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# Spiders in a Window: How Dangerous Stories Lead to Dangerous Women

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# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“Spiders in a Window: How Dangerous Stories Lead to Dangerous Women”**

written by

**Mattie Mae Motl**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for completion of  
the Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

27 April 2020

**Spiders in a Window: How Dangerous Stories Lead to Dangerous Women**

**A Thesis by Mattie Mae Motl**

**Ouachita Baptist University**

**Spring 2020**

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*Dedicated to Sadie Dodson, Lindsey Edwards, and Dr. Amy Sonheim—*

*my mother, my mentor, and my advisor.*

*You are the most dangerous women I know.*

## **Preface: The Diagnosis**

Christian women have been marginalized, suppressed, and forgotten by Christian men for centuries. In many cases, these actions are polite when compared to the horrors which self-proclaimed Christ-followers have afflicted on women. Countless sexual abuse cases have been discovered within the walls of the Southern Baptist Church, and the headlines have not stopped printing. Articles from major news outlets such as the *Houston Chronicle* and *San Antonio Express-News* have revealed that Southern Baptist pastors, youth leaders, and deacons have assaulted hundreds of women over the past twenty years—and those numbers only include the women who are confident enough to bring light to their trauma (*National Catholic Reporter*). Not only is sexual harassment occurring to women within local churches, but it has been found among church leaders on the national scale. Church patriarchs such as Paige Patterson, a former president of Southwestern Baptist Seminary; Bill Hybels, a former pastor of one of the biggest congregations in America; and Andy Savage, another former megachurch pastor; have three things in common: their extensive knowledge of the Bible, their national respect as a follower of Christ, and the fact that all three of these men have faced sexual assault allegations from women who trusted them as spiritual advisers (See Roach, Goodstein, and Mass).

How is it that these influential Southern Baptist leaders have completely suspended their biblical convictions when it comes to the treatment and respect of women? It seems, based on the Bible's basic teaching of unconditional love, respect, and appreciation for the Image of God in every human being, as well as their biblical training and national Christian leadership, that these men would support women instead of exploit them— but this hasn't been the case for centuries.

The church was built by women, supported by women, and refined by women; but one of the church's foundational flaws has been the oppression of women. This oppression should be

shocking based on the groundbreaking treatment and inclusion of women within scripture. Hagar, Ruth, Jael, Esther, Rahab, Mary, Phoebe, Priscilla—the list goes on—were all women who played active roles in the formation of the biblical narrative. They were neither idle, passive, nor weak; they paved the way for the church—the same church that would dismiss them and continue to oppress and harass women.

In this thesis, I will study the story and legacy of the forgotten Christian minister: Thecla of Iconium. A missionary, a martyr, a saint, and a woman, Thecla of Iconium leaves a legacy that can be traced all the way to the beginning of the church—until her legacy was prohibited by the church. By studying Thecla's widespread legacy and then widespread repression, I hope to address Christian misogyny by confronting it. I do not want sexual abuse cases to be merely acknowledged. Although awareness is good, it only relieves symptoms. The oppression of Christian women by Christian men is a disease that needs to be cured. Women are valuable to God. They have no business being harassed, oppressed, or forgotten by the church. The story of Thecla of Iconium speaks to the beginning of this disease, and the first step to a cure is a diagnosis.

## Chapter One: A Chorus of Discounted Women

“But all the women cried out with a loud voice, and as with one mouth gave praise to God, saying: ‘One is God, who has delivered Thecla!’”

– *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*

Thecla of Iconium was a common name among Early Christian households during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. She was known as a student of the gospel, an apostle of Paul, and a courageous follower of Christ. Her life was riveting: she abandoned her mother and fiancé for the teachings of a stranger, she knocked the crown off of an emperor’s head, and she baptized herself in a vat of electric eels. Thecla’s story is surely one of dramatic intrigue. However, Thecla was not only known for her captivating tale; she was also viewed as the pinnacle of virtue. Thecla denied herself and surrendered her relationships in order to fully pursue holiness. Indeed, Thecla was known as a heroine of the Christian faith.

Thecla’s renown began with the circulation of a document: *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. According to Wilhelm Schneelmecher’s commentary in the *New Testament Apocrypha*, scholars have discovered eleven copies of the manuscript in Greek, as well as versions in Latin, Syriac, Slavic, and Arabic (214). The oldest version of the story was likely written as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, and it was incorporated into a larger group of writings—*The Acts of Paul*—which pulled together assorted traditions and legends concerning the apostle (Cohick 1). Although *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* was originally written in the larger context of *The Acts of Paul*, Thecla’s story was mostly distributed as a standalone text, and her name was not necessarily attached to Paul’s legacy. In fact, as Schneelmecher notes,

[I]t is not so much Paul as Thecla who stands in the foreground. Certainly there are also reports about Paul: his sermon in Iconium, his defense before the governor, his meetings with Thecla outside Iconium and in Myra. But this in no



way alters the fact that here it is more a question of “Acts of Thecla” than of “Acts of Paul.” (Schneelmecher, 21)

*The Acts of Paul and Thecla* was not like the other stories in *The Acts of Paul*, because the other stories in the book actually deal with Paul’s actions. In *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, on the other hand, Thecla dominates the plot, her legacy almost completely independent of Paul’s.

Thecla of Iconium was popular in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries due to her compelling narrative and her virtue. For hundreds of years, she was the face of righteousness, resilience, and passion. However, not all of the readers of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* were pleased with its reception. In fact, Tertullian, the influential theologian whose thoughts and writings aided in the foundation of the early church, completely rejected the document and everything it inspired. His statement in *de Baptismo* 17 (circa 200 A.D.) discounts the story and character of Thecla of Iconium:

As for those (women) who <appeal to> the falsely written Acts of Paul [example of Thecla] <in order to> defend the right of women to teach and to baptize, let them know that the presbyter in Asia who produced this document, as if he could add something of his own to the prestige of Paul, was removed from his office after he had been convicted and had confessed that he had done it out of love for Paul. For how credible would it seem that he who has not permitted a woman even to learn with over-boldness, should give a female the power of teaching and of baptizing! 'Let them be silent', he says, 'and at home consult their own husbands.' (qtd. in Schneelmecher 214)

Tertullian claimed that the text was forged under a pseudonymous presbyter in Asia. Forgery aside, Tertullian is more preoccupied with the idea that women have been using Thecla’s story to

advocate for their right to teach and baptize because Thecla both teaches and baptizes the narrative. The quoted text is taken from one of Tertullian's prominent works, *de Baptismo*. *De Baptismo*—like all ancient documents—presents its own complications. According to Wilhelm Schneelmecher, *de Baptismo* is only supported by one manuscript and one copy in the year 1545. In addition to that, it is unclear from the translation whether the author was referring to *The Acts of Paul* as a whole or *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* specifically. Either way, *de Baptismo* 17 was taken very seriously by early Christians. Tertullian's judgment of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* was later cited by Jerome to renounce the text's authority. Schneelmecher writes, “[i]n the following period the Church gradually came to the same judgment as Jerome. Thus, the [*Acts of Paul*] are rejected as apocryphal...” (216). Regrettably, Thecla's influence among early Christian women led to the complete dismissal of the text.

In this thesis, it is not my object to argue whether or not Thecla was a historical figure. There is not enough evidence to support either argument, both sides being frankly, unconvincing. There is some documentation to confirm the details of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, such as the name of a queen, the name of specific roads, and even a Turkish woman around the date of composition by the name of Thecla. Although these factors have been used by some scholars to argue for a historical Thecla, the documentation is simply too ambiguous to confirm anything. Even if there were a historical character named Thecla, it would be impossible to determine how much of the story was exaggerated. Although Thecla may not have been a real person, her legacy and influence were very real. Through the widespread distribution of the manuscript, as well as Tertullian and Jerome's urgency to dispel the reliability of the text, it is clear that Thecla's name carried significant weight among the 2nd century Christian community.

It is remarkable that a woman and her story – whether historical or not – was so influential among the early church. Thecla was prominent in a time when women were ignored, and that sort of legacy warrants investigation. Over the years, Thecla’s prominence fades into obscurity. It is strange that a story so significant among the church’s founding would be forgotten. Although “Thecla” was a common name among early Christian households, her name is barely known among contemporary Evangelicals. For that reason, my thesis requires a retelling of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, for which I have drawn heavily from the Wilhelm Schneelmecher (1992) and Jeremy Barrier (2009) commentaries.

*The Acts of Paul and Thecla*

Thecla’s story begins with Paul traveling from Antioch with his two companions, Demas and Hermogenes. Demas and Hermogenes are hypocrites who flatter and deceive, but Paul continues to demonstrate the love of Christ towards them. As the three companions travel to the town of Iconium, a devout believer named Onesiphorus eagerly awaits Paul’s arrival. Finally, Paul arrives in Iconium with Demas and Hermogenes, and Onesiphorus insists on hosting them. As soon as Paul arrives at Onesiphorus’ house, he begins to teach. He opens with his own adaptation of the Beatitudes:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are they who keep their flesh undefiled, for they shall be the temple of  
God.

Blessed are the temperate, for God will reveal himself to them.

Blessed are they that abandon their secular enjoyments, for they shall be accepted  
of God.

Blessed are they who have wives, as though they had them not, for they shall be made angels of God.

Blessed are they who tremble at the word of God, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are they who keep their baptism pure, for they shall find peace with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Blessed are they who pursue the doctrine of Jesus Christ, for they shall be called the sons of the Most High.

Blessed are they who observe the instructions of Jesus Christ, for they shall dwell in eternal light.

Blessed are they, who for the love of Christ abandon the glories of the world, for they shall judge angels, and be placed at the right hand of Christ, and shall not suffer the bitterness of the last judgment.

Blessed are the bodies and souls of virgins, for they are acceptable to God and shall not lose the reward of their virginity, for the word of their Father shall prove effectual to their salvation in the day of his Son, and they shall enjoy rest forevermore. (Schneelmecher 239)

Meanwhile, next door, a young virgin named Thecla hears Paul from her bedroom window. She sits in the window and listens to his teachings, and she falls in love with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thecla longs to be with Paul and learn more from him. She is so enraptured by the words of Paul that she refuses to leave her bedroom window. Yet, Thecla's mother, Theocleia, is worried for her daughter, so she sends for Thecla's fiancé. When Thecla's fiancé, Thamyris, arrives, Theocleia explains to him that her daughter has been sitting in her window for three days and three nights. In Theocleia's distress, she compares Thecla to a spider. She says, "[m]y

daughter also, who sticks to the window like a spider, is (moved) by [Paul's] words (and) gripped by a new desire and a fearful passion; for the maiden hangs upon the things he says and is taken captive" (Schneelmecher 240). Thamyris is also concerned for his betrothed, but when he confronts her, Thecla refuses to turn her attention away from the teachings of Paul. This leads Thamyris to mourn for the loss of a wife, Theocleia a daughter, and her maidens a mistress, but Thecla remains unfazed.

Thamyris, greatly disturbed by his unresponsive future wife, marches over to Onesiphorus' house where Paul is teaching. Demas and Hermogenes greet Thamyris, informing him that many of the men in town were losing their wives because of Paul. Demas and Hermogenes convince Thamyris that he should deliver Paul into the hands of the governor. Outraged, Thamyris confronts Paul, calling for his execution. All of the men in town agree, shouting, "away with the sorcerer! He has corrupted all of our wives" (240). The governor obliges by imprisoning Paul.

When Thecla hears word of Paul's imprisonment, she is horrified. She rushes to the prison to bribe the gatekeeper with bracelets and a mirror so that she can be with Paul in his cell. Sitting at Paul's feet, kissing his chains, Thecla listens to him teach all night. When morning comes and Paul is taken for the judgment seat, Thecla is discovered in his cell. Disturbed by Thecla's boldness, the governor orders that Thecla should also face judgment. When it is time for Paul's sentence, the governor announces Paul's expulsion from Iconium. At this point, Thecla's own mother betrays her, asking for her daughter's execution. While Paul is being exiled, Thecla is preparing to lose her life. As the executioners bind her to the stake, Thecla has a vision of the Lord sitting in the form of Paul. As a response to this vision, she extends her arms

in the sign of the cross, and God sends a mighty storm to deliver her, killing everyone but Thecla. The Lord miraculously intervenes to save Thecla from her execution.

Meanwhile, Paul is hiding in the house of Onesiphorus. He had been fasting and praying for Thecla. When Thecla finally finds Paul after her miraculous deliverance, Paul and the house of Onesiphorus rejoice over God's faithfulness. After rejoicing and offering thanks, Thecla pleads with Paul to let her come with him on his missionary journeys. When he declines, telling her that she would be nothing more than a temptation for him and others, Thecla offers to cut off all of her hair and dress like a man in order to avoid involuntarily seducing men. Seeing her passion for the gospel, Paul relents, allowing her to accompany him to Antioch.

When the unlikely pair arrive in Antioch, they are greeted by an emperor. The emperor, Alexander, immediately lusts after Thecla and attempts to pursue her. Upon being asked if he knows Thecla, Paul denies her. Thecla protests the flirtation by ripping Alexander's robe and throwing the crown from his head. Because of this act of defiance, Thecla is sentenced to the games. Enraged by the decree, a chorus of discounted women cry, "[e]vil judgment! impious judgment!" (244) Thecla accepts her fate but asks permission to remain pure until the moment of her death. A local woman of great wealth, Tryphaena, offers to host Thecla in her home in order to comfort and protect her until she is released to the wild beasts.

When it is time for the inaugural procession of beasts and competitors, Thecla is bound to a lioness. However, the lioness is not remotely vicious, resting at Thecla's feet to lick her toes like a domestic cat. This sight astonishes the crowd and once again a chorus of women announces, "an impious sentence has been passed on this city!" (244) After the miraculous events of the procession, Thecla returns to the care of Tryphaena. When Thecla arrives, Tryphaena describes a dream that she had received from God. After the death of her daughter,

God insisted in the dream that Tryphaena should adopt Thecla as her new daughter. Tryphaena obeys God, taking Thecla as her own, asking Thecla in turn to pray for her daughter who had passed. Thecla agrees and prays for her late daughter, as Tryphaena mourns her second daughter's fate with the wild beasts.

The next day, Thecla is torn from Tryphaena with a heartbreaking goodbye. Thecla prays, thanking God for her adopted mother: "Lord God, in whom I trust, with whom I have taken refuge, who didst deliver me from the fire, reward thou Tryphaena, who had compassion upon thy handmaid, and because she preserved me pure" (245). The chorus of local women cause an uproar, shouting, "[l]et the city be raised against this wickedness. Take off all of us, O proconsul! Cruel sight! Evil sentence!" (245) The cries of the women are ignored, however, as Thecla is led to the games.

As the games begin, Thecla is released to the beasts. In the arena, there is a bear, a lion, and a lioness. Once again, God intervenes for Thecla. As the beasts enter, the lioness runs straight to Thecla to lie at her feet. God then uses the lioness to protect Thecla. In a fierce battle, the lioness defeats both the bear and the lion while defending Thecla. The lioness sacrifices her own life in the process. While the witnesses of this divine intervention are in awe, Thecla spies a pool of "seals" (best translated as deadly eels), and to the surprise of her audience, she exclaims, "[n]ow is the time for me to wash.' And she [throws] herself in, saying: 'In the name of Jesus Christ I baptize myself on the last day.' And when they saw it, the women and all the people wept, saying: 'Cast not thyself into the water!'; so that even the governor wept that such beauty should be devoured by seals" (245). As soon as Thecla immerses herself, the "seals" float to the surface, dead. As she rises out of the water, God clothes her with fire so that no one could see her

nakedness nor could the beasts come near her. Finally, the female witnesses take action. In unison, they throw perfumes on the wild beasts to make them fall asleep.

The triumph of the women infuriates the governor. He loses his patience with the martyr who can't be martyred, ordering that Thecla be bound to raging bulls. Ultimately, God again divinely intervenes, sending a cloud of fire to burn through ropes used to tie Thecla to the bulls. Tryphaena suddenly faints for grief and fear for her adopted daughter. The whole crowd erupts in worry for the influential woman, who they thought had died. The governor stops the games, demanding of Thecla, "who are you? and what is there about you that not one of the wild beasts touches you?" (245) Thecla, filled with the Holy Spirit, announces:

I am a handmaid of the living God. As to what I have about me, I have believed in him in whom God is well pleased, His Son. For his sake not one of the beasts touched me. For he alone is the goal of salvation and the foundation of immortal life. To the storm-tossed his is a refuge, to the oppressed relief, to the despairing shelter; in a word, whoever does not believe in him shall not live, but die forever.

(245-246)

The women in the crowd burst out in cheers and exultation, and "they [cry] out with a loud voice, and as with one mouth [give] praise to God, saying: One is God, who has delivered Thecla" (246).

Under the pressure of the crowd, the governor releases Thecla to her adopted mother. Tryphaena is overjoyed to receive Thecla in safety, and because of the miracles she had witnessed, Thecla is able to convert Tryphaena and her entire household to Christianity. However, Thecla is not content to stay in the comfort of her Trphaena's home. She still longs to join Paul in his missionary journeys, thinking that she will now be accepted by him because of



her baptism, God's clear interventions, and her evangelizing of an entire town. Haunted by Paul's fear of temptation, she cuts off all of her hair and puts on men's robes. After that, she seeks Paul, eventually finding him in the town of Myra. After Paul hears of all of the things Thecla has done, he sends her with his blessing: "Go and teach the word of God!" (246)

Thecla, after finally receiving her longed-for commission, lives out the rest of her days spreading the gospel. She even returns to reconcile with her fiancé and mother, but her fiancé is dead and her mother once again denies her. Even then, Thecla's alienation from her loved ones does not deter her mission. After Thecla's lifetime of devout apostleship, the author concludes Thecla's story with the commendation that "after enlightening many with the word of God she slept with a noble sleep" (246).

## Chapter Two: A Web of Unorthodox Guidance

“My daughter, who sticks to the window like a spider, is (moved) by his words (and) gripped by a new desire and a fearful passion.”

-*The Acts of Paul and Thecla*

Thecla of Iconium had everything a woman could want in 2<sup>nd</sup> century Turkey. Before her conversion, she was wealthy and influential, she had a household of supportive family and maids, and she was engaged to be married. These blessings were all a woman of this time period could hope for and more. However, Thecla’s destiny changed when she heard the teaching of a man from Tarsus from her bedroom window. Paul’s words metamorphosed Thecla from a woman of privilege into a dangerous spider in a window.

The spider metaphor carries a lot of weight in ancient tradition. The spider was traditionally viewed as something treacherous and associated with false teaching. According to the *Beastiarium of Christ* by Louis Charbonneau-Lassey, ancient Christian tradition saw spiders as representing “the image of Satan, the treacherous pursuer of souls,” “the seductive and provocative prostitute,” with the spider web often interpreted as “‘vain works’ such as have no value in God’s eyes” (359). In other words, Thecla’s mother comparing her to a spider was not a compliment.

According to Thecla’s mother, not only was Thecla a spider, but she was a spider in a window. The window is a traditional literary image to represent the liminal. Someone caught in a liminal space is neither here nor there; they are on the threshold of something in between. Thecla was in the liminal space because she had left her old life behind, but she had not yet entered her new life. For three days, she sat in the window, paralyzed in the liminal. On one side of the threshold was the support and comfort of her previous life, yet on the other was an alienating and dangerous path. Although she sits in the window, the fact metaphor of Thecla as a spider

suggests that she has already been lost to the treacherous teachings of Paul. It is almost as if the author were warning his readers that Thecla's story would not be conventional. Rather, Thecla was a spider awaiting to captivate her readers in a dangerous web of unorthodox guidance.

It is clear through the reception of Thecla's tale that the stories people weave can have dangerous consequences (such as women having the ambition to baptize and spread the gospel). However, did the author have such an intent? Why was *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* written, and for whom? The only clue given for the author's purpose is found in Tertullian's scathing review: "[the author] had [written *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*] out of love for Paul" (qtd in Schneelmecher 214). However, this intent is hard to argue based on Tertullian's questionable witness and a close reading of the text. The text seems far too preoccupied with Thecla to be written based on a love of Paul. Paul is barely a supporting character in a plot motivated and developed by Thecla. Because Tertullian's purpose leaves many questions unanswered, many scholars have wrestled with the correct reading of the manuscript. This has led to a careful examination of the genre because the genre of a story affects how the story should be read and interpreted.

Dr. Lynn Cohick offers a helpful synthesis of the opposing interpretations of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla's* genre. She gives two major categories: 1) that *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* was a romantic narrative, or 2) that it was ancient hagiography.

Most scholars agree that *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* fits within similar literary conventions as that as a romantic narrative. Thecla becomes enamored with Paul, is separated from him, struggles to reunite with him, and finally joins him at the resolution of the story. Scholars also argue for romance based on erotic tones used to describe Thecla. Cohick writes,

[T]he romance [narrative] includes erotic scenes of both heterosexual and homosexual desire. Some see a similar emphasis on erotic desire in Thecla's behavior toward Paul. They point at her kissing his chains and rolling on the floor where he has previously sat. They notice her steady gaze toward Paul when she initially hears his message from her window seat, and her fervent glances at the crowd to see Paul when she is first brought into the arena in Iconium. (19-20)

These erotic features of Thecla's story have indeed been a question to modern readers. Thecla is simultaneously commended for her chastity, yet she is eroticized in the process. However, this story differs from a romance in a major way: Thecla is not reunited with her lover in marriage. On the contrary, her reunion with Paul is fairly short and even anticlimactic. Thecla only stays with Paul long enough to receive his blessing for ministry. In addition, she goes so far as to make herself look like a man before she meets him (a hagiographical convention which indicates a woman wanting to remain chaste). Some scholars argue against the erotic interpretation of Thecla's narrative based on the lack of marriage and the lack of a desire for marriage.

This leads to a second classification for Thecla's narrative: ancient hagiography. Interpreting the narrative as a saint's tale emphasizes the clear ascetic undertones of the text. Where other scholars may eroticize Thecla by placing her in the context of a romance, the scholars who prefer ancient hagiography as the genre venerate Thecla as a prime example for purity and holiness. This reading of the text puts Thecla on a pedestal of righteousness. There are many counterarguments to a sexual reading of Thecla. Cohick writes,

Thecla's kissing his chains or rolling where he sat in prison reflects her conviction that his body is holy. ... Thecla is said to "love" Paul (APTh 3.19), but the Greek term used (*storge*) primarily refers to love between parent and child, or

love as an abstraction. Rarely does the term carry sexual connotations. ... Thus the separation of Thecla and Paul serves to rest her commitment to the faith and message of the gospel. The tribulations form character and demonstrate steadfast devotion to God. (20)

Still, neither a love story nor a saint's tale describes Thecla's narrative. Appropriately, Thecla once again lands in the liminal: her story is somewhere in between romance and hagiography. The romantic narrative conventions are undeniable, yet the hagiographical readings are also convincing. So how should Thecla be read? Should she be eroticized or venerated? This is the age-old trap for all women: will they be a Ruth or a Rahab? A Mary or a Mary Magdalene? Will they be chaste, unscathed by the corruption of the world around them, or will they be contaminated and violated by passion and fleshly desires? Thecla breaks the mold. Because she fits exclusively into neither preconceived genre, her story defies expectations. Thecla is the heroine of a romantic narrative in which she has no romantic intentions, and she is the subject of a hagiography in which she scandalizes the conventions of a typical saint. She sits in the window between the customary and the unexpected, and she is comfortable in the liminal space.

Yet, the question of purpose remains unanswered. The author is unknown, and the genre is inconclusive, so it seems impossible to determine a certain function for the narrative. Because of this, modern readers continue to bring preconceived notions to the text instead of approaching the narrative as the original audience would have interpreted it. Scholars often fall into this pitfall, leading to many different theories and interpretations which reflect their own personal convictions or agendas.

For *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, feminist scholarship most often falls into this trap. Thecla's story is intriguing in its treatment of women, but 21<sup>st</sup> century feminists have no place

claiming Thecla for a debate which did not exist when the manuscript was written. There is no use pretending something is reflected in a manuscript when the author clearly had no connection to that debate. The original audience, 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christians, would have been far more interested in subjects such as orthodoxy and asceticism than they would have been in the treatment of women by the church or, more broadly, society. The 21<sup>st</sup>-century feminism debate, with all of its appropriate baggage, is a puzzle piece that many scholars have tried to force into Thecla's narrative, but the piece doesn't go with the puzzle to begin with. If Thecla were a historical figure, perhaps there would be more to say concerning her own motives, agenda, or purpose. However, as Cohick notes,

Like a grain of sand captured by an oyster is overlaid with rich layers of protein and crystals to become a pearl, so too it may be that a first-century female teacher caught the attention of a pious writer who sketched her testimony, to which a later witness added layers and interpretations, producing a lasting pearl of remembrance in the current figure of St. Thecla. (8)

Thecla, whoever she may have been originally, and if she were anyone at all, has become who her admirers have made her.

Though it is true that 21<sup>st</sup> century feminists have no business applying their own agenda to a 2<sup>nd</sup> century context, it is also true that *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is clearly preoccupied with the woman and her role in a missionary context. There are several examples of this throughout the narrative. The author of the manuscript often compares men to women, and by doing so, he poses some very important questions: how does God relate to women? Should women have as much freedom in ministry as men? Does God use women in a way that allows for them to overshadow men? These are all questions which the original readers would have

surely asked while approaching *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*; they are therefore questions worth posing in modern research. There are three major themes in Thecla's story which pose men and women in opposition to each other: men's chorus vs. women's chorus, lion vs. lioness, and Paul vs. Thecla. As we study the three major Men vs. Women themes, the author was indeed considering the role of women and how they relate to God.

*Men's Chorus vs. Women's Chorus*

According to *Britannica*, a chorus in Ancient Greek theatre

is a group of actors who described and commented upon the main action of a play with song, dance, and recitation.... While the tragic protagonists act out their defiance of the limits subscribed by the gods for man, the chorus expresses the fears, hopes, and judgment of the polity, the average citizens. Their judgment is the verdict of history.

Although *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is literary and not theatrical, the author uses a chorus-like construction to comment on the action of the narrative. There are eight instances in the story that the chorus has a voice, and most of these have to do with a verdict against Thecla. Like a clamoring crowd in a court case, the citizens chime in on whether they believe the verdict was just. However, the author of the story distinguishes a men's chorus from a women's chorus. The men's chorus only comments twice, while the women's chorus dominates the plot and offers commentary the other six times.

For the sake of comparison, I have listed out all of the quotes from the text from the chorus. In the right column, I have included all of the quotes from the men's chorus, and on the left, the women's:

Men's Chorus	Women's Chorus
<p>"Away with the sorcerer, for he has corrupted all of our wives!" (241)</p>	<p>"Evil judgment, impious judgment!" (244)</p>
<p>"Away with the sacrilegious person!" (245)</p>	<p>"O God, outrageous things take place in this city!" (244)</p>
	<p>"O that the city would be destroyed on account of this iniquity! Kill us all, Proconsul; miserable spectacle, evil judgement!" (245)</p>
	<p>"Do not throw yourself into the water!" (245)</p>
	<p>"But the women lamented when other and fiercer animals were let loose..." (245).</p>
	<p>"And the women shouted aloud and with one voice praised God, 'One is the God who saved Thecla,' so that the whole city was shaken by their voices" (246).</p>

*Figure 1. Men's vs. Women's Chorus. (Motl).*



Whenever the men's chorus speaks, they call out for violence and destruction. The women's chorus, on the other hand, supports Thecla, admonishes her persecutors, and acknowledges her relationship to God. The women's chorus recognizes Thecla's holiness, while the men's chorus views her as a nuisance. It is strange that the author of the narrative presents the women in the story as more enlightened and informed than the men. This is especially strange when applied to a spiritual context with a long tradition of favoring men over women. Throughout Christianity's history, the default has always been to assume the man closer to God and more in-tune with his will. However, the author of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* rejects this tradition and depicts women as having the capacity to understand something about God and his plan that the men in the story do not. In fact, the men's chorus works *against* God, while the women's chorus works *with* him.

#### Lion vs. Lioness

Another way the author compares men to women is through their use of a lioness to protect Thecla in the arena. The text clearly distinguishes that the lion is female. This is a small detail, and one that seems insignificant at first glance. However, with further investigation, it is odd that the author would go to such lengths to distinguish a lioness from a lion. Why was it such an important detail to the narrative that the author include the sex of the animal which God miraculously used to save Thecla's life? Why would the author draw attention to something so inconsequential? The fact that this detail was included in the narrative warrants attention, especially in the context of a story centered around a woman and her journey to apostleship. The text reads,

And lions and bears were set upon her, and a fierce lioness ran to her and lay down at her feet. And the crowd of women raised a great shout. And a bear ran upon her, but the lioness ran and met it, and tore the bear asunder. And again a lion trained against men, which belonged to Alexander, ran upon her; and the lioness grappled with the lion, and perished with it. And the women mourned the more, since the lioness which helped her was dead. (245)

The lioness was not only Thecla's fierce defender, but she also seemed to revere her as a master. Before any of the fighting begins, there is a relationship established between the lioness and Thecla. The lioness enters the arena and lies at Thecla's feet as if to make a point to the crowd: "this is where my loyalty lies." In unison, the chorus of women cheers which also expresses loyalty and support of Thecla. For a moment before the chaos, the lioness, Thecla, and the women spectators rest in solidarity. But this moment does not last long before the arena erupts with action. A bear springs for Thecla, but the lioness slays it. This sort of protection is surely miraculous and would have been surprising to the crowd of witnesses.

The true climax of the lioness' strength is exhibited, however, when she faces off a lion. Not only would this lion have been stronger than the lioness, but it was owned by Alexander himself, and it was trained against men. This implies that the lion was groomed to kill, and if it were "trained against men," it could have certainly slain a woman. So, the battle began: a male lion, owned by an influential man, and trained to kill men against a lioness protecting a woman. However, God was on the side of the females. He empowered the lioness to slay Alexander's lion, protecting Thecla. Not only was the

lioness able to protect Thecla from the lion, but she also sacrifices herself in the process. The lioness defends Thecla to the point of giving her own life; therefore, she becomes more than Thecla's protector; she becomes her savior. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* subverts expectations by allowing God to use women to overcome and overpower men. At the time, it was not necessarily hard for men to admit that God could use women, but it would have been difficult for them to understand how God could use women outside of societal rules and gender limitations. Sure, a woman could be holy, but only within the confines of expectations. However, the author of Thecla's story did not place those same confines on women or how God could use them.

### *Paul vs. Thecla*

From the very beginning of the story, a reader may expect more action from Paul based on the title, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Yet, the title is misleading. Thecla is the true agent of action in the tale. She is the protagonist, the heroine, and the main focus of the narrative. Paul's is a supporting character rather than a well-developed contributor to the story: his preaching causes Thecla to give her life to the gospel, his imprisonment leads Thecla to be condemned to execution, his missionary journey causes Thecla to be captured and entered into the games, his blessing acts as Thecla's motivation. Paul is depicted as passive as well as problematic. He offers opposition to Thecla's mission. For example, when Thecla asks to follow Paul, he says "no" on account of her being a temptation. When she offers to disguise herself as a man to avoid tempting her missionary partners, he finally agrees but makes her wait to get baptized until she can prove herself. Then, when they reach the next town, Paul rejects Thecla when Alexander attempts to woo her, and Paul leaves her for torture and death with no opposition. If the

author of this story truly wrote it “out of love for Paul,” it seems they missed the mark by a wide margin. Paul seems barely likable in this story that is supposedly intended for his glory. Thecla, on the other hand, is loyal, faithful, consistent, and passionate about God’s calling in her life. She does not cower from opposition as Paul does; instead, she trusts God and applies herself fully to the proclamation of his truth.

One of the most interesting ways to compare Paul and Thecla in this story is to look at their descriptions of God and how the two apostles relate to Him side by side. At the beginning of the story, when Paul is on trial for corrupting the women of the town by preaching, Paul introduces himself:

If today I am examined as to what I teach, then listen, Proconsul. The living God, the God of vengeance, the jealous God, the God who has no need of nothing, has sent me since he desires the salvation of men, that I may draw them away from corruption and impurity, all pleasure and death, that they may sin no more. (Schneelmecher, 242)

Paul’s view of God focuses on his harsh judgment, his jealousy, and his vengeance. God is sovereign, holy, all-powerful, incorruptible, and untouchable. This description stands in sharp contrast to Thecla’s:

I am a handmaid of the living God. As to what I have about me, I have believed in him in whom God is well pleased, His Son. For his sake not one of the beasts touched me. For he alone is the goal of salvation and the foundation of immortal life. To the storm-tossed his is a refuge, to the oppressed relief, to the despairing shelter; in a word, whoever does not believe in him shall not live, but die forever. (245-246)

As Thecla stands in the center of a coliseum, surrounded by spectators, she proclaims this message of compassion. The way that Thecla relates to God is drastically different than Paul's way. Thecla emphasizes God's immanence, benevolence, and tenderness. To a woman in a society who rejected her, oppressed her, and stifled her, God offered acceptance, empowerment, and support. While Paul characterizes God by appealing to his more masculine characteristics, Thecla relates to him through his feminine ones. This is revolutionary for a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century manuscript to highlight: God has both masculine and feminine characteristics, and neither is more important than the other. Both are essential to who God is and how his children relate to Him.

Therefore, although it is difficult to nail down a specific purpose based on genre for *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, it is also hard to ignore how the narrative treats women in such an unusual way. The author defies expectations, and it would have surely puzzled the original audience. Thecla's story had such an impact on the treatment of Christian women that people began to use it to argue for women's ability to baptize and evangelize. Thecla, as a spider in a window, captivated readers in a web of unconventional and revolutionary thinking. It is impossible to say for sure what the author intended for this story. Whether he felt a creative desire to write a piece of fiction, or whether he wanted to launch a radical transformation of the early church, we will never be certain. But we do know how the story was received: it caused women to be gripped, like Thecla, with "a new desire and a fearful passion" for ministry. For that reason, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is a dangerous story, and dangerous stories lead to dangerous women.

### Chapter Three: The Dangerous Effect

“Away with the sorcerer, for he has corrupted all of our wives!”

*-The Acts of Paul and Thecla*

As centuries passed, Thecla’s apostleship evolved into sainthood. As Christianity matured in its beliefs, so did the pressure on Christian women to uphold certain standards and expectations. Because of this, the stories of female saints began to circulate. These women were the examples—the pinnacles of female virtue. These saints were placed on pedestals of perfection, so that women could model themselves after characters so pious and faithful. As Thecla’s story developed with Christianity, it began to shift according to the demands of its audience. Cohick writes, “Thecla is a shadowy figure, which may explain the resilience of her memory and influence, for subsequent generations viewed her as an exemplar for their own times, whether for martyrdom, asceticism, or virginity” (1). As Cohick argues, Thecla’s story transforms with its audience, and her character reflects her admirers. Indeed, in order for a story to last centuries, it must be malleable. When Thecla was venerated for her martyrdom, she was an apostle; when she was venerated for her chastity, she was a saint.

As Thecla metamorphosed from apostle to saint, her inspiration shifted: as an apostle, Thecla inspired women to teach and baptize, and as a saint, she inspired virginity and asceticism. For example, her readers cared less about *why* Thecla left her fiancé (to pursue the gospel) than the fact that leaving her fiancé would preserve her purity. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Saints are extremely significant to Christians:

By canonizing some of the faithful, i.e. by solemnly proclaiming that they practiced heroic virtue and lived in fidelity to God’s grace, the Church

recognizes the power of the Spirit of holiness within her and sustains the hope of believers by proposing the saints to them as models and intercessors. ‘The saints have always been the source and the origin of renewal in the most difficult moments in the Church’s history.’ (219)

Saints are the prime examples of Christian virtue. They are faithful, pious, compassionate, and pure. They remain uncorrupted by the evils of this world because they are Christ’s models for the church of perfect righteousness. They are the heroes of the Catholic faith; their stories inspire, convict, and indoctrinate. Saints even act as intermediaries between the worshiper and Christ, offering a special connection between God and his church. Catholic Christians pray through saints for concerns like healing, comfort, compassion, and patience. They do not believe that the saints themselves have the power to offer such blessings, but because God has chosen them to work as mediators, praying to the saints may gain their request special favor from the ultimate Source (“Praying to the Saints,” *Catholic Answers*). For these reasons, Thecla being declared a saint holds extreme importance. The church upheld Thecla as an ideal prototype for 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Christian women, and it claimed she had the divine power to offer mediation between God and believers.

The genre of hagiography has a rich history to say the least. The *vitae* (the collection of saints’ lives) exhibits the ideals of Christianity at the time. By the virtues and morals highlighted in the stories of the saints, historians have been able to recognize important social and spiritual expectations of the period. This is especially true of women. According to Dr. Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg in her book, *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society* (1998), there is more written about women and by women in

the genre of Hagiography than any other source in this time period. For this reason, it is worth careful analysis and study. Why would the church be so preoccupied with writing, circulating, and endorsing these stories of female saints? Dr. Schulenburg's answer to this question is that

the Church hoped to inspire a certain modification in behavior, a religious conformity, and to mold "social copies." Thus, through the use of saints' Lives, churchmen attempted to reinforce their own concepts of ideal female behavior. They endeavored to socialize women according to contemporary religious ideals, to shape and control women and female sexuality by dictating how women should think and behave." (53)

Dr. Schulenburg writes that the church acknowledges the importance of stories and how they are told. If the church wants to subjugate women and force them into submission, it must control their narratives. Little girls should not hear the story of Thecla and admire her missionary zeal. Instead, they should hear her story and focus on her sexual purity. This was the case for all female saints: virginity equals holiness. According to the morals of the *vitae*, women could rarely reach sanctification in any other way.

Thecla was one of the first examples of purity as a defining holy characteristic for female saints. Before her, there was a precedent for obtaining sainthood as a wife or mother (see Saint Perpetua or Saint Felicitas). In fact, author and commentator Karen Armstrong writes, "[u]ntil the 4th century, Thecla was one of the most important of the holy women of Christianity. We find St. Methodius, in his Symposium, celebrating the glory of virginity ranking Thecla as the most illustrious virgin of the Church. Later she would lose this position to the virgin Mary" (*The Gospel According to Woman*, 140). For



virginity to become such a crucial element to a woman's relationship with God was detrimental to women in most ways, but it also offered them an avenue for social and spiritual independence. There are many instances in hagiographical tradition in which women pursue monasticism or sainthood in order to avoid the influence of men. The quest to preserve their virginity, and thus their holiness, left women in Early Christianity an option other than slavery to their husbands and their children for the rest of their lives. However, although men encouraged women to flee from worldly passions, they did not appreciate when their own desires were rejected as a result. This led to many faithful women being raped or martyred. Female saints were the example for young women, but their example was a treacherous one. If Christian women wished to pursue holiness, the *vitae* commands them to pursue chastity. But, like Thecla denying Alexander and ending up in the games as a result, to pursue chastity was to pursue danger.

This danger did not stop women from going to extreme lengths to abstain from sexual passions. Because women were blamed for their own victimization, they took it upon themselves to avoid tempting the men around them at all costs. For example, Thecla, after Paul tells her that her presence on the mission field is going to be a temptation, shaves her hair and wears men's clothes. Thecla is not the only saint who did this. An even more famous example of this behavior comes from the story of Joan of Arc. Joan of Arc, the 15<sup>th</sup> century saint from France, dressed as a man in order to lead France to victory in a battle during the Hundred Years' War. However, Joan was captured by the English and placed on trial for several reasons, one of them being that she was dressed as a man:

They said Jeanne [Joan] put off and entirely abandoned woman's clothes, with her hair cropped short in the fashion of young men, she wore shirt breeches, doublet, with hose joined together long and fastened to the said doublet by twenty points, long leggings laced on the outside, a short mantle reaching to the knee, or thereabouts, a close-cut cap, tight-fitting boots or buskins, long spurs, sword, dagger, breastplate, lance and other arms in the style of men-at-arms. (*Joan of Arc*, qtd in Armstrong 155)

This act of defiance was one of the reasons why Saint Joan of Arc was burned at the stake at the heartbreaking age of nineteen. Both Thecla and Joan dressed as men in order to gain some sort of equality, even if for a moment. Joan wanted equality on the battlefield, and Thecla wanted equality on the mission field. Surprisingly, though, these stories are relatively tame when compared to the lengths some other women went to in order to preserve their chastity. Schulenberg summarizes accounts of women cutting off their breasts, stuffing dead animals in their clothes, and castrating themselves in order to avoid ravenous men (250). Women were consistently told that it was better to torture themselves than be raped, and if they were raped, they might as well kill themselves. The *vitae* not only promoted this perspective but venerated and upheld it as the highest standard of holiness.

Although men were frustrated when women modeled themselves after men, they believed that the only way to achieve sanctity was to become a man. Armstrong points out several of these quotations from influential (and notably misogynist) Christian men. Saint Jerome, a 4<sup>th</sup> century Latin Catholic priest and church historian, wrote, "As long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when

she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man” (qtd in Armstrong 143). Jerome perfectly illustrates the dilemma for Christian women. If a woman wants to be holy, she must become a man; yet, she is fundamentally different than men and should not attempt to imitate them. This sort of logic traps women into a never-ending cycle of failure. According to Jerome, holiness is simply unattainable for women.

Similarly, Saint Ambrose, a 4<sup>th</sup> century Roman governor and bishop in Milan, wrote, “...[S]he who does not believe is a woman and should be designated by the name of her sex, whereas she who believes progresses to perfect manhood, to the measure of the adulthood of Christ. She then dispenses with the name of her sex, the seductiveness of youth, the garrulousness of old age” (qtd in Armstrong 144). Ambrose claimed that the only way for a woman to become holy is for that woman to become a man—associating manhood with a sort of Christian enlightenment. Again, Christian women are given a false solution—one in which the only option for holiness is to somehow metamorphose into a man.

Finally, Leander of Seville, a 6th century Catholic bishop, wrote,

... [A] virgin remains a woman and yet knows nothing of the drives and compulsions of her sex. Forgetful of her feminine weaknesses, she lives in masculine strength; nor has she any need to become a slave to her body which by natural law should be subservient to a man. Happy the virgin who takes her body from Eve but not her punishment.” (qtd in Armstrong 144)

For the women who desperately want to achieve holiness, it is a narrow path, indeed. They must be like a man in as many ways as possible, but they mustn't dress like a man or, even worse, act like one. There is clearly a fine line between "progressing towards perfect manhood" and attempting to be equal with them, and failure to walk that line leads to the stake. Armstrong quotes the 9th century Synod of Verona, an assembly of the church and its clergy, to emphasize the rejection of this transvestite behavior:

The 9<sup>th</sup> century Synod of Ver indicates that this phenomenon may have been more than a pious legend when it says, 'if women who choose chastity in the cause of religion either take on the clothes of a man or cut their hair in order to appear false to others, we resolve that they should be admonished and criticized, because we consider that they err through a great ignorance rather than zeal.' (qtd in Armstrong 147)

It is puzzling that the same behavior which Thecla is exalted for would lead young women to be "admonished and criticized." If saints are supposed to be the example, why are women so harshly punished for imitating them? Perhaps this quote from Saint Ambrose will give the answer to this question. When introducing the story of Saint Thecla, Ambrose wrote, "Let Thecla show you how life can be sacrificed" (qtd. Armstrong 280). Ambrose acknowledges the rigid path to righteousness for women. There is treachery on every side for a woman who wishes to give her life to Christ. Because of the spiritual standards put in place for a woman, there is a vicious pattern throughout hagiographical tradition. The pattern is this: the church upholds women who abstain from sex and venerates them as holy; women view this as an avenue to pursue social and spiritual independence; in order to pursue holiness, they must go to great

lengths to abstain from corruption; this leads them to dress as men and deny men; as a result, men oversexualize their purity and they are infuriated by their attempts to stay pure; men rape the women to force them into submission; women kill themselves because they are told that their holiness is directly connected to their purity, so they feel like a relationship with God is unachievable. This pattern was repeated throughout centuries of Christian tradition, and it all started with the promotion and circulation of a couple of stories of saints.

Today, Thecla is no longer considered a canonized saint. The Catholic church de-canonized Thecla in the 1960s due to her lack of historical evidence.

Sainthood was not always an institution dictated by the church. In fact, the earliest saints were canonized at the local level. Around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic church began to more carefully monitor the canonization process. There were investigations and rules put in place to regulate the validity of sainthood. Tellingly, when the canonization process was institutionalized, the number of female saints drastically declined. Dr. Schulenberg includes fig. 2 in her book to demonstrate the steady decline of female representation in the *vitae* as the church gains more power:

TABLE 1 Women Saints in the Middle Ages, 500–1099

YEARS	TOTAL NUMBER OF SAINTS	MALE SAINTS	FEMALE SAINTS	PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE SAINTS*
500–49	236	213	23	9.7
550–99	304	281	23	7.6
600–49	201	180	21	10.4
650–99	365	292	73	20.0
700–49	230	176	54	23.5
750–99	194	157	37	19.1
800–49	128	109	19	14.8
850–99	151	132	19	12.6
900–49	64	49	15	23.4
950–99	105	88	17	16.2
1000–49	132	117	15	11.4
1050–99	164	148	16	9.8
Total	2,274	1,942	332	—

Source: Saints listed in the *Bibliotheca sanctorum*.

Note: Because of the nature of our sources, the figures shown are only approximate.

\*Average = 14.9

Figure 2. “Women Saints in the Middle Ages, 500-1099. (Shulenberg, 35).

Although Thecla was de-canonized relatively recently, it is hard to ignore the widespread suppression of female saints since the Catholic church took hold of the entire process. Perhaps the church did not realize the effect these stories would have on the lives of actual Christian women. Perhaps they did not expect women to pursue holiness, independence, and spiritual equality with such zeal. It is clear that Thecla's story, and other stories like hers, had a dangerous and unwanted effect on the women who heard it. This effect allowed for women to resist and challenge the men around them. For Thecla, all it took was hearing a sermon from her bedroom window, and she began to pursue holiness at all costs, even to the point of defying the men in her life. All it takes is a dangerous story to make a dangerous woman.

Southern Baptists do not venerate saints, but if they did, Lottie Moon would be on the top of the altar. I remember the first time I heard her story. I was ten years old and it was a chilly Sunday in December. As someone who grew up in a Southern Baptist Church, I was surprised to hear the name of a woman coming from the pulpit. That name was Lottie Moon, and the Christmas offering was named after her. There was no further explanation. I did not know her story, and I did not understand why we were supposed to give money in an envelope with her name on it. So, I decided to go and do the research myself.

According to the *International Missions Board* (IMB) website, Lottie Moon was born in Virginia in 1840. She was always a driven woman, and because of that she was one of the first women in the South to earn her master's degree. That same passion and fervor was applied to her spiritual life when she decided to serve in China as a missionary. Lottie Moon rejected a marriage proposal, sold all of her belongings, and set

sail for China when she was only 32 years old. So, this southern, Christian, and single woman taught at a girls' school to bring the gospel to Chinese women, and she ended up staying there for the rest of her life. She started dressing like the locals, she learned their language, and she prepared their food. One of the most famous examples of Lottie Moon's compassion was that she always handed out freshly baked cookies to the people in her village.

Lottie Moon's life was not easy. She was often rejected and despised. Although she toiled to care for her community, she was often left empty and disappointed. She wrote constant letters to the Southern Baptist Convention asking for financial support, but because she was a woman, her letters were often ignored or rejected. The IMB concludes her life story with this passage:

Disease, turmoil and lack of co-workers threatened to undo Lottie's work. But she gave herself completely to God, helping lay the foundation of what would become the modern Chinese church, one of the fastest-growing Christian movements in the world. Lottie Moon died at 72 — ill and in declining health after decades ministering to her beloved Chinese. But her legacy lives on. ("Who Was Lottie Moon," IMB)

But what *is* her legacy? As I read further into Lottie Moon's story, I discovered how often she was refused the aid she needed by the Southern Baptist Church. This aid, which would have been more freely offered to a married man, was never offered to a single woman. I also discovered that the common narrative told about Lottie Moon's death—that she died of hunger because she gave away all of her own food to the starving people

of China— is a myth. In an interview with Regina Sullivan, a professor at Berkeley College in New York, David McCollum writes:

Sullivan maintains that Southern Baptist leaders have used inaccurate accounts of [Moon's] death on Christmas Eve in order to create a legend of martyrdom to fuel their fundraising efforts for foreign missions... That legend has, for almost a century, been highlighted by the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, the SBC's largest single source of mission funding. Sullivan maintains, from her research, that Moon actually died from an infection, the effects of dementia and subsequent loss of appetite; her medical needs were carefully attended to until her death by professional doctors and nurses. (*EthicsDaily*)

The Southern Baptist Church chose what parts of Lottie Moon's story would make a good profit, and they ignored the rest. They manipulated her testimony by refusing to acknowledge the fact that they left her without the proper support and by adding an alleged martyrdom to monetize her death. Because they could not do so to Lottie Moon herself, the Southern Baptist Church suppressed her story into submission. Lottie Moon's story is dangerous. No father wants his little girl to hear that story and feel inspired to reject a marriage proposal and live in an impoverished country for thirty-nine years. Stories have impacts, and if you control a story, you control its influence.

After I learned the story of Lottie Moon in 2010, I wrote a monologue from her perspective and delivered it in front of my church. I knew it was important to know the story behind the name. I am the perfect example of a dangerous story leading to a dangerous woman: if a girl like me hears the story of Lottie Moon, she might write an



undergraduate honors thesis on the oppression of women in the church. Lottie Moon was a real woman. She struggled with misogyny and oppression her whole life, while all she wanted to do was further the gospel to a part of the world where people needed it. I cannot argue that Thecla was a real woman, nor is that the goal of my thesis. However, her story had the same dangerous effect on women in the early church that Lottie Moon's had on me. For this reason, Thecla's story was suppressed, and Lottie Moon's story continues to be misrepresented. Whether in 2<sup>nd</sup> century Turkey, or 21<sup>st</sup> century America, the church has silenced dangerous stories in order to avoid dangerous women.

## Chapter Four: A New Tradition

“For he alone is the goal of salvation and the foundation of immortal life.”

*-The Acts of Paul and Thecla*

*The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is the story of a divine calling. When Thecla was sitting in her bedroom window, she not only heard the sermons of Paul, but she also witnessed a vocation from God that would change her life forever. This calling caused Thecla to rebel against what her life was expected to be, and it possessed her to follow Christ even to the point of death and humiliation. She ignored the wishes of her mother, she relinquished her chance of becoming a wife, she followed Paul despite his disapproval, she insulted the emperor, she defiled her beauty, and she stood in the middle of an arena and baptized herself in a vat of electric eels. God’s calling for Thecla had no regard for her limitations as a woman.

For the sake of this thesis, I not only wanted to study Thecla’s life, but I also wanted to study Thecla’s way of living. With the help of my university, I was able to observe the lives of women who have committed their lives to the advancement of the gospel—Benedictine Sisters in Venice, Italy.

### *A Modern Saint: Sister Edarlyn*

On July 25, 2019, I had a conversation with a woman who, like Thecla, has completely dedicated her mission to the calling of Jesus Christ. Sister Edarlyn, a Filipino nun who lives and studies in Venice, Italy sat down with me in *Istituto San Guiseppe*. She was a member of the Daughters of St. Joseph. I was sitting in a common area filled with plants and natural light. The marble ceiling towered over me, covered in immaculate paintings and carvings. As I sat across from Sister Edarlyn, her warm smile welcomed me. It quickly became less like talking to a stranger, and more like talking to an old

friend. I asked about her story, her mission, and her vocation. She was raised in a Christian home with her mother, one brother, and one sister in the Philippines. Her first encounter with the sisterhood was in her Catholic high school:

*I always dreamt—and also wanted— that in the future I'd be having a happy life, a peaceful life, and a family of my own. And also my family is dreaming about it for me, no? But then it was the will of God. God asked me his own way. I never thought of being a religious sister. When I was in high school, because the school was run by the Benedictine sisters, I hated sisters! They were very, very strict. We were always reciting prayers before the class, and our class would pray the rosary. Since I was one of the tallest girls, I would kneel down, but after a while—I am obstinate! I was complaining. I was disturbing others. I know that prayer is important, but you know young ones. (Edarlyn)*

Her laughter echoed through the convent, disturbing some older sisters who were watching news in the opposite room. It was hard for me to imagine the woman sitting across from me as a stubborn teenage girl, not wanting to kneel in prayer because it hurt her knees. But as she told the story, her eyes lit up. She was passionate and lively, laughing at her younger self, her ignorance, and her misunderstanding.

*I love movies, also. I was scared because I watched movies about sisters giving difficulties to the other sisters. They were also telling of the saints and their suffering. I had that baggage entering the convent—that we must be careful with the sisters, you know? But the sisters, we are just like everybody else. There are some people that you are not sympathetic*

*with, and there are people you are sympathetic with. Some with who you say to yourself 'I want to talk to them! I want to know more!' It's only a mindset.*

I recalled *Sister Act* (1992) and *The Sound of Music* (1965), some of my favorite movies that capture nuns in the same light as Sister Edarlyn identified: the stereotype of strict women with a tendency to gossip and a struggle to get along. As Sister Edarlyn described her “baggage,” I realized that she was also leveling with mine, as if to say she had been just like me, once, too. She recalled:

*But then one time— it was February I think— a sister from this congregation [in Venice] with another Italian sister went in our school. Because in the month of February, we called that month Vocation Search. What does it mean, vocation? Vocation is a calling from god. As [Catholic] Christians we believe there is three callings: a religious life, a family life, and then remaining single for a cause. The Catholics— we believe in this. I was attracted to the name: Daughters of St. Joseph—in Italian, San Guiseppe. They were under the protection of St. Joseph— the worker, and the foster father of Jesus. I was baptized in that parish [dedicated to St. Joseph]. The first attraction is to continue my devotion to St. Joseph. And so, what I did—I approached the sister after they introduced their congregation. I was attracted not because they are sisters, but only in the name— St. Joseph! San Guiseppe! The Daughters of St. Joseph. I have such a devotion to St. Joseph.*

As Sister Edarlyn called out St. Joseph's name, it felt like a prayer. Her eyes closed, and she was deeply moved by her own testimony. I could not help but think of St. Thecla, and her dedication to the apostle Paul. All it took was hearing his sermon outside her window, and Thecla had no other choice but to pursue this devotion. This was the way Sister Edarlyn spoke of St. Joseph. I asked her to expound on her devotion to the Saint. She said:

*It's our distinction to other congregations. Here is the spirituality of the home of Nazareth. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph live together in simplicity, in laboriousness. We [the Daughters of St. Joseph] have to work also, and a time for silence also, even in our work. In the midst of our work, we need also to cultivate our inner silence. St. Joseph was a man of silence, no? He worked more. Even in the Bible, few things are being said about St. Joseph. He did not talk about himself. Among the saints, he is called a man of silence. This is in our virtues— to be silent. You can be silent in the exterior, but you are not silent inwardly. There is a lot of anger, lamentations in life, or even depression, no? St. Joseph offered everything to God, even his own will. He had the opportunity to shame Mary for being pregnant before marriage, but Joseph was a righteous man, and he loved very much Mary, so he stayed silent. We need also to help others, not to be showy, not to proclaim 'I am doing this' just to show we are doing good things. You can do good things in a heathen way. St. Joseph wants us to learn to be humble. I do good not because you will recognize me, but I am doing this out of love. God wants us to*

*continue as his children, because inside us, there is always a seed of goodness. It's up to us to cultivate that seed of goodness, or to be swayed by the world.*

Sister Edarlynn was dedicated to St. Joseph, because he was a man of action. He was faithful, and he did not call attention to his own work. This was his calling: to be devout even in silence and without any promise of recognition from man.

*An Early Christian Saint: Priscilla*

I recalled a catacomb I visited during my stay in Rome. It was the *Catacomb De Priscilla*. This catacomb, nicknamed the queen of Catacombs by archeologists, housed over 40,000 burial sites for early Christians from the late 2nd century into the 5th. A noble woman by the name of Priscilla funded the burial site for believers who were being martyred in Rome and were thus not permitted to be buried within city limits. The catacomb was massive with tombs lining the walls like bookshelves.

I was even more astounded, however, by all of the beautiful artwork in the catacomb. They were elaborate frescoes, each depicting a different scene of worship.



**Figure 3. Madonna in Catacomb de Priscilla. (Motl)**

There was a painting of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego enduring the fire along with the silhouetted figure of Christ; a painting of Abraham sacrificing his son as a sign of faithfulness to Yahweh; a painting of the apocalyptic character Susannah being rescued from false accusation and persecution; and a painting of believers— both men and women—sitting down to share in the Eucharist. In this catacomb, there was

also the oldest known nativity, a depiction of Mary and the infant Jesus, in the world

(see fig.3). The fresco was faded and chipping, but it was easy to make out the mother Mary nursing her Savior to sleep.

My favorite painting in the catacomb was dedicated to the founder, Priscilla (see fig. 4). The painting on the left depicts her marriage, the painting on the right depicts her nursing a child, and the painting in the middle depicts the woman in a worshipful stance with a prayer veil over her head. Although this woman's life was no doubt filled with joy and love, the center of her life was her calling to Christianity. She was first and foremost a worshiper of the Most High.



*Figure 4. Priscilla's Life in Catacomb de Priscilla. (Motl).*

The most touching aspect of this painting, however, was pointed out to me by the tour guide. When we approached the room covered in bright colored artwork, she allowed us to stand in awe for just a minute before turning off all the lights. We all let out a gasp of surprise. The tour guide explained that this was how dark the catacomb was without electricity. We could barely move, much less see the paintings. The tour guide emphasized that when the catacomb was painted, it was perhaps even darker than it was now. In order to create the artwork we were admiring, someone had to hold up a candle

to each stroke of the paintbrush. They did not expect anyone to see these paintings. They painted these not for the good of others, but for the glory of God. We, as tourists, were witnessing a private act of worship. One with the virtue of St. Joseph— a silent, faithful act of good without any promise of recognition.

Women are so often called to carry out their calling in silence. They are the devoted workers behind the scenes, the ones painting in the dark. Just as St. Joseph was quiet in his faith to support others, women are often forced to uphold this role. Their lack of recognition, however, does not prevent women from pursuing their vocation. They continue to work, to support, to encourage, and they faithfully hold up a candle to their paint brush as they go.

Sister Edarlyn was no different, even when her mother disapproved of her decision to pursue life in the sisterhood, she did not let that deter her mission. She told me:

*The sister from that time—the Italian sister—she would write me. I would ask her questions about life, and she would answer. I ask what is their mission. She responded that their mission is education for the youth, so I was attracted to that. I wanted to see and experience the life in the convent. I had the prejudice that life in the convent is hard, also. So, even [though] my family are Christians, my mother, for example, did not agree that I would enter the convent. When I tried to visit the sisters and stay there for a while, she called me up and told me to [stay] home. She said, ‘you can serve god even outside the convent,’ and it’s true! But I said, ‘let me try this, ma. If I’m not happy, I will be returning anytime in our house*



*and continue what you want for me. For sure, our house is always open to welcome me as a daughter, no? My mother said, 'ehhh, we'll see—you will be returning. So, I started that way.*

Sister Edarlyn never returned home. She fell in love with the sisterhood and dedicated her life to the gospel and teachings of St. Joseph. As Sister Edarlyn shared her story, I thought back again to Thecla's story, and how Thecla's mother begged for her to stay home, to get married, to pursue a life of what was expected of her. This is the constant struggle of women: if they choose to follow their own desires, what will they leave behind? If they choose marriage, will they sacrifice their career? If they choose a career, will that rob them of being a proper mother? If they choose God's calling for their life, what relationships will they have to sacrifice in the process? Both Thecla and Sister Edarlyn had to give up their families' expectations for their life. They would never get married, and they would never have children. Instead, they must live out their days in faithful pursuit of the divine calling given to them. No one and nothing could keep them from this.

As I was speaking to Sister Edarlyn, I felt like I was witnessing her worship. She wove long reveries, elaborating tangents about what God and the gospel meant to her. I sat and I listened, and for a moment, I was permitted to behold the deepest motivations of her heart. She spoke of theology, politics, and the environment. She spoke of humanity, and what humanity should look like when it is first and foremost defined by love, empathy, and acceptance. At one point in the conversation, she paused and asked if I was Catholic. I shook my head no, admittedly a little nervous that she would dismiss my theology. Her response felt like a breath of fresh air:

*Ah, well we both believe in Jesus. That is our commonality, no? But even as a Catholic, I must respect our Muslim brothers. You know? We must respect them. We must not have the prejudice that Muslims are enemies of the Christian. This is a part of vanity. We are all children of Adam and Eve. We must support each other; bear each other. When we see our dogs, when we come home, their tail is always wagging. They are happy you are there. The pet greets you. You know, human beings—we forget to greet each other. To recognize you are here; your presence. Greetings are a part of human beings. We need to greet each other. Before we become Christians, we must practice being human. God is like air. We do not see him, but there is a presence. If there is a lot of noise, we don't feel him. Even in the song; in the song, there is instrumental music. Even the lovers, they don't constantly say "I love you, I love you," but there are moments of silence—moments of rest, moments of love. We don't have that sensibility these days. Even in the noise, we have to discover the presence of God. This is the spirituality of St. Joseph. There is a Chinese saying that the bamboo tree, when it grows taller, the more it learns how to bend and not break.*

Sister Edarlyn's vocation is so intricately woven into her person. She spoke so freely about her theology, the God she loved, and the Saint she was devoted to, I was grateful to have been even a small part of her story.

Finally, I explained the context of my interview to Sister Edarlyn. I told her that I, too, felt a vocational call to ministry. I shared that an ongoing controversy in the

evangelical church was the treatment of women in ministry. I had barely stopped talking when she chimed in:

*Even in the Catholic church, women are seen as a second class. This is cultural. I believe that we women have also roles. In the home, the women must be mothers, and a man must work outside. Even in the church, as Christians, we have also roles. So, for me, as a Catholic, priests are only male. However, in the Old Testament, there are priestesses. I don't want to, also, tell heresy against our Catholic faith. Because in the Catholic faith, we not only believe in the Bible, but the tradition of the Catholic church.*

I realized she was holding herself back. Once she mentioned the women in the Old Testament, her tone shifted. The idea of going against tradition caused her to bite her tongue. She, nevertheless, continued—

*However, now, the tradition is shifting to allow women to have roles. For instance, the Pope allows not only altar boys but also altar girls. It takes time. It takes years. Men are chauvinists, also. We women are [perceived as] the weak gender. But men are also weak. They are human. Psychologically speaking, men and women must cry. There are also tears of joy, not only sadness or sorrow. In the Philippines, women have a special role in politics. We have female presidents. In the US, you do too, no?*

I had to shamefully respond that, no, we had never had a female president.

*Ah. Well, women, psychologically speaking, are more organized than men. We do one thing; we think of the others also. Multitasking— we can do that. Of course, there are things men can do only. But that does not mean men are superior to us. Even Joan of Arc— she pretended to become a man to fight for her faith and what she believed in. There are a lot of saints and even in the Bible—Mary Magdalene in the Bible! She had an important and big role that she played in the resurrection of Jesus. The angels announced to women that there was a resurrection. Some men say that angels told women first because they like to talk, so the news will spread quickly. But I don't believe that. It is a stereotype.*

As she continued speaking, I could feel that she was starting to leave behind her disclaimer about tradition. It was clear that she had been thinking about this for a while, and she was grateful for someone to air her grievances to. I was also grateful. Christian women from all over the world and from every sort of theological background can unite in one thing: they are seen as less than men. It is a universal truth all over the world— from Arkansas to Venice.

*Our greatness as women is because we can generate life. In politics, ecology, and in the church— women have a strength that men cannot do. We have a sense of generation. Not only in the productive system, but also in a moral sense and a spiritual sense. We are counselors. Women are more astute than men. Behind the success of man, there is always a woman. I actually believe that! Women are always the inspiration. St. Paul is a chauvinist. My sister and I used to write in our*

*Bibles when Paul would address brothers ‘and sisters!’ I think we need educating the young ones, to convince these little ones that girls have also a role to play. It takes time, but women have an important role to play in the church. We believe in the sacrament of the sacred Eucharist: only twelve disciples, the first priests ordained by Jesus. But the priesthood of Jesus, is for all. We give glory to God. Worshipping God, that is ministry. In the strict sense, that is the meaning of the ministry. That is the one way also to serve God, our common priesthood. [As Catholics,] I cannot be ordained as a priest as a woman, but I can do something for my church.*

I was overjoyed. Sister Edarlyn was preaching to the choir. I was interviewing her for my thesis, and she started writing it for me. But then she paused, reeling herself back to the truth of her religion: *“But it is the Catholic church. I cannot disobey the structure of the Church, because we also believe in the tradition of the Church.”*

I thought back to my visit to Vatican City in Rome. I remember how odd it seemed that the walls of the Vatican were covered in biblical women and female saints. Even the walls of the most sacred chapel in the world— the Sistine Chapel— were lined with strong, influential women in theology. On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo alternated prophets from the Old Testament with women known as Sybils. Sybils were credited with writing the Judeo-Christian Sibylline Oracles. The sibyl was regarded by some Christians as a prophetic authority comparable to the Old Testament. On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo alternated five sibyls and seven prophets. In the medieval hymn *Dies Irae*, the sibyl is the equal of David as a prophet. He

depicted the Cumaean, Delphic, Eryhraean, Persian and Libyan Sybils (“Michelangelo’s Sybils of the Sistine Chapel,” *About Famous Artists*).

The five Sibyls painted by Michelangelo were said to have foretold of the birth of a savior. The prophecies by the pagan prophetesses were accepted by Christians as being fulfilled with the birth of Christ. Thus, the prophets of the Old Testament and the Sibyls of pagan antiquity all



foretold the same coming of the Christ and are depicted together in the Sistine Chapel.

Michelangelo painted these figures larger than any other in the Sistine Chapel. During Michelangelo’s time there was a renewed interest in the writings of the classical and early Christian period which drew more attention to the Sibyls. Michelangelo’s depiction of them here shows the shift in theology at the time. (“Michelangelo’s Sybils of the Sistine Chapel)

*Figure 5. Delphic Oracle in the Sistine Chapel. (About Famous Artists).*

How is it that the walls of the Sistine Chapel are permitted to host paintings of women who changed the course of Christianity, yet actual women are given limited access to the services within it? Why, in theory, are women allowed to preach the coming of Jesus Christ, yet in practice, they are ignored? How is it that some women are depicted as pinnacles of holiness, while still rarely given access to the tools they need to pursue their vocations?

Sister Edarlyn continued:

*But there is also time to renew something inside the church. The church is*



**Figure 6. "The Prodigal Son." (Rembrandt).**

*a mother. God has a motherly heart also. I don't know if you are familiar with the*

*Rembrandt painting of the "Prodigal Son"*

*[See fig. 6]. You see the two hands of God.*

*When the prodigal son returned, not to claim again his sonship, but to become a servant of the father, because he did not feel worthy to be a son again to his father. You know, one of the interpretations is that if you ask for your*

*inheritance is to tell your parents "you die."*

*The son doesn't love him. Yet the father accepted it, no? He gave love and mercy. When his son returned, you see in that painting, one hand is the hand of a mother, and one is the father. This one is the hand of a male, a father's hand, and this one is the mother. God is a father, and God is a mother. This is a very nice interpretation of the prodigal son. In the*

*Catholic church, we should be talking about this. God is always a mother, also. We women have our own reasoning, because we don't consider one aspect. We have a deeper perspective of life. We have discernment. Respect of differences, I believe. We as human beings, we are created equal [in] God['s eyes]. I studied also at a protestant school. We have different Bibles, no? We were fighting which one is more correct. One time, when we were discussing about the Bible, I told my part and my reasoning. I am a Catholic and I love being a Catholic, but I respect your Bible. I don't fight over that. Sometimes we lose our energy because of that. That is your tradition, and I respect your tradition. When I confronted that topic, I spoke to them in front of our class, I said we do not need to fight over this. We are all Christians. Why look at our differences? Why not focus on our commonalities? You cannot do anything about history. So, I am a very open-minded person, I don't want to fight. I fight over Christian faith; I believe that Jesus Christ is our savior. I would open my life to that. Our strengths will be complementary to each other. Even in public service, we need women and men. We need also to promote our own rights [as women]. I'm not a feminist, but I believe that women have a stand. We have the capacities of men. We need also to show that we have something to contribute to humanity. Si.*

Sister Edarlyn and I have a great deal more in common than I ever thought we could. Despite our different nationalities, our different backgrounds, our different upbringings, our different cultures, our different lifestyles, our different theologies, our



different ages, and our different perspectives, we found companionship in our similarities. We are both students, we are both in the middle of writing a thesis, we are both adventurous and open-minded, and we both put a lot of weight into what it means to be a human and a child of God. But most importantly, we both share the same calling. Although our calling looks drastically different in practice, we are both dedicated to the idea of loving others in the name of Jesus. It was this commonality which caused us to bond so quickly in such a short amount of time. Not only did we share a calling, but we also share our womanhood. We understand each other and what it means to love Christ, and we also understand what it means to love Christ as women. We are similar in that we have received a divine calling from our Savior, and we are similar in that tradition has dictated the degree to which we can follow that calling.

Evangelical Christians have spent so much time separating themselves from tradition that they don't recognize the ways it has sculpted their understanding of scripture. Tradition dictates that women are inferior, that virginity is equal to holiness, and that women belong behind the potluck table instead of behind the pulpit. Scripture does not promote this way of thinking. According to the Bible, women are necessary. God chooses women; he promotes them; he emboldens them; he uses them in ways he could never use men. The mentality that women may support but never lead comes from the tradition that women are and always have been inferior to men. This is not merely a Christian tradition. It can be found in every major religion, government, and institution in the world. It is one of the oldest and most universal traditions in the world that women are not equal to men.

The church should not be dictated by this tradition. If we as Christians are called to separate ourselves from that which is worldly, we should separate ourselves from the earthly mindset that women are inferior in men to our interpretations of scripture. Instead, we should administer interpretive tools to properly contextualize parts of scripture that discuss women. We should give ourselves to the study of historical and literary context, diligent interpretation, and cultural studies. We should research Priscilla alongside Paul. As women and as those who are called to pursue a life of ministry, our gifts are not complementary to men. They do not exist only to support, to submit, nor subserve. The divine calling of the woman is strong, sufficient, and spirit-filled.

As Sister Edarlyn emphasized, it is most important to recognize our commonalities. We are children of God, not Catholic, Evangelical, man, nor woman. Our beauty is found in our diversity. The body of Christ would be so much less if it were made up of one nationality, one culture, or one gender. To this day, these words from Sister Edarlyn have shifted my perspective of the world:

*Don't think that we [the sisters] are angels. We also have our weaknesses. Holiness is not doing a miracle, and it is not kneeling down to the sacraments to 'pray pray pray.' **Holiness is human.** Holiness is doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way of love. If you love the subject in school, even if it's difficult, you will learn. If you have passion for that, you overcome it. We must always be first human, in the sense that— to be a human being is to be different, and we must respect others.*

Sister Edarlyn, like Thecla, and like every other woman with a calling to pursue ministry, has a crucial role in the body of Christ. Hearing Sister Edarlyn's story has changed my

life for the better. It has empowered me, refreshed me, and given me a new perspective on what it means to pursue holiness. If every Evangelical began to practice St. Joseph's virtue of silence, and if they took the moment to listen to the stories of those who are different from them, I believe we would see a global shift in the evangelical church. It would be a shift towards empathy, kindness, and understanding. I also believe we would see a shift in the church's leadership. Not only would there be more women in leadership, but there would be more people of color, sexualities, and disabilities. This is what I want for the church: a new tradition.

### **Conclusion: The First Step**

*The Acts of Paul and Thecla* inspired early Christian women to imagine a whole new realm of possibilities for their role in ministry. If Thecla could leave everything behind and dedicate her life to the gospel and mission of Jesus Christ, why couldn't other women? If God chose Thecla, a young girl from Iconium sitting in her bedroom window, why couldn't other girls be chosen? Whether Thecla was historical, a legend, or even a protagonist in a novel, her story had the power to provoke questions about the way things were. Indeed, Thecla was no different than the rest of us. She was no one until she encountered the gospel, and she was no one until she decided to abandon everything and everyone to shamelessly pursue Christ without any regard for the expectations of her sex. No one could keep her from living according to her call: not her mother, her fiancé, the emperor, and not even her own spiritual mentor, Paul. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* was so important not because of its historical or theological accuracy, but because of its historical and theological implication: the implication that women have so much more to offer in roles of church leadership, biblical studies, and global ministry.

As a church, we must put an end to the widespread oppression of women. This oppression stems from the ancient tradition that women are less human than men and, therefore, less holy. This leads Christian men, self-proclaimed godly men, to discount, to ignore, to suppress, and even to abuse women. The Bible does not allow for this behavior. It is crucial for the church to relinquish this tradition. If the church does not allow women to contribute fully to the body of Christ, the church will never be whole, and it will never truly be God's will for his people.

I believe the first step to a cure for Christian misogyny is also the first step to writing a new tradition—a tradition that requires women as crucial members of the body of Christ: the church must circulate and encourage dangerous stories. Tradition is cultivated and developed through stories. If Christians were to encourage stories of strong women who are emboldened by the gospel to do impossible things, there would be a shift towards a tradition in which little girls would be free to imagine their divine calling within any context: whether it be behind the pulpit, on the mission field, or the author of biblical commentaries. In order to encourage this new way of thinking and to demand the respect women deserve, we must not shy away from stories like those of Sister Edarlyn, Lottie Moon, or Thecla.

The only way to write a new tradition is to read, cultivate, and spread a different narrative: one in which women are permitted to enter the picture. This is the danger in a dangerous story: the women who are inspired by them. These are the women who will rise up and demand a seat at the table. The women who will not allow men to dictate their calling from God, women like Esther, Jael, Ruth, Mary Magdalene, Phoebe, Priscilla, Thecla, and women like me. Then, and only then, will the church be prepared to open its doors to the women who have always been waiting at the threshold, the women who sit and listen like spiders in a window. If we allow dangerous stories to transform the way we live and worship, this new tradition *can* and *will* revolutionize Christianity as we know it.

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