

Given what I've said before about women in the ancient world, in early Christianity, and in the churches of Paul, I can now explain why women who had originally played a significant role in the early Christian movement came to be silenced, especially in the churches of Paul (as seen, for example, in the Pastoral epistles). Here is how I discuss the matter in my college-level textbook on the New Testament.

Our theoretical discussion of the ideology of gender in the Roman world, that is, of the way that people mentally and socially constructed sexual difference, gives us a backdrop for reconsidering the progressive oppression of women in the Pauline churches. Women may have been disproportionately represented in the earliest Christian communities. This at least was a constant claim made by the opponents of Christianity in the second century, who saw the inordinate number of women believers as a fault; remarkably, the defenders of the faith never denied it. The large number of women followers is not surprising given the circumstance that the earliest Christian communities, including those established by Paul, were not set up as public institutions like the Jewish synagogues or the local trade **associations**, which met in public buildings and had high social visibility. Paul established house churches, gatherings of converts who met in private homes, and in the Roman world, matters of the household were principally handled by women. Of course, the husband was lord of the house, with ultimate authority over everything from finances to household religion, but since the home was private space instead of public, most men gave their wives relatively free reign within its confines. If Paul's churches met in private homes, that is, in the world where women held some degree of jurisdiction, it is small wonder that women often exercised authority in his churches. It is also small wonder that men often allowed them to do so, for the home was the woman's domain. The heightened possibility for their own involvement is perhaps one reason why so many women were drawn to the religion in the first place.

Why, then, did women's roles come to be curtailed? It may be that...

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