The present essay is intended to offer a brief summary of pre-Reformation views and praxis in an area of considerable contemporary interest. It is offered with the hope that discussions on the role of women in the life of the church, especially when appeal is made to historical precedent, will be more nuanced in the future. Discussion focuses especially on 1 Timothy 2:8-15 since this is the passage where evangelical discussion is most frequently engaged.

The scarcity of the evidence and the Fathers' ambivalent attitudes to women sometimes render interpreting the evidence of the early church difficult. For example, a 'tension' appears to exist in every patristic text that deals with women. Thus, Clark comments,

Women were God's creation, his good gift to men — and the curse of the world. They were weak in both mind and character — and displayed dauntless courage. They undertook prodigious feats of scholarship. Vain, deceitful, burning with lust — they led men to Christ, fled sexual encounter, wavered not at the executioner's threats, adorned themselves with sackcloth and ashes. . .the Fathers praised and blamed, honored and disparaged the female sex.2

Consequently, what sometimes appears as an inconsistency, both in the appeal to Scripture and in articulating a coherent theology of women, may arise from the historical and cultural context, the possible use of hyperbole and the tension experienced between received dogma and the heroic way women faced martyrdom. Nevertheless, it appears that a traditional interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 prevailed during the first five centuries of the church.

This is illustrated in the most thorough treatment of the passage preserved from the period: that of John Chrysostom.3 He argues that Paul offers instructions on prayer, requiring that 'in like manner [to the men] . . . women approach God without wrath or doubting, lifting up holy hands' and that they 'imitate not therefore the courtesans'. This command is addressed to wealthy wives but applies 'much more . . . [to] those who have professed virginity.' Thus, all women are exhorted to, 'transfer this care to thy soul, to the inward adorning.'4 While Chrysostom recognized that the historical context was one in which some women were endeavouring to 'thrust themselves into ministry in the church',5 he universalises the teaching of the passage. Consequently, he stresses the fact that Paul teaches that women are 'not to speak at all in the church', whether on worldly or sacred issues. This is because, according to a 'divine law', they 'have not received a commission'.6

Three reasons are offered for this (and reappear throughout church history): female vulnerability, the order of creation and the fact that sin entered the human race through the actions of a woman. Thus, Chrysostom notes, firstly, that 'the sex is naturally somewhat talkative' and the 'woman is softer of mind than a man and more subject to being flooded with emotion'. Secondly, he adds that 'the male sex enjoy the higher honour. Man was formed first.' Finally, the man is to have precedence because the woman 'made a bad use of her power over the man. . . . The woman taught once, and ruined all.' Thus the primal history concerns contemporary women since the 'sex is weak and fickle, and he [Paul] is speaking of the sex collectively'.

Nevertheless, women can still be saved even though their sex has incurred blame since, 'God hath given her no small consolation, that of childbearing . . . if they [the children] continue in faith charity and holiness with sobriety'.7 Moreover, the wife is not a spiritual inferior and is of great service to her husband since, 'she keeps the house, takes care of all things in the house, she presides over her handmaids, she clothes them with her own hands, she causes thee to be called the father of children, she delivers thee from brothels. She aids thee to live chastely, she puts a stop to the strong desire of nature.'8

Chrysostom was fairly typical of the outlook of the Fathers. Thus, the Apostolic Constitutions9 refer to the ordination of deaconesses,10 permit women to prophesy11 and pray publicly but forbid teaching.12 In doing so, they appeal to 1 Corinthians 11:2ff and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and specifically to the order of creation: 'For if the “man be the head of the woman,” and he be originally ordained for the priesthood, it is not just to abrogate the order of the creation, and leave the principal to come to the extreme part of the body. For the woman is the body of the man, taken from his side, and subject to him, from whom she was separated for the procreation of children.'13

More generally, the Fathers assume 1 Timothy 2:8-15 refers to public worship14 and 2:8-11 requires prayer to be offered in innocence and,15 especially in the case of women, humbly.16 Women are to cultivate their 'inner' virtues17 and may, perhaps, prophesy,18 but are not to teach (even sound doctrine).19 Women are the spiritual equals of men. Thus, Cyprian of Carthage states in his Epistles 'the mercy of Christ, and the heavenly grace that would subsequently follow, was equally divided among all; without difference of sex, without distinction of years, without accepting of persons, upon all people of God the gift of spiritual grace was
Moreover, Clement acknowledged that wives accompanied the apostles and ministered alongside of them. This is confirmed in a statement which is reflective of early ascetic ideals, where he cites 1 Corinthians 9:5 and he says, 'Dicta tantum in quadam epistola: 'Non habemus potestatem sororem uxorem circumcendii, scit et reliqui apostoli.' Sed hi quidem, ut erat consentanteum, ministerio, quod divelli not poterat, praedicationi scilicet, attendentes, non ut uxorres, sed ut sorores circumducebant mulieres.' However, teaching is forbidden to women on grounds of both nature and law and the fact that the Fall occurred when the woman acted outside her appointed role. Further reasons are that she is to blame for the Fall and under the greater judgement as a result and women are an easy target for false teaching. Verse 15 teaches that the home is the sphere of a woman's ministry and 'the childbirth' is often seen as a reference to Mary: 'what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith.'

Thus, the Fathers viewed 1 Corinthians 11:2ff, 14:33ff and, especially, 1 Timothy 2:8-15 as clear, universal and normative. Women were forbidden the teaching office on the grounds of divine law, the realities of created nature in which the woman was made to support the man and on the basis of deemed weaknesses in the female make up and 'her' responsibility for sin entering the world. Nevertheless, leadership by women was especially prominent in early heretical sects (for example, Montanism) which bore a resemblance to similar movements in Protestantism, resisted 'an increasingly rigid, ritualistic Catholicism' and subsequently appeared attractive to those with pietistic leanings.

Thus women were actively involved in officially recognized and public speaking ministries by the middle of the second century. The office of deaconess developed and the Council of Chalcedon addressed positively the issue of their formal ordination. Other women, especially the high born, studied and taught the Bible. These included Jerome's female-workers Paula, Eustochium and Marcella, the sister of Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Peter of Sebaste and Marcellina, who taught Ambrose and Satyrus. Something of the perceived ambiguity of the situation was recorded by Jerome when he said of Marcella,

In case of any dispute arising as to the testimony of scripture on any subject, recourse was had to her to settle it. And so wise was she and so well did she understand what philosophers call to prepon, that is, the becoming, in what she did, that when she answered questions she gave her opinion not as her own, but as from me or someone else, thus admitting that what she taught she had herself learned from others. For she knew that the apostle said: 'suffer not a woman to teach,' and she would not seem to inflict a wrong upon the male sex, many of whom (including some priests) questioned her concerning obscure and doubtful points.

A similar picture of active ministry by women is witnessed later. Thus, while there are difficulties associated with referring to the 'Celtic' church, most conclude that in 'insular' Christianity the role of women was one 'which their sisters in the majority of other contemporary European societies did not have.' This conclusion seems warranted by the recorded ministries of Ita of Kileedy, Hilda, by the prominent place accorded to women's names among church dedications in Cornwall that suggests an active missionary role by women and by the prominence of women in the Anglo-Saxon church. Later, women ascetics exercised a significant ministry of leadership and teaching: for example, Leoba, Liutberga, Birgitta of Sweden, Heloise, Mechtilde of Magdeberg and the famous preacher, Hildegard of Bingen. Later still, Catherine of Siena was increasingly sought out as a confidante, teacher and public speaker, Theresa of Avila had a prominent public ministry and engaged in active teaching ministry: often, as in the case of the Beguines, through writing. Again, women achieved prominence especially among lay-inspired movements such as the Catharri and Taborites. Others, often inspired by St. Antony, resorted to anchoritism: a role that offered them great influence as teachers and spiritual directors. The most famous Englishwoman was Julian of Norwich, who was sought out by many (including Margery Kempe) for her wisdom and teaching. Thus, while these developments can be exaggerated (and many of these women were consciously swimming against the tide) their existence cannot be denied.

Thus, the historical evidence is not altogether unambiguous. It suggests that appeal to historical precedent as to the role of women in the church needs to be advanced with a greater degree of circumspection than has frequently been the case.

Notes
1 M. G. Mara, 'Woman', in the Encyclopedia of the Early Church, ed. E. Ferguson (Chicago: St. James, 1990), 881.
6 Chrysostom, Timothy, 69f, 78.
8 Chrysostom, Timothy, 71.
9 Ibid, 71f.
13 Constitutions, Book 8, Section II, 211f. A similar view is expressed by Tertullian who, on the one hand, says that while 'women should be under obedience' they are not to speak in the church for the 'mere sake of learning' but on the other.
states, ‘they have the right of prophesying’. See Tertullian, Against Marcion, ANCL, Vol. VIII, Book V, Chapter, VIII, 410f.

14 Constitutions, Book 3, Section VI, 96.

15 Ibid, Book 3, Section IX, 100.


20 Tertullian, Against Marcion, ANCL, Vol. VII, II, XIII, 143. Despite the support of the Apostolic Constitutions this view does not seem to have been generally adopted in the patriarchic church. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Vol. VII, ed. G. Bray (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 146; notes that Origen, Commentary on 1 Corinthians, Ambrosiaster, Commentary on Paul’s Epistles and even the Montanist Oracles do not believe that women were permitted to corporately prophesy.


23 Clement, Miscellanies, III, VII, 112.


28 Irenaeus, Heresies, ANCL, Vol. IX, I, XIII, 1, 51f, and V, XXII, 1, 111. However, elsewhere Irenaeus places the blame on the man being misled by Satan. See, for example, idem, Proof of the Apostolic Preaching, in Ancient Christian Writers, Vol. 16, trans. J. F. Smith (New York: Newman, 1952), 57.

29 Clement, Miscellanies, III, X, 310.

30 Theodore of Mopsuestia, Commentary and Cyril of Jerusalem, Lectures, XII, cited in Gorday, 165.

31 A similar picture appears in the medieval period. See, for example, R. B. Edwards, The Case for Women’s Ministry (London: SPCK, 1989), 104-111.


37 As Brownell, 25, concedes.

38 Tucker & Liefeld, 110.


45 I. Bradley, The Celtic Way (London: Darton, Longman & Todd,
46 Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (New York: Washington Square, 1968), 221-226. Beressford Ellis, *Women* , 142-171, suggests there is evidence that some women (including Hilda) were ordained and even given episcopal rank.


50 *The Life of St. Liutberga*, trans., J. A. McNamara (Fordham: University Press, 1997).

51 *Birgitta of Sweden, Life and Selected Writings*, ed. & trans., M. T. Harris (New York: Paulist, 1990), 77f, 86f.


56 Tucker & Lifield, 162f. Often women resorted to writing (at the direct appointment of Christ) in order to exercise a ministry.


61 Furlong, 5-10.