizing and empowering women's gifts in leadership and ministry. It is crucial for the church to build inclusive leadership that not only accepts but also values women's roles as integral members of the body of Christ. Numerous studies show that inclusive leadership can strengthen church dynamics and produce more relevant and responsive ministries to the needs of the

³⁴ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 60-62.

³⁵ Leonard Swidler, *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding: The Official Report of the Roman Catholic-Jewish Consultation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 25-30.

congregation.³⁶ Recognizing women's gifts in leadership is a crucial step in correcting the patriarchal historiography that has dominated church tradition. Eka Darmaputera noted that this inclusivity also contributes to the harmony and diversity of an increasingly pluralistic church.³⁷

Furthermore, the church needs to review institutional structures that may have hindered women's participation. Overly hierarchical and rigid structures can limit women's ability to freely actualize their calling and gifts. Therefore, structural reform of the church that orients all members of the body, without gender discrimination, is urgent. Furthermore, teaching theology that respects the history of women in the church is also a crucial aspect of this practical application. Theological education must present women's narratives integrally, whether as servants, evangelists, or figures who contributed to the development of the early church.

Beyond educational and structural aspects, the church also needs to open up spaces for reflective discussion about the legacy of patriarchy in church doctrine and practice. This discussion allows the faith community to reflect on how traditionally understood doctrines can contain gender bias and how this impacts the lives of the congregation.³⁸ This discourse is certainly not just about assessing doctrine, but also about how the church can be a just and inclusive community. Bruce Winter even emphasizes the importance of critical theological reflection on church tradition as a means of renewal.³⁹ Overall, this application is not only theologically relevant but also crucially pastoral, where a healthy church is a faith community that hears and values all the voices of its members, including those who have historically been excluded because of gender, class, or social status. Thus, the church's calling is to be a whole and united body of Christ, where no one is marginalized for any reason. The church must be inclusive, recognizing and empowering women, both a prophetic calling and an ecclesiological act that affirms equality and love within the body of Christ.

³⁶ Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 28.

³⁷ Eka Darmaputera, *Pemikiran Etika Kristen Indonesia* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2002), 112-114.

³⁸ Mary Grey, *Women's Experience and the Theological Reflection* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 60.

³⁹ Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 183.

CONCLUSION

This article asserts that women played a crucial and strategic role in the development of the early church, yet their contributions are often omitted from official historical narratives. Figures such as Phoebe, Priscilla, and Lydia were active servants and leaders in the early Christian community. Unfortunately, centuries of patriarchal-biased church historiography have obscured their roles, creating a skewed and incomplete church history.

Through feminist theology and contextual hermeneutics, theologians such as Letty M. Russell and Musa Widyatmodjo have demonstrated the need for a rereading of the biblical narrative and church history.⁴⁰ This rereading is not simply a matter of revising the narrative, but also involves efforts to liberate and restore the role of women as an integral part of the body of Christ. In the context of pluralistic and patriarchal Indonesia, this step is highly relevant for building an inclusive and just community of faith.⁴¹ The contemporary church is called to create a truly participatory space for all its members. The principle of equality as God's creation serves as an ethical foundation for supporting women's full participation in ministry and leadership. By reviving the narrative of women in the early church, the contemporary church can affirm its identity as an inclusive community of love, justice, and witness in facing the challenges of the modern world.

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⁴⁰ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 3-7; Musa Widyatmodjo, "Feminist Theology and Its Challenges in Indonesia," *Jaffray Journal* 11, no. 2 (2013): 115-120.

⁴¹ Yonky Karman, *Contextual Theology in Indonesia: An Initial Thought* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2001), 75-80.

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