

THE MYRRH-BEARING WOMEN
Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus
THE SEVEN DEACONS AND EARLY EVANGELISM

May 4, 2014
3rd Sunday of Pascha
Revision F

GOSPEL: Mark 15:43-16:8
EPISTLE: Acts 6:1-7

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Today's Gospel lesson is used in the West for Easter Sunday to illustrate the Resurrection. In the Eastern lectionary, the parallel account to today's Gospel lesson from Matthew is used on Holy Saturday. Part of today's Gospel lesson is also used in the Orthodox lectionary as one of the eleven Gospels of the Resurrection that are read during Sunday Matins.

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The choice of this Gospel lesson today illustrates the character of some of the people involved, namely the Holy Women.

Today's Epistle lesson, the ordination of the first seven deacons, is not used at all in the West, nor is Stephen's witness and testimony. The account of Stephen's martyrdom, however, is used in the West because of its connection with the Apostle Paul. The Epistle lesson today continues the seven part series started last week on the development of Christianity after the Resurrection.

In the Eastern lectionary, the connection of today's Gospel and Epistle lessons (the Myrrh-Bearing Women and the first seven deacons) is significant and is a message in itself: the Myrrh-Bearing Women served as deaconesses to the Lord during His earthly ministry. The first seven deacons were chosen to continue this service.

Identity of the Holy Women

There are eight women that are generally identified¹ as the myrrh-bearers. Each of the four Gospels gives different aspects of the roles of these eight women at the Cross, and at the tomb on Pascha morning, perhaps since the eight women arrived in different groups and at different times. These are the eight:

- Mary Magdalene
- Mary Theotokos (The Virgin Mary)
- Joanna
- Salome
- Mary the wife of Cleopas (or Alphaeus)
- Susanna
- Mary of Bethany
- Martha of Bethany

Of the eight, the first five are the more prominent and outspoken. The last three, according to tradition, were also included. Five of these women were also very wealthy. The women of means were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and Mary and Martha of Bethany.

A confusing aspect in Gospel references to these women is that two of the Mary's had sons named James. Mary, the wife of Alphaeus, was the mother of James, one of the Twelve Apostles; the Virgin Mary was the stepmother of James, the Lord's brother (Matthew 13:55, Galatians 1:19).

In Western church tradition, James, the son of Alphaeus, and James, the Lord's brother, have sometimes been identified as the same person. From Eastern tradition, James, the Lord's brother was Bishop of Jerusalem from 30-62 AD and never left the vicinity of Jerusalem. He is the James who rendered the decision of the Council of Jerusalem in 48 AD (Acts 15:13-19). Eastern tradition links James, the son of Alphaeus, with evangelism abroad, especially in Egypt where he was martyred.

¹ The Life of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, Holy Apostles Convent, Buena Vista, Colorado, chap. 22.

One helpful tip that can clear up the confusion between these two Mary's is the passage that refers to the Virgin Mary as the mother of James and Joseph (Matthew 13:55). This Joseph is also called Barsabbas, Justus, and Judas (Acts 1:23, Acts 15:22). Therefore, the women looking on from afar² at the cross were Mary Magdalene, the Virgin Mary (that is, Mary the mother of James and Joseph), and Salome (the wife of Zebedee and the Virgin Mary's step daughter).

Matthew refers to Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary", which is the Virgin Mary also from the context (Matthew 27:61 and 28:1). Such church Fathers as Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Palamas support this interpretation.³ Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa identifies "Mary, the mother of James" (Mark 16:1 and Luke 24:10) as the Virgin Mary also.

These eight women had been together much of the time during Jesus' three-year public ministry. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and others (Luke 8:3) are described as providing for Jesus out of their possessions (that is, acting as deaconesses). These same women had faithfully followed Him from Galilee and had come up with Him to Jerusalem (Matthew 27:55, Mark 15:40-41 and Luke 23:55).

Gospel: Mark 15:43-16:8

To Jesus' disciples, the Resurrection came as amazement and surprise such that that they found it hard to believe. John Chrysostom noted⁴ that the Jewish leaders understood better what Jesus said about His Resurrection after three days than did His disciples.

“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the sea monster's belly, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth' (Matthew 12:39-41). Thus, He didn't say openly that He would rise again, since the Jews would have even laughed Him to scorn, but He intimated it in such manner, that they might believe Him to have foreknown it. Being aware of it, they said to Pilate, 'That deceiver said', these are their words, 'while He was yet alive, After three days I will rise again' (Matthew 27:63). Yet we know His disciples were ignorant of this; they were more void of understanding than the Jews. Therefore the Jews became self-condemned.”

By piecing together the four Gospel accounts, the following was the sequence of events on Pascha:

- Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary set out for the tomb when it was still dark and arrived at the first glimmer of daylight. They witnessed the angel descend with an earthquake and an appearance like lightning. The guards passed out in fear, but not the two Mary's (Matthew 28:1-4). The angel rolled the stone away to reveal an already empty tomb. In the hymns of the Resurrection used in the Orthodox Church,

² Thai is from Matthew 27:56.

³ The Life of the Virgin Mary, Pg. 381

Gregory of Nyssa, De Resurrection, 2, in PG 46. 633B

Gregory Palamas, pg. 151, 240A

⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XLIII, 2.

the words are directed to the Jewish leaders: either produce a body or explain the unbroken seal.

- Mary Magdalene immediately ran to tell Peter and John, leaving the Virgin Mary alone at the tomb (John 20:1-4).
- As the sun was rising, the other women arrived at the tomb, joining the Virgin Mary and saw the stone already rolled away (Mark 16:1-4, Luke 24:1-2).
- Going into the tomb, they spoke with the two angels (one inside, one outside) who had taken the appearance of young men. The angels told them to go tell the Apostles that the Lord had risen (Matthew 28:5-8, Mark 16:5-8, Luke 24:3-8).
- As the women left to tell the apostles, the angels left, and the guards recovered and reported what happened to the Sanhedrin. Then Peter and John arrived. Peter and John did not report seeing any angels (John 20:5-20, Luke 24:12).
- As the women returned home, they spoke to no one until they reached the Apostles. On the way the Lord Himself met them (Matthew 28:9-10).
- Meanwhile, Mary Magdalene had returned to the tomb with Peter and John, but stayed there after they left. As she wept, she saw the two angels and met the risen Lord (John 20:11-19, Mark 16:9).
- Mary Magdalene rejoined the other women and reported all these things to the Apostles (Mark 16:10-11, Luke 24:9-11).
- During the day, Cleopas (Mary's husband) and Luke were traveling to Emmaus and met the Lord on the way. They immediately returned to Jerusalem to the Apostles in the upper room (Luke 24:13-35).
- During the day, the Lord also appeared to Peter (Luke 24:34).
- The Apostles (except for John and Peter) didn't believe the women until the Lord appeared to them in the upper room that evening (Mark 16:14-18, Luke 24:36-43, John 20:19-23). Peter and John recognized that He had risen after seeing the empty sarcophagus of the grave clothes, i.e. the 100 lb. of myrrh, aloes and linen strips, lying there undisturbed (John 19:39-40, 20:6-8).

John Chrysostom stated⁵ that the women were the first to see the evidence of the Resurrection due to their continued faithfulness to Christ.

“The angel prepared them to bring the good news to others, which most of all made them believe. He said well ‘in Galilee’, freeing them from troubles and dangers, so that fear should not hinder their faith. ‘And they departed from the sepulcher with fear and great joy’ (Matthew 28:8). They had seen something amazing, and beyond expectation; an empty tomb, where they had seen Him laid two days earlier. He had led them to this sight, that they might become witnesses of both things, both of His tomb, and of His Resurrection. For they considered that no man could have taken Him, when so many soldiers were sitting by Him, unless He raised Himself. For this cause they rejoiced and wondered, and received the reward of so much faithfulness to Him, that they should first see and gladly declare, not what had been said only, but also what they had seen.”

⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXXXIX, 2.

Chrysostom also noted⁶ the courage of the women. “For what purpose do the women wait by the tomb? As yet they knew nothing great or exalted about Him, which is why they had brought ointments, and were waiting at the tomb, so that if the madness of the Jews should relax, they might go and embrace the body. Do you see the women’s courage? Do you see their affection and their noble spirit even in the face of death?”

John Chrysostom also noted⁷ that Mary Magdalene, the first to see the risen Christ, took a little time to realize that her relationship to Him changed with the Resurrection. None of His followers were going to be as familiar with Him, when He ascended to the Father, and they needed to be more reverent toward Him. The effect of His appearance to Mary Magdalene and the other women was to instill great faith in the others.

“When Mary Magdalene tried to embrace Jesus, I think that she wished still to converse with Him as before, and that in her joy she perceived nothing great in Him, although He had become far more excellent in the Flesh. To lead her away from this idea, and that she might speak to Him with more awe, He raised her thoughts, that she might pay more reverent attention to Him. With all the disciples He does not appear as familiar as before. To say, ‘Don’t approach Me as you did before, for matters are not in the same state, nor shall I be with you in the same way’, would have been harsh and arrogant. But by saying, ‘I am not yet ascended to the Father’ (John 20:17), though not painful to hear, was the saying of One declaring the same thing. For by saying, ‘I am not yet ascended’, He showed that He was hurrying there. It was not fitting that One about to depart there, and no longer to converse with men, should not be looked on with the same feelings as before. And the following 40 days showed that this was the case.”

“When Mary Magdalene brought the news of Christ’s Resurrection to His disciples, why was it that they didn’t grieve any more knowing that He was about to depart to return to His Father? Earlier they were grieved, supposing that He was about to die; but now that He was risen, what reason had they to grieve? Moreover, Mary reported His appearance and His words, which were enough to comfort them. It was likely that the disciples, on hearing these things, would either not believe the woman, or believing, would grieve that He had not deemed them worthy of the vision. He had promised to meet them in Galilee; in order that they might not be unsettled by dwelling on this, He didn’t let not a single day pass. He brought them to a state of longing, by their knowledge that He was risen, and by what they heard from the woman. When they were thirsting to see Him, and were greatly afraid, which thing itself especially made their desire greater, He then presented Himself before them, and that very marvelously. He appeared in the evening because it was probable that they would then be especially fearful. But the marvel was, why they did not suppose Him to be an apparition? For He entered suddenly, ‘when the doors were shut’. The chief cause was that the woman beforehand had formed great faith in them; besides, He showed His face to them clearly. He didn’t come by day, in order that all might be collected together. Great was their amazement; He didn’t knock at the door but all at once stood in their midst, and showed His side and His hands. At the

⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXXXVIII, v. 58.

⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LXXXVI, 5.

same time also by His Voice He smoothed their tossing thoughts, by saying, 'Peace be with you'" (John 20:19).

Throughout the Lord's three-year earthly ministry, the myrrh-bearing women had stayed in the background but contributed to everyone's support with meals and provisions. After the resurrection, these women are mentioned as being prominent during the prayers and supplications in the upper room prior to Pentecost. During this time, the Virgin Mary was especially prominent. All the things that she had kept and pondered in her heart (Matthew 2:19) now needed to come out in order that everyone might understand the Word of the Cross (1 Corinthians 1:18ff) and how Jesus had to be crucified.

The Virgin Mary

The Virgin Mary was quietly prominent at the Cross, and at the tomb⁸. Jerome, noting her presence, stated⁹,

"What a poor and impious view we take of Mary, if we hold that when other women were concerned about the burial of Jesus, she His mother was absent. John testifies that she was there present, when the Lord, upon the cross, commended her, as His mother and now a widow, to the care of John. Some say that she was entrusted to the disciple John on account of her widowhood and solitary condition. Yet didn't she have four sons, and numerous daughters, with whom she might find comfort"? (Matthew 13:54-56)

The other sons and daughters of the Virgin Mary were stepsons and stepdaughters, some of whom were older than Mary herself. These had families of their own to take care of; this is why the Lord assigned the care of His mother to John. John was Mary's nephew, and was probably her closest blood kin.

Mary Magdalene

Later on, Mary Magdalene, who was quite wealthy, came to be called "Equal to the Apostles" for her role in the young church, primarily in Rome and later in Ephesus with the Apostle John. Following Pentecost, she traveled to Rome to appear before Tiberias Caesar and tell him the whole story of Pilate's unjust trial of Jesus, his release of a murderer and insurrectionist and his cowering to the Jewish leaders. As a result of this, Pilate was summoned to Rome, was unable to defend his actions and was banished to Gaul where he committed suicide. Mary Magdalene stayed in Rome for a long time working as an evangelist before moving to Ephesus in the 60's AD to work with the Apostle John. When Paul wrote to the Romans in c. 55 AD, Mary was still there and Paul addressed her by name (Romans 16:6). Since Peter didn't arrive in Rome until the mid 40's AD, Mary was a pioneer for the Church in Rome. In doing this, she would have had to liquidate all her wealth along with the others after Pentecost (Acts 4:34-37).

After Peter arrived in Rome, Mary stayed to continue helping the Church. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul also addressed 18 members of the original Seventy Apostles (Romans 16:3-

⁸ John Chrysostom noted that when the Gospel writers referred to "Mary the mother of James", they were referring to the Virgin Mary. See John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXXXVIII, v. 56.

⁹ Jerome, The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary, 14-15.

23), who had been sent to Rome by Peter and Paul to aid in the work Mary started. When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, Peter has just left Rome after debunking the illusions of the Arch heretic Simon Magus, who was Nero's favorite sorcerer. Since Simon's influence was widespread¹⁰, the 18 Apostles were there to counteract his influence while Peter was gone.

Mary and Martha of Bethany

Like Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha were quite wealthy. This can be seen from Mary's anointing of Jesus with a pound of pure oil of spikenard worth over 300 denarii (John 12:3-5). Their house was large enough to accommodate Jesus, the Twelve and a number of the Seventy when they came to Jerusalem. All the Apostles were reluctant to stay overnight too close to the plotting of the Jewish leaders (Matthew 21:17, Luke 10:38-42). The house was also large enough to hold a reception attended by many of the Jewish leaders at Lazarus' funeral (John 11:19, 31). In addition, we note that Lazarus needed to be "unbound" when he was raised from the dead (John 11:44). This describes a rich man's funeral similar to what Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea did for Jesus, where they wrapped Jesus' body with strips of linen and 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes (John 19:39-40).

After Pentecost, the Jewish leaders followed through on their threat to kill Lazarus (John 12:10). Putting Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in a leaking boat, they set them adrift at sea with no oars, rudder, food or water. Miraculously, they landed on Cyprus where Lazarus was later ordained bishop. Mary and Martha later went to Gaul with Simon the leper (known in Gaul as Julian) who was ordained bishop there (Matthew 26:6, Mark 14:3ff, Luke 7:36-50).

Salome, Mary, Joanna, and Susanna¹¹

Salome was the niece of Mary, the wife of Cleopas (Alphaeus), and was the wife of Zebedee. She was also the stepdaughter of the Virgin Mary, being the daughter of Joseph. She stayed in Jerusalem after Pentecost with her son John, who was given the charge of caring for the Virgin Mary (John 19:26, 27). Since Zebedee owned the fishing business, and prices for fresh fish were high, Salome had some money, but she wasn't really wealthy like Mary Magdalene and Joanna.

Mary, the wife of Cleopas, left for Spain with James, the son of Zebedee, to help with his evangelism abroad and was buried in Compostela, Spain, with great honor. This implies that her husband Cleopas (Alphaeus) died shortly after Pentecost.

Joanna was the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward (Luke 8:3), and lived in Tiberias by the Sea of Galilee where Herod's palace was located. She was also a wealthy woman due to her connection with royalty. She was the one who retrieved the severed head of John the Baptist after Herod's party (Matthew 14:11, 12) and buried it in the Garden of Gethsemane. Susanna was another wealthy woman that we know very little about (Luke 8:3).

¹⁰ Emperor Claudius and the Roman Senate had erected a statue of Simon along the Tiber River with the inscription, "To Simon, the Holy God". Simon had dazzled many in Rome with his illusions, demonstrating his "divine" powers. For more information, see the Study, Mark Kern, Simon Magus Heresiarch, St Athanasius Press, 2003.

¹¹ For more details about the Myrrh-Bearing Women, see the Study, Mark Kern, The Life of the Virgin Mary, St Athanasius Press, 2000.

Joseph and Nicodemus

In addition to the Myrrh-Bearing Women, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are also remembered on the 3rd Sunday of Pascha for their work in the burial of Jesus. Both were members of the Sanhedrin but were also followers of Jesus secretly (John 19:38). Nicodemus had come to Jesus by night three years earlier saying, “No one can do these signs that You do unless God is with Him.” Jesus proceeded to speak to Nicodemus about:

- Being born from above (John 3:3-9)
- How He must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness (John 3:13-17)
- Light versus darkness revolving on belief in the Son (John 3:18-21).

Nicodemus later defended Jesus before fellow members of the Sanhedrin saying that the Mosaic Law forbids one to judge a man before giving him an opportunity to be heard and before the judges know what he has done. (Compare Exodus 23:1-2, Deuteronomy 1:16-17). However, Nicodemus was shouted down as they said, “Are you also from Galilee? Search and look for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee” (John 7:50-52). Not only were they violating the Law that they were charged with upholding, but also they neglected the fact that Jonah (2 Kings 14:25) and Nahum both came from Galilee. Nicodemus died while mourning the death of the Protomartyr Stephen, and he was buried in Gamaliel’s tomb.

Joseph’s role in the burial of Jesus was pivotal in the proof of the Resurrection. John Chrysostom observed¹² that without the embalming, the burial in Joseph’s tomb and the sealing of the tomb, there was no proof that Christ died. By sealing the tomb and setting a watch of soldiers, His enemies proved against their will that He rose from the dead. In their deceit, His enemies said, “We remember that that deceiver said, when He was yet alive” (Matthew 27:63). He was therefore dead! There was no unfair dealing on the part of the Apostles, and the sepulcher was found empty; it is clear that He had risen, plainly and incontrovertibly. Do you see how even against their will they contend for the proof of the truth?

Chrysostom also noted¹³ that Joseph had concealed his recent discipleship; but he became very bold after the death of Christ. He was not an obscure person, but one of the council, and highly distinguished; from this especially one may see his courage. He exposed himself to death, taking upon him enmity with the whole council; by his affection to Jesus, he both dared to beg the body, and not to desist until he obtained it. He showed his love, and his courage not only by taking Jesus’ body, and burying it in a costly manner, but also by laying it in his own new tomb. This was so ordered with purpose, so that there should not be any suspicion, that one had risen instead of another.

After the Resurrection, Joseph was fettered and imprisoned by the Jews. Eventually they released him and drove him from Israel. According to the gospel of Nicodemus (sometimes called the Acts of Pilate), Joseph played an important role in starting the first Christian community at Lydda.

¹² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXXXIX, 1.

¹³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXXXVIII, v. 58.

Later accounts speak of Joseph traveling with the Apostle Philip, preaching the Gospel throughout Gaul. From there Philip sent 12 priests with Joseph as bishop to England. Considerable legend has grown up in later centuries around Joseph (and his son Josephes) especially associated with the Holy Grail. The pagans of that region, who drank blood regularly, were fascinated with the Lord's Table when they converted to Christianity. Joseph died peacefully in what is now North Wales.

In being driven from his homeland by the Jews, Joseph undoubtedly had to pay quite a price. The Scriptures (Matthew 27:57) refer to Joseph as being a rich man. According to tradition, he made a lot of money from the tin trade between Britain and Palestine¹⁴. Being driven away, he had to leave his wealth behind. Compare Matthew 19:16-30. For more details on the life of Joseph and Philip, see the Study on the life of the Apostle Philip.

¹⁴ Joseph made his fortune from a shipping business that mined tin in the British Isles and brought it to Palestine to make bronze, an alloy of copper and tin. Bronze with a high tin content was harder and stronger, and the British Isles was the closest source of tin. The copper content of bronze was mined to the East of the Jordan River. Thus Joseph had a monopoly on a key ingredient used for tools and weapons.

THE SEVEN DEACONS AND EARLY EVANGELISM

May 4, 2014
3rd Sunday of Pascha
Revision F

Epistle: Acts 6:1-7

Introduction

This reading from Acts goes well with the Gospel Reading since the first seven deacons continued the faithful service that was started by the Myrrh-Bearing Women.

During the Lord's three-year ministry, the Twelve and the Seventy left everything (Matthew 19:27), including their jobs to follow Jesus wherever He went. The eight Myrrh-Bearing Women had filled in the gap to bankroll Christ's ministry out of their substance (Luke 8:3). Thus Myrrh-Bearing Women served as deaconesses to the Lord during His earthly ministry. After Pentecost, when everyone had everything in common, people sold their possessions, brought the proceeds of the things that were sold and laid them at the Apostles' feet. They (the Apostles) distributed to each as anyone had need (Acts 4:32-34; 2:44-45). Over the next year or so, some of the Holy Women had a hand in the distribution since that was what they did during the Lord's three-year ministry.

However, there was a bit of a problem. Of the eight Myrrh-Bearing women, Mary Magdalene and Mary the wife of Cleopas had left town because they were called to other things¹⁵. Mary and Martha of Bethany were forced to leave town due to a murder plot against them and their brother Lazarus (John 12:10-11). This left a hole in the operation that others needed to fill; the first seven deacons were chosen to continue this ministry. During transitions, something often gets overlooked; in this case, it was the Greek-speaking widows, who were overlooked and neglected in the daily distribution (Acts 6:1).

Toward the end of the first year of the Church, the Twelve Apostles were still together in Jerusalem (Acts 6:2). We can put a rough date on this since the first deacon Stephen was stoned to death in the first year¹⁶ after Pentecost. The Church in Jerusalem had increased rapidly and included a great number of widows¹⁷. Some of the widows had gotten neglected in the daily distribution, and the Twelve decided to appoint responsible men to handle the situation (Acts 6:1-3), and ordained seven men: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas.

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¹⁵ Mary Magdalene left for Rome; Mary, the wife of Cleopas, left for Spain.

¹⁶ Nickolai Velimirovic, *Prologue From Ochrid*, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, December 27.

¹⁷ We may have difficulty appreciating a large number of widows, since that is usually not a major part of our culture. To put this in perspective, the Church in Antioch in the 4th Century supported 3000 widows and virgins (John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, LXVI, 3), where supporting widows was a major task of the Church. For more information, see the Study for the Third Sunday of Pascha.

See also John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Acts*, XIV, v 1-2.

Demetrius of Rostov characterized¹⁸ these Greek-speaking widows as Jews obedient to the Laws of Moses, but whose primary language was Greek, not Hebrew.

“When a murmuring of the Grecians arose against the Hebrews (Acts 6:1), the Greeks here referred to were not the pagan idolaters generally called the heathen in the Scriptures, for the time had not come for the door of faith to be opened to these, nor had the word of salvation been preached to them. The Greek-speaking Christians who grumbled against the Jews soon after the day of Pentecost were not converts from heathenism, but Jews obedient to the Law of Moses, dispersed among other nations. The Apostle James addressed them, opening his epistle, ‘To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting’ (James 1:1). Though they had not adopted the beliefs and customs the Hellenes, they were called Greeks by the inhabitants of Jerusalem, because they spoke Greek.”

Thus it was among Greeks of the Dispersion that there arose a murmuring against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution (Acts 6); they were assigned the lowest tasks, or given poor and insufficient food and clothing.

There were many Jews throughout the world that did not speak Hebrew well; in Alexandria alone, there was such a large number of Jews who only spoke Greek, that Pharaoh Ptolemy III commissioned the Septuagint¹⁹ to make the Hebrew Scriptures available to his people.

At this point, it is instructive to look closely at the Scriptures to see both what it says and what it doesn’t say. If the issue was for the Twelve to leave the Word of God and serve tables, this implies that they weren’t serving tables at that time. They were busy teaching the people daily on Solomon’s porch (Acts 3:11, 4:1-3, 5:12, 20-21) and in every house (Acts 5:42). But it also says that the Twelve “distributed to each as anyone had need” (Acts 4:35) of the proceeds of the things that were sold. This seems to make a compelling case for the distribution to have been delegated to someone, and the Holy Women stand out as the most likely. Regarding delegations, John Chrysostom mentioned²⁰ that the Twelve “had been taught by Moses’ example (Numbers 11:14-17, Exodus 18:14-27) not to undertake the management of everything by themselves”.

The Magnitude of the Problem in Caring for Widows

John Chrysostom, speaking²¹ to the Church in Antioch in c. 386 AD, mentioned²² that the Church consisted of about 100,000 believers and that the Church supported²³ about 3,000

¹⁸ Demetrius of Rostov, The Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints, tr. Fr Thomas Marretta, Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO, 2000, December 27.

¹⁹ The Septuagint, called the LXX from the seventy translators, was a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. It was widely used in the 1st Century, and most Old Testament quotes in the New Testament are taken from the Septuagint and not from the Hebrew original.

²⁰ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, XIV, vv 5-6.

²¹ Editor, Preface to the Oxford Edition, Chrysostom Homilies on Matthew

²² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXXXV, 3-4.

²³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXVI, 3.

Philip Schaff, ed., Preface to Chrysostom’s Homilies on 1 Corinthians, 6.

widows and virgins. [Cyprian mentioned²⁴ that the Church in Rome had a similarly large number of widows to support.] On the other hand, Chrysostom mentioned that the Jews used to care for 8,000 Levites, who had no livelihood outside the Temple or synagogue, plus many more widows and orphans. Chrysostom's complaint was that the priests were becoming too burdened with fundraising in order to help fend off starvation of the poor. If each Christian were to give one loaf of bread to the poor, there would be plenty to go around. Instead the priests are subject to reviling in the marketplace because they have to be too involved in business activities.

Chrysostom described²⁵ Antioch as about 10% wealthy, 80% middle class and 10% poor. The Church was not wealthy, and also helped those in prison, the sick among the nomads, the maimed and crippled, those that show up at the doors of the Church, as well as the clergy. If ten men were to help one poor man, there would be no poor. Chrysostom stated²⁶ that he was ashamed and embarrassed at how little the average person in the Church in Antioch gave to the poor. Although he spoke about this often, he only noticed a small change.

“Some increase indeed there has been, but not so much as I hoped for. I see you sowing, but not with a liberal hand. Therefore I fear that you also ‘reap sparingly’ (2 Corinthians 9:6). For as proof that we sow sparingly, let us inquire which are more numerous in the city: poor or rich; and which are they, who are neither poor nor rich, but are of the middle class. For instance, 10% is rich, 10% is poor, having nothing at all, and the rest are of the middle class.”

“Let us, the whole multitude of the city, distribute among the poor, and you will see the disgrace how great it is. For the very rich are few, but those that come next to them are many; the poor are much fewer than these. Nevertheless, although there are so many that are able to feed the hungry, many go to sleep in their hunger, not because those that have are not easily able to help them, but because of their great inhumanity. If both the wealthy and the middle class were to distribute among themselves those who are in need of bread and clothing, scarcely would one poor person fall to the share of fifty men or even a hundred. Though there are such a great abundance of persons to assist them, the poor are wailing every day. That you may learn the inhumanity of the others, when the Church has a revenue of one of the lowest among the wealthy, not of the very rich, consider how many widows it helps every day, how many virgins; for the list of those has already reached three thousand. Together with these, the Church helps those that dwell in the prison, the sick among the nomads, the healthy, those that are absent from their home, those that are maimed in their bodies, those that serve the altar, those that come casually every day for food and clothing. Yet her substance is in no respect diminished. If ten men only were thus willing to spend for each poor man, there would be no poor.”

²⁴ Cyprian mentioned that the Archdiocese of Cornelius, Priest in the Church of Rome, consisted of 46 Priests, 6 Deacons, 6 Sub-Deacons and more than 1500 widows and sufferers. See Eusebius, Church History, VI, 43 and Cyprian, Epistles, LXVII, 6, Elucidation 15.

²⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXVI, 3.

²⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXVI, 3.

The size of the Church in Jerusalem prior to the scattering of the saints after the stoning of Stephen and the others (Acts 8:4) may have rivaled the size of the Church in Antioch, with a corresponding number of widows.

Poor Treatment of Widows

There were much different standards of morality between Hebrew Law and the surrounding Gentile nations. In addition, Israel often followed the morality of the surrounding nations rather than what was decreed by the Mosaic Law. This is the case also in the treatment of widows. Alfred Edersheim mentioned²⁷ that the provisions of the Mosaic Law were wise and kind toward widows.

“Among the Romans interest was calculated monthly. Regarding pledges, and in dealing with insolvent debtors, the mildness of the Jewish Law has never been equaled. It was lawful, with certain restrictions, to take a pledge, and in the event of non-payment to sell it; but clothing, bedding, plows, and all articles required for the preparation of food were exceptions.”

“It was unlawful, under any circumstances, to take a pledge from a widow, or to sell what belonged to her. These are only some of the provisions by which the interests of all parties were not only guarded, but a higher religious tone sought to be imparted to ordinary life. Those who are acquainted with the state of matters among the nations around, and the cruel extortion of the Roman law, will best appreciate the difference in this respect also between Israel and the Gentiles. The more the Rabbinical code is studied, the higher will be our admiration of its provisions; characterized as these are by wisdom, kindness, and delicacy, we venture to say, they are far beyond any modern legislation. Not only the history of the past, the present privileges, and the hope connected with the promises, but the family, social, and public life, which he found among his brethren, would attach a Jew to his people.”

Hermas, of the Seventy, encouraged²⁸ people to purchase afflicted souls, such as by helping widows and orphans, with their money, rather than purchasing land and big houses.

“You who serve the Lord, and have Him in your heart, take care that you work the works of God, remembering His commandments and promises, and believe that He will bring them to pass if His commandments are observed. Instead of lands, therefore, buy afflicted souls, according as each one is able, and visit widows and orphans, and do not overlook them. Spend your wealth and all your preparations, which you received from the Lord, upon such lands and houses. For to this end did the Master make you rich, that you might perform these services to Him; and it is much better to purchase such land, possessions, and houses, as you will find in your own city, when you come to reside in it. This is a noble and sacred expenditure, attended neither with sorrow nor fear, but with joy. Do not practice the expenditure of the heathen, for it is injurious to you, who are the servants of God. Practice an expenditure of your own, in which you can

²⁷ Alfred Edersheim, Sketches of Jewish Social Life, Chapter 12, p. 158

²⁸ Hermas, The Shepherd, Book III, Similitude 1.

rejoice; and do not touch what is another's nor covet it, for it is an evil thing to covet the goods of other men; but work your own work, and you will be saved".

On the other hand, treatment of widows, orphans and the poor by the (heretic) Arians was worse than that by the Gentiles, such that it was obvious by their works that the Arians were not of God. Athanasius of Alexandria described²⁹ the Arian persecution of widows as follows:

"The Arians devised another yet more cruel and unholy deed; cruel in the eyes of all men, but well suited to their antichristian heresy. The Lord commanded that we should remember the poor; He said, 'Sell what you have, and give alms' (Luke 12:33), and again 'I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; for inasmuch as you have done it to one of these little ones, you have done it unto Me' (Matthew 25:35, 40). But these men, as being opposed to Christ, have presumed to act contrary to His will in this respect also. When the Duke gave up the Churches to the Arians, and the destitute widows were unable to continue any longer in them, the widows sat down in places where the Clergy set apart for their appointed care. When the Arians saw that the brethren readily served them and supported them, they persecuted the widows also, beating them on the feet, and prosecuted those who gave to them before the Duke. This was done by means of a certain soldier named Dynamius, and it was well pleasing to General Sebastian. For there is no mercy with the Manicheans; it is considered a hateful thing among them to show mercy to a poor man. Here then was a novel subject of complaint; and the Arians first invented a new kind of court. Persons were brought to trial for acts of kindness, which they had performed; he who showed mercy was accused, and he who had received a benefit was beaten. They wished rather that a poor man should suffer hunger, than that he who was willing to show mercy should give to him. Such sentiments these modern Jews, for such they are, have learned from the Jews of old, who when they saw him who had been blind from his birth recover his sight (John 5:16), and him who had been paralyzed a long time made whole (John 9:13-16), accused the Lord who had granted these benefits to them, and judged them to be transgressors who had experienced His goodness."

Cyprian of Carthage stated³⁰ that serving widows and the poor, even though risky, will be rewarded greatly by Christ at His return.

"Brethren, even those who have fallen may amend their minds by your exhortation; if they may confess, they can make amends for their previous sin. Any who may have fallen into temptation, and begin to become sick, and repent of what they have done, and desire communion, it should be granted them. If you have widows or bedridden people who are unable to maintain themselves, or those who are in prisons or are excluded from their own houses, these ought in all cases to have someone to serve them. Catechumens, when seized with sickness, ought not to be deceived, but help should be given to them. As a matter of the greatest importance, if the bodies of the martyrs are not buried, those whose duty

²⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, History of the Arians, VII, 61; VIII, 72.

Athanasius of Alexandria, Personal Letters, XLVII.

³⁰ Cyprian of Carthage, Epistles, II, 3.

it is to do this service incur a considerable risk. By whomever this duty may have been performed, we are sure that he is regarded as a good servant, as one who has been faithful in the least, and will be appointed ruler over ten cities (Luke 19:17). May God, however, who gives all things to them that hope in Him, grant to us that we may all be found in these works.”

Celibate Widows in the Church

Paul wrote to Timothy in c. 64 AD regarding some Apostolic instructions in caring for widows. The emphasis in providing support for the widows is that they are providing a service to the Church from their constant prayer and good works.

1. Only give support to widows over 60; that is “Take into the number” (1 Timothy 5:9).
2. Support only those widows, who exhibit a blameless life with many good works, and who are constantly in prayer night and day (1 Timothy 5:3-10).
3. Refuse support to younger widows; instead let them marry and raise children (1 Timothy 5:14).
4. The danger with the younger widows is that they may be led away by the lusts of the flesh and become unable to live celibate (1 Timothy 5:6, 12-15).

Paul had written earlier, c. 55 AD, to Corinth regarding whether one should marry or not. This is applicable to widows in the case where they wish to remarry. Paul’s instruction to Corinth is as follows:

1. Because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife and each woman her own husband (1 Corinthians 7:1-3).
2. Husband and wife are bound to each other; they do not have over their own body, but their spouse does. It is sin to deprive each other of sexual intimacy (1 Corinthians 7:3-6).
3. For widows and virgins, it is best for them to remain celibate. If they don’t have self-control, it is better for them to marry than to burn (1 Corinthians 7:6-9, 25-40).
4. Those who came to the Lord after they were married: sanctify rather than divorce your unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:10-24).

How did the early Church interpret Paul’s words regarding widows and virgins? Paul’s instructions in the summary above are not given a detailed discussion very often today, perhaps because Paul’s underlying emphasis is celibacy. Jerome examined³¹ Paul’s words in great detail:

“Paul spoke concerning widows, ‘I desire that the younger women marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak disgracefully. For some have already turned away after Satan’ (1 Timothy 5:14-15). I must begin by considering the meaning of this pronouncement. He had previously described his ideal widow as one who had been the wife of one man, who had brought up children, who has diligently followed every for good works, who had relieved the afflicted with her substance (1 Timothy 5:9-10), whose trust had been in God, and who had continued in prayer day and night. With her he contrasted her opposite, saying, ‘She that lives in pleasure is dead while she lives’

³¹ Jerome, Letter to Ageruchia, CXXIII, 3-7.

(1 Timothy 5:6). And that he might warn Timothy, he immediately added these words, ‘the younger widows refuse; for when they have begun to grow sensuous³² against Christ, they will marry; having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith’ (1 Timothy 5:12). It is then for these who have outraged Christ their Spouse by committing fornication against Him (for this is the sense of the Greek word); it is for these that Paul wishes a second marriage, thinking bigamy³³ preferable to fornication; but this second marriage is a concession and not a command.”

“We must take Paul’s words clause by clause, as shown in the Table below.”

Paul’s Statement	Reason for Paul’s Statement
I desire that the younger women marry	I don’t want the young women to commit fornication
That they bear children	I don’t want them killing children (i.e. abortion), whom they have conceived in adultery
That they be the heads of households	It is better that a woman should marry again than that she should be a prostitute; better that she should have a second husband than several lovers

“A second marriage brings relief to a miserable plight, but the alternative involves a sin and its punishment. He continues, ‘that they give no occasion to the adversary to speak disgracefully’ (1 Timothy 5:14), which is a brief and comprehensive precept, in which many admonitions are summed up. For instance, a woman must not bring discredit upon her profession of widowhood by too great attention to her dress; she must not draw troops of young men after her by smiles or glances; she must not profess one thing by her words and another by her behavior.”

“Paul compressed into a few words all the reasons for such marriages; he shows the motive for his command, ‘for some have already turned away after Satan’ (1 Timothy 5:15). Thus he allows to those with little self-control to have a second marriage, or in case of need a third, simply that he may rescue them from Satan, preferring that a woman should be joined to the worst of husbands rather than to the devil. ‘For it is better to marry than to burn’ (1 Corinthians 7:9). Why is it better to marry? He answers immediately: because it is worse to burn.”

“Apart from these considerations, that which is absolutely good and not merely relatively so is to be as Paul was: that is loose, not bound; free, not enslaved; caring for the things of God, not for the things of a wife. Immediately afterwards he adds, ‘The wife is bound by the Law to her husband as long as her husband lives, but if her husband has fallen asleep, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord. But she is happier if she remains celibate, after my judgment; and I think also that I have the Spirit of God’ (1 Corinthians 7:39-40). Marriage then is a bond, and widowhood is the loosing of it. The wife is bound to the husband and the husband to the wife; and so close is the tie that

³² A similar form of the Greek word for “grow sensuous” is also used to refer to the whore Babylon the Great (Revelation 18:7, 9).

³³ He uses the term “bigamy” since their first spouse, Christ, is still living.

they have no power over their own bodies (1 Corinthians 7:3-5), but each stands obligated to the other. Those who are under the yoke of marriage don't have the option of choosing abstinence."

"Paul is not urging unmarried girls or youthful widows to marry. He is speaking to widows who have relatives that are able to support them, or who have sons and grandsons that are able to be responsible for their support. Paul commands these younger widows to show piety at home, to be grateful to their parents and to relieve them adequately by honest work. The point is that the Church may not be burdened, but may be free to relieve those that are really widows (1 Timothy 5:16). That is, widows that are desolate, who have no relatives to help them, who cannot labor with their hands, who are weakened by poverty and overcome by years, whose trust is in God and whose only work is prayer. From which it is easy to infer that the younger widows, unless they are excused by poor health, are either left to their own efforts or else are consigned to the care of their children or relatives. In 'honoring widows who are really widows' (1 Timothy 5:3), this implies either alms or a gift, as also, 'Let the elders be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine' (1 Timothy 5:17). Paul compels poor widows, those who are young and not broken down by sickness, to labor with their hands that the Church, not charged with their maintenance, may be able to support such widows as are old."

"Consider too that no one is to be elected a widow, except she has been the wife of one husband. A distinction of the priesthood is that no one but monogamists shall be admitted to the altar. The twice married are excluded from the priestly office; they are barred from receiving the alms of the Church. Similarly a woman who has resorted to a second marriage is held unworthy to be supported by the faithful."

"We must distinguish between what Paul himself desires and what he is compelled to acquiesce in. If he allows me to marry again, this is due to my own lack of self-control and not to his wish. For he wishes all men to be as he is, and to think of the things of God; once they are loosed, they should no longer seek to be bound. But when he sees unstable men with lack of self-control in danger of falling into the abyss of lust, he extends to them the offer of a second marriage; if they must wallow in the mire, let it be with one and not with many. The husband of a second wife must not consider that this is a harsh saying or one that conflicts with the rule Paul laid down. Paul has two directions: first, he proclaims a command, 'I say to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they remain as I do'. Next, he makes a concession, 'But if they have no self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn' (1 Corinthians 7:8-9). He first shows what he himself desires, then that in which he is forced to acquiesce. He wishes us, after one marriage, to remain celibate as he is celibate, and sets before us in his own Apostolic example, an instance of the blessedness of which he speaks. If he finds that we are unwilling to do as he wishes, he makes a concession to our lack of self-control. Which then of the two alternatives do we choose for ourselves? The one, which he prefers and which is in itself good? Or do we choose the one, which in comparison with evil is tolerable, yet as it is only a substitute for evil is not completely good? Suppose that we choose that course

which Paul does not wish, but to which he only consents against his will, allowing those who seek lower ends to have their own way. In this case we don't carry out Paul's wish but our own. We read in the Old Testament that the daughters of the priests, who have been married once and have become widows, are to eat of the priests' food and that when they die they are to be buried with the same ceremonies as their father and mother. If on the other hand they take other husbands they are to be kept apart both from their father and from the sacrifices and are to be counted as strangers (Leviticus 22:12-13)."

In the following paragraphs are more detailed comments on whether widows should remain celibate from Tertullian, Methodius, Basil the Great, Ambrose of Milan, John Chrysostom and Jerome. Each of these Fathers of the Church quotes Paul's instruction regarding celibacy for widows, virgins and even for married couples.

Tertullian

Tertullian, a widower and the Father of the Latin-speaking Church, wrote³⁴ a short work, dedicated to his late wife, regarding his advice to others who were in the same state, or who were contemplating doing so. He looked at the events of one's life as an opportunity to turn to the Lord in a renewed fashion. The death of a spouse or a divorce can be such an opportunity, and it is good not to throw away the opportunity of attaining so great a good. Even if one chooses remarriage one should be mindful of the rule that 'above all they marry in the Lord' (1 Corinthians 7:39, 2 Corinthians 6:14).

"Remaining celibate is the highest aim of widowed life, even though it is more difficult than remarriage. Marrying 'in the Lord' is permissible, as being within our power (1 Corinthians 7:39), but it is far more culpable not to observe that which you can observe. Paul advised widows and the unmarried to remain permanently in that state, 'But I desire all to persevere in imitation of my example' (1 Corinthians 7:7). Regarding marrying 'in the Lord', he no longer advises, but plainly commands. If we do not obey, we run a risk, because one may with more impunity neglect 'advice' than 'orders'. Remaining celibate springs from counsel, and is proposed to the will for acceptance or rejection. Marrying 'in the Lord' descends from authority, and is bound to necessity. Disregard advice to remain celibate is within our liberty; disregarding the command to marry 'in the Lord' represents a stubborn resistance to authority."

Some people interpreted Paul's words to imply that it is OK to marry an unbeliever, and that Paul gave such his blessing. Paul stated:

'If any of the brethren has an unbelieving wife, and she consents to the matrimony, let him not dismiss her; similarly, let not a believing woman, married to an unbeliever, if she finds her husband agreeable (to their continued union), dismiss him; for the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the believing wife, and the unbelieving wife by the believing husband; otherwise your children would be unclean' (1 Corinthians 7:14).

³⁴ Tertullian, To His Wife, IV, ii, 1.

Tertullian refuted³⁵ the misinterpretation of Paul's words to say that we should not wittingly ensnare ourselves. We are called to peace, however; if we come to know the Lord while married, our marriage to an unbeliever may draw the unbeliever to the Lord.

“God forbid that he who thus interprets the passage be wittingly ensnaring himself! Paul points to those believers who may have been found by the grace of God in the state of Gentile matrimony. Paul's words state, ‘If any believer has an unbelieving wife’ (1 Corinthians 7:12); it does not say, ‘takes an unbelieving wife’. It shows that it is the duty of someone who, already living in marriage with an unbelieving woman, has presently been by the grace of God converted, to continue with his wife. To be sure, no one, after attaining to faith, should think that he must turn away from a woman, who is now in some sense an ‘alien’ and ‘stranger’. Accordingly he gives a reason, that ‘we are called in peace to the Lord God’; ‘the unbeliever may, through the use of matrimony, be gained by the believer’ (1 Corinthians 7:15-16). Otherwise Paul would be giving the saints permission to marry promiscuously.”

Paul foresaw many dangers and wounds to faith in marriages to unbelievers, which he prohibits. He took precaution, in the first place, against the defilement of holy flesh by joining it to Gentile flesh. Tertullian continued³⁶ to answer questions about marriage to Gentile unbelievers.

“Why, if we are defiled by marriage to a Gentile, is not the one already married to a Gentile not forced to divorce his wife, just as the unmarried is forbidden from seeking a Gentile spouse? The answer is that the Lord holds it more pleasing that matrimony should not be contracted, than that it should be dissolved. Divorce He prohibits, except for the cause of fornication; but celibacy He commends. Let the newly converted believer, therefore, have the necessity of continuing with his spouse; let the unmarried have the power of not marrying. Secondly, those who are converted to the faith in the state of Gentile marriage are not defiled since together with themselves, others also are sanctified. Christians have been sanctified before marriage; if they get mixed up with ‘strange flesh’, they cannot sanctify that flesh in their union. The grace of God sanctifies what it finds; what has not been able to be sanctified is unclean; and what is unclean has no part with the holy.”

Regarding the unmarried, either widows or virgins, Tertullian stated³⁷ that there is a difference between what God permits and what He desires for us to do. If we choose what would be the best for us, God will reward us accordingly for our pursuit of this. If we reject what would be best for us, and do the minimum that God permits, we deserve no reward, and the unwillingness to deserve a reward is flirting with sin. A second marriage is permitted for us, but it is given with the caveat that it is better to marry than to burn and be consumed with lust (1 Corinthians 7:9). If one cannot contain his lust, it is better to marry; marrying is ‘good’ only because burning is worse. The analogy, ‘it is better to marry than to burn’ can be compared to

³⁵ Tertullian, *To His Wife*, IV, ii, 2.

³⁶ Tertullian, *To His Wife*, IV, ii, 2.

³⁷ Tertullian, *On Exhortation to Chastity*, IV, v, 3.

'it is better to lose one eye than two eyes'; neither is 'good', but one is more tolerable than the other.

Methodius of Patara

Methodius lived an ascetic life from his youth³⁸, and is known as one of the first critics of the heretic Origen. He examined³⁹ Paul's instructions regarding widows and virgins and divided them into advice and commands. To avoid fornication, Paul said let every man have his own wife and every woman her own husband. Each spouse does not have power over his/her own body; to avoid fornication, they are not allowed to defraud each other of sexual intimacy (1 Corinthians 7:3-5). This is a command! If both husband and wife desired to be celibate for a short time to devote himself or herself to prayer, this is OK so long as both consent. The danger is that Satan tempt one spouse beyond their capacity to resist during the time of celibacy and prayer, and fornication result (1 Corinthians 7:5-6). This is advice!

Regarding widows and widowers, Paul said that it is good for them if they are able to remain celibate. If this would lead to fornication, Paul's advice was to remarry; not that a second marriage was good, but that it was better than burning (1 Corinthians 7:9, 39). Methodius made an analogy to the 40-day Paschal fast. If someone was dangerously sick and was having difficulty maintaining his strength during the fast, it would be good to offer him food.

“Just as though, in the fast which prepares for the Paschal celebration, one should offer food to another who was dangerously ill. We might say, ‘My friend, it’s fitting and good that you should bravely hold out like us, and partake of the same things, for it is forbidden even to think of food today. But since you are held down and weakened by disease, and cannot bear it, therefore, ‘by permission’, we advise you to eat food, lest, because of your sickness, you are unable to hold up against the desire for food and perish’. Thus Paul speaks here, first saying that he wished all were healthy and celibate, as he was, but afterwards allowing a second marriage to those who are burdened with the disease of the passions. The danger is that they should be wholly defiled by fornication, goaded on by the itchings of their sex organs to promiscuous intercourse, Paul considers such a second marriage far preferable to burning and indecency.”

Paul's advice to those considering celibacy was to assess their own capabilities. Methodius summarized⁴⁰ this by saying

“Paul cautioned those who had chosen celibacy, but afterwards found it intolerable and grievous, boasting of their perseverance before men, out of shame, but no longer having the power to persevere in the life of a celibate. There are those who of their own free will and purpose decide to preserve their flesh in virgin purity, ‘having no necessity’, that is, no passion calling forth their members to intercourse. For there are, as it seems, differences in men's bodies. Such a one can contend, struggle, and zealously continue in his profession; admirably fulfilling it, Paul exhorts him to continue and to preserve it, according the highest prize to virginity. He that is able and ambitious to preserve his flesh pure, does better; but he that is unable, and enters into marriage lawfully, and does not indulge in secret corruption, does well”.

³⁸ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, June 20.

³⁹ Methodius, Banquet of the Ten Virgins, III, 12.

⁴⁰ Methodius, Banquet of the Ten Virgins, III, 12.

Basil the Great

Basil the Great settled into the monastic life after completing his education at the best schools of his day. He was appointed Bishop of Caesarea, and is referred to as a “Doctor” of the Greek-speaking Church⁴¹. He clarified⁴² some issues with widows and virgins who desire to live the celibate life, but subsequently fall and desire to marry. He also gave some guidelines for accepting young women and men into the ranks of the celibate.

“There are cases of fallen virgins, who make their vows vain; after professing a chaste life before the Lord, they fall under the lusts of the flesh. Our fathers tenderly and meekly made allowance for their infirmities, and determined that they might be received after a year, ranking them with those who have a second husband. Since the Church grows stronger as she advances, and the order of virgins is becoming more numerous, it is my judgment that careful attention should be given both to celibacy, and to the mind of Scripture, which may be discovered from the context. Widowhood is inferior to virginity; consequently the sin of the widows comes far behind that of the virgins. ‘The young widows refuse; for when they have begun to grow sensuous against Christ, they will marry; having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith’ (1 Timothy 5:11). If, therefore, a widow lies under a very heavy charge, as negating her faith in Christ, what must we think of the virgin, who is the bride of Christ, and a chosen vessel dedicated to the Lord? It is a grave fault even on the part of a slave to give herself away in secret marriage and fill the house with impurity, and, by her wicked life, to wrong her owner. It is far more shocking for the bride to become an adulteress, dishonoring her union with the bridegroom, and yielding herself to unchaste indulgence. The widow, as being a corrupted slave, is rightly condemned for abandoning celibacy; but the virgin comes under the charge of adultery. We call the man who lives with another man’s wife an adulterer, and do not receive him into communion until he has ceased from his sin. So we shall ordain in the case of him who has the virgin. One point, however, must be determined beforehand, that the name ‘virgin’ is given to a woman who voluntarily devotes herself to the Lord, renounces marriage, and embraces a life of holiness. We admit professions of celibacy dating from the age of full intelligence. For it is not right in such cases to admit the words of children. But a girl of sixteen or seventeen years of age, in full possession of her faculties, who has been submitted to strict examination, and is then constant, and persists in her entreaty to be admitted, may then be ranked among the virgins, her profession ratified, and its violation rigorously punished. Many girls are brought forward by their parents and brothers, and other kinsfolk, before they are of full age, and have no inner impulse towards a celibate life. The object of the friends is simply to provide for themselves. Such women as these must not be readily received, before we have made public investigation of their own sentiments.”

“I do not recognize the profession of men, except in the case of those who have enrolled themselves in the order of monks, and seem to have secretly adopted the celibate life. Yet in their case I think it becoming that there should be a previous

⁴¹ That is, along with Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom.

⁴² Basil the Great, Letter to Amphilochius, CXCIX, 18-19.

examination, and that a distinct profession should be received from them, so that whenever they may revert to the life of the pleasures of the flesh, they may be subjected to the punishment of fornicators.”

Ambrose of Milan

Ambrose is one of the four “Doctors” of the Latin-speaking Church⁴³ and lived a strict ascetic life after his baptism. He was the governor of Liguria, where Milan is the chief city, during the Arian controversy. Although only a catechumen at the time, he was elected Bishop of Milan by popular demand and against his will. As Bishop, he slept little, prayed constantly, fasted every weekday and performed a number of miracles.

Ambrose wrote a treatise “Concerning Widows” as a sequel to his longer treatise “Concerning Virgins”. In this treatise, he went into great detail regarding how the examples of great widows in Hebrew history give background to Paul’s advice for widows in the Church. Some examples are: the faith of the widow of Zarephath, the service to God of the Prophetess Anna, the liberality of the widow who gave the two mites, the forward-looking of Naomi, the bravery of the widow Judith, and the leadership of the widow Deborah. In all this, Ambrose points to the honor of celibacy in widowhood and faithfulness to a widow’s first husband. Introducing his subject, Ambrose stated⁴⁴:

“A widow is not distinguished only by bodily abstinence, but is distinguished by virtue. I do not give commandments regarding this, but Paul does. ‘Honor widows that are really widows! But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents’ (1 Timothy 5:3-4). Affection ought to exist in a widow, to love her children and to do her duty to her parents. So when discharging her duty to her parents she is teaching her children, and is rewarded herself by her own compliance with duty, in that what she performs for others benefits⁴⁵ herself.”

“Paul says, ‘For this is good and acceptable before God’ (1 Timothy 5:4). If widows care for the things of God, and ‘continues in supplications and prayers night and day’ (1 Timothy 5:5), great respect is paid to them, so that they are honored even by bishops.”

The Widow of Zarephath⁴⁶

What is the meaning of the fact that when there was a very great famine in all the Land, yet the care of God was not lacking to the widow⁴⁷, and Elijah was sent to sustain her? In this story the Lord warns me that He is about to speak (Luke 4:25); He seems to request that my ears attend to a mystery, Christ and the Church. One is preferred among many widows! Who is such an one, to whom so great a prophet, who was carried up into heaven, should be guided, especially at

⁴³ That is, along with Jerome, Augustine and Gregory the Great.

⁴⁴ Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Widows, I, 7-8.

⁴⁵ More details on this will be covered under the following subsection on Naomi.

⁴⁶ Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Widows, III, 14, 17, 20; For reference, see 1 Kings 17:12-24.

⁴⁷ Zarephath was in Sidon, a Gentile region. We may presume that Hebrew widows were ignored and this one Gentile widow merited God’s attention.

that time when the heaven was shut for three years and six months? The famine was everywhere, and yet this widow did not lack. These three years are those in which the Lord came to the earth and could not find fruit on the fig-tree, 'For three years I came seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and found none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?'" (Luke 13:7).

Elijah is of no small account, who by his word moistened the dry earth with the dew of heaven, and unlocked the closed heavens. For who is he who can open the heavens except Christ, for Whom daily an increase for the Church is gathered?

By this example, then, it is shown that not all can merit the miracles of divine power, but only they who are aided by the pursuits of godly devotion; they, who are devoid of reverence for heaven, lose the fruits of divine working.

The Service to God of the Prophetess Anna⁴⁸

Great is the gift of divine blessing in widows, since such honor is given them by God. The Prophetess Anna shows what widows ought to be; she was left destitute by the early death of her husband, yet obtained the reward of full praise, being intent not less on the duties of the Faith than on the pursuit of chastity. She was a widow of 84 years, who didn't leave the temple, who served God night and day with fasting and with prayers.

She was a widow, the wife of one man, tested by age, vigorous in faith, and worn out in body, whose resting-place is the temple, whose conversation is prayer, whose life is fasting, who day and night serves in unwearied devotion, who knows no age in her piety. She was trained from her youth, who kept her widowhood through weakness of body, in large-heartedness in virtue. She was with her husband for seven years, such that the things which are the support of her old age began in the aims of her youth.

We are taught that the virtue of chastity is threefold, first that of married life, a second that of widowhood, and the third that of virginity, where one does not exclude the others. These result each in that which belongs to each. The training of the Church is rich in this, that it has those whom it may set before others, but has none whom it rejects, and would that it never could have any! We have so spoken of virginity as not to reject widowhood, we so reverence widows as to reserve its own honor for marriage. It is not our precepts but the divine sayings, which teach this.

Let us remember then how Mary, how Anna, and how Susanna⁴⁹ are spoken of. Since not only must we celebrate their praises but also follow their manner of life. Let us remember where Susanna⁵⁰, Anna (Luke 2:37), and Mary (Luke 1:28) are found, and observe how each is spoken of with her special commendation, and where each is mentioned, she that is married in the garden, the widow in the temple, the virgin in her secret chamber.

⁴⁸ Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Widows, IV, 21-24. For reference, see Luke 2:36-37.

⁴⁹ See Lancelot C. L. Brenton, "History of Sussana" 1-63, The Septuagint with Apocrapha, Hendrickson, Peabody MA, 1990.

⁵⁰ Lancelot C. L. Brenton, "History of Sussana" 1-7, The Septuagint with Apocrapha, Hendrickson, Peabody MA, 1990.

The Liberality of the Widow's Mites⁵¹

By a widow, we are taught how fitting it is to be merciful and liberal towards the poor, and that this feeling should not be hindered by our own poverty. Liberality is determined not by the amount of our possessions, but by the willingness to give. By the voice of the Lord that widow is preferred above everyone, 'This poor widow has put in more than everyone' (Luke 21:3). The Lord characteristically teaches everyone, that no one should be held back from giving assistance through shame at his own poverty, and that the rich should not flatter themselves that they seem to give more than the poor. For the piece of money out of a small stock is richer than treasures out of abundance, because it is not the amount that is given but the amount that remains which is considered. No one gives more than she who has left nothing for herself.

Considering the mystical sense, one must not despise this woman casting in two mites. Plainly the woman was noble who in the divine judgment was found worthy to be preferred to everyone. Perhaps it is she who of her faith has given two testaments for the help of man, and so no one has done more. No one could equal the amount of her gift, who joined faith with mercy. Those who practice widowhood, do not hesitate to cast into the treasury the two mites, full of faith and grace.

Strive to equal this widow, my daughters. 'It is good to be zealous in a good thing always' (Galatians 4:18). 'Earnestly desire the best gifts' (1 Corinthians 12:31). The Lord is always looking at you; Jesus looks at you when He goes to the treasury, where the gain of your good works assists those in need. Is it a small thing that you should give your two mites and gain in return the Lord's Body? Moses proclaimed, 'None shall appear before the Lord empty-handed' (Exodus 34:20), empty of mercy, empty of faith or empty of chastity. The Lord Jesus tends to look on and to commend not the empty, but those who are rich in virtues. Let the maiden see you at work; let her see you serving others. The return, which you owe God, you should make from the progress of others. No return is more acceptable to God than the offerings of piety.

The Forward-Looking of Naomi⁵²

Does the widow Naomi seem to you of small account, who supported her widowhood on the gleanings from another's harvest, and who was supported by her daughter-in-law? (Ruth 2:2) It is a great benefit for the support of widows, that they so train their daughters-in-law to have in them a payment and reward for their training. To her who has well taught her daughter-in-law, a Ruth will never be lacking, who will prefer the widowed life of her mother-in-law to her father's house. So that Naomi, deprived of her husband and her two sons, didn't lose the reward of her pious care, for she found both a comfort in sorrow and a support in poverty.

Holy women can see how fruitful a widow is in the offspring of virtues. A good widow knows no lack, and she has as a rule the reward of the training she

⁵¹ Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Widows, V, 27, 29, 32. See also Luke 21:1-4.

⁵² Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Widows, VI, 33, 34, 36. See also the Book of Ruth.

has given. The widow has, then, this excellent recommendation, that while she mourns her husband she also weeps for the world, and the redeeming tears, which shed for the dead, will benefit the living.

The Bravery of Judith⁵³

Bravery also is usually not lacking in a good widow. True bravery surpasses the usual nature and the weakness of the sex by the devotion of the mind, such as was in the widow Judith (Judith 8:4-5). She alone was able to rouse up from utter prostration and defend men broken down by the siege, smitten with fear, and grieving with hunger. Everyone dreaded Holofernes after his success in so many battles, and after he had driven countless thousands of men to hide within the walls of Jerusalem. When the armed men were afraid, and were already discussing the final surrender, she went outside the wall, excelling the army, which she delivered, and was braver than the army, which she put to flight.

From the time when her husband died, she began a time of mourning. Every day she fasted except on the Sabbath and the holy days, out of respect for the Faith. Holy Judith (Judith 10:1-3), strengthened by lengthy mourning and by daily fasting, didn't seek the enjoyments of the world regardless of danger, and was strong in her contempt for death. In order to accomplish her stratagem, she put on the bridal clothes, which she wore in her husband's lifetime, as though she would give pleasure to her husband, if she freed her country. But she saw another man, whom she was seeking to please, even Him, of Whom it is said, 'After me comes a Man Who is preferred before me' (John 1:30). And she did well in resuming her bridal ornaments, when about to fight, for the reminders of marriage are the arms of chastity, and in no other way could a widow gain the victory.

Living among the thousands of enemies, she remained chaste. In her wisdom, she designed a scheme, where she chose out the commander, and

⁵³ Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Widows, VII, 37-42. See also Lancelot C. L. Brenton, "Judith" 7:1-15:13, The Septuagint with Apocrypha, Hendrickson, Peabody MA, 1990. The events of the Book of Judith are difficult to place historically, such that some deny that they took place at all. These events probably took place about 700 BC, just after the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom. When the Assyrians laid siege to Bethulia, Judith's city in the hills above Dothan, everyone cowered before them except Judith, a wealthy widow. By night, Judith and her handmaid left the city and went to the Assyrian camp to speak to the Commander Holofernes. Holofernes was stunned by her extraordinary beauty and by her godliness; Judith told Holofernes that she had fled from the Hebrews because of the sins of the people. Holofernes offered to feed Judith at his own table, but Judith declined since she was fasting. She would eat only of the provisions she brought until the Lord showed her what she was to do. Judith fasted for three days and prayed to the Lord all night, every night. On the 4th day, Holofernes invited Judith to a feast of his servants, and Judith accepted. Judith only consumed the provisions she brought, while Holofernes, in great delight, drank more than he had ever done in his life. After the feast, Judith went into Holofernes' tent with him, and he passed out drunk. When everyone else was asleep, Judith cut off Holofernes' head with his own sword, put the head in a knapsack, and returned to Bethulia by night. Ordering the head put on a pole for everyone to see, Judith ordered everyone to attack the Assyrian army at daybreak. The Assyrians woke up hung over; when they tried to arouse their commander and found him dead, they panicked and ran. Israel thus defeated the Assyrians decisively, and the Assyrians were so embarrassed at being defeated by a woman that they didn't return for Judith's lifetime. (Judith lived to the age of 104.) Judith never remarried even though many proposed to her. For more details of the background of the Book of Judith, see <http://www.specialtyinterests.net/judith.html>, which is an on-line copy of Damien Mackey, A Historical Commentary on the Book of Judith, March 2003.

prepared an opportunity for victory. She reserved the merit of abstinence and the grace of chastity. Unpolluted, either by food or by adultery, she gained no less a triumph over the enemy by preserving her chastity than by delivering her country.

Temperance is the virtue of women. When the men of the enemy were intoxicated with wine and buried in sleep, the widow took the commander's sword, cut off the commander's head, and passed unharmed through the ranks of the enemy. Drunkenness can injure a woman, seeing that wine so weakens men that women overcome them. Let a widow, then, be temperate, pure in the first place from wine, that she may be pure from adultery. He will tempt you in vain, if wine doesn't tempt you. If Judith had drunk she would have slept with the adulterer. But because she didn't drink, the sobriety of one without difficulty was able both to overcome and to escape from a drunken army.

This was not so much a work of her hands, as a trophy of her wisdom. Having overcome Holofernes by her hand alone, she overcame the whole army of the enemies by her wisdom. Hanging up the head of Holofernes in Jerusalem, a deed that the wisdom of the men had been unable to plan, she raised the courage of her countrymen, and broke down that of the enemy. She stirred up her own friends by her modesty, and struck terror into the enemy, so that they were put to flight and slain. So the temperance and sobriety of one widow even made men braver.

Though she might well exult in her victory, she was not so elated by this success that she gave up the exercise of her widowhood. She refused all who desired to marry her, laid aside her bridal clothes, and took up again the widow's clothes. She did not care for the adornments of her triumph, thinking those things better whereby vices of the body are subdued than those whereby the weapons of an enemy are overcome.

The Leadership of the Prophetess Deborah⁵⁴

The Prophetess Deborah showed not only that widows have no need of the help of a man, since she undertook the duties of a man, and did even more than she had undertaken. When the Judges were ruling Israel, because the rulers could not govern the people with manly justice, or defend them with manly strength, wars broke out on all sides. They chose Deborah, by whose judgment they might be ruled. And so one widow both ruled many thousands of men in peace, and defended them from the enemy. There were many judges in Israel, but no woman before was a judge. I think that her judgeship and her deeds have been described, that women should not be restrained from deeds of valor by the weakness of their sex. As a widow, she governed the people, led armies, chose generals, determined the outcome of wars and ordered triumphs. So, then, it is not nature, which is liable to weakness, but valor, which makes strong.

Deborah brought from her home, her son as leader of the army, that we might acknowledge that a widow can train a warrior. As a mother, she taught,

⁵⁴ Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning Widows*, VIII, 44-47. See also Judges 4. The account we have in Judges does not confirm or deny whether Deborah's husband Lapidoth was still alive. Also it refers to Barak as the son of Abinoam, not the son of Lapidoth. It is possible that Barak was Deborah's stepson, and that her second husband, Lapidoth had died, since he is not mentioned as being present in any part of the account.

and as judge, she placed in command; being herself brave, she trained him, and, as a prophetess, she sent him to certain victory.

Deborah's son Barak shows that the chief part of the victory was in the hands of a woman when he said, 'If you will not go with me I will not go, for I don't know when the Lord is sending His angel with me' (Judges 4:8 LXX). How great, then, was the strength of that woman to whom the leader of the army says, 'If you will not go, I will not go'. How great is the fortitude of the widow who doesn't keep back her son from dangers through motherly affection, but rather with the zeal of a mother exhorts her son to go on to victory, while saying that the decisive point of that victory is in the hand of a woman!

Deborah foretold the events of the battle. Barak, as he was told, led the army; Jael carried off the triumph⁵⁵, for the prophecy of Deborah fought for her. In a mystery this revealed to us the rising of the Church from among the Gentiles, for whom should be found a triumph over Sisera, that is, over the powers opposed to her. It was not the Jews but Jael who gained the victory over the enemy; those people could not follow the enemy, whom it had put to flight by the virtue of faith. By their fault salvation came to the Gentiles, by their sluggishness the victory was reserved for us.

Regarding Second Marriages⁵⁶

Widows who have been in the habit of giving don't lack of their necessary expenses; they receive help themselves, who in great dangers have time and again guarded the resources of their husbands. Further, I think that the help that a husband gives is usually provided for widows by sons-in-law and other relatives, and that God's mercy is more ready to help them; therefore, when there is no special cause for marrying, the desire of so doing should not exist.

This, however, I say as advice, we do not order it as a precept; we stir up the wills of widows rather than bind them. I do not forbid second marriages, only I do not advise them. 'All things are lawful to me', Paul says, 'but all things are not helpful' (1 Corinthians 6:12). Also, to drink wine is lawful, but, for the most part, it is not expedient.

It is then lawful to marry, but it is more appropriate to abstain, for there are bonds in marriage. Beautiful is the grace of mutual love, but the bondage is more constant. 'The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does' (1 Corinthians 7:4). This bondage is not just by one of sexes, but, 'Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does'. The constraint in marriage is great, which subjects even the stronger to the other; for by mutual constraint each is bound to serve. Neither husband nor wife can withdraw their neck from the yoke, for they are subject to the lack of self-control of the other. Paul said, 'You were bought with a price, do not become slaves of men' (1 Corinthians 7:23). You see how plainly the servitude of marriage is defined. If a good marriage is servitude, what is a bad one, when they cannot sanctify, but destroy one another?

⁵⁵ Sisera, the commanding general of the enemy, hid in Jael's tent to rest from the fighting. As he slept, Jael drove a tent peg through his head, pinning him to the ground.

⁵⁶ Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Widows, XI, 67-70.

I exhort widows to keep the grace of their gift; also I incite women to observe Church discipline. Though it is the flock of Christ, yet some are fed on strong food; others are still nourished with milk, who must be on their guard against those wolves who are hidden in sheep's clothing, pretending to be celibate. For they know how severe are the burdens of chastity, since they cannot touch them with the tips of their fingers. The measure of the burden must always be according to the strength of him who has to bear it; otherwise, where the bearer is weak, he breaks down with the burden laid upon him; for too strong meat chokes the throats of infants.

Widowhood is Good⁵⁷

The widow has not received a command, but advice; advice not given only once but often repeated. First, it is said, 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman' (1 Corinthians 7:1). And again, 'I wish that all men were even as I myself' (1 Corinthians 7:7); and once more, 'It is good for them if they remain even as I am' (1 Corinthians 7:8); and a fourth time, 'It is good because of the present distress' (1 Corinthians 7:26). It is well pleasing to the Lord, honorable, and perseverance in widowhood is happier, Paul lays this down not only as his own judgment, but also as a desire of the Holy Spirit. Who, then, can reject the kindness of such a counselor? Who, then, would shrink from becoming holy in body and spirit, since the reward is far above the labor, grace beyond need, and the wages above the work?

And this, I say, not in order to lay a snare for others, but that as a good vinedresser of the land entrusted to me, I may see this field of the Church to be fruitful, at one time blossoming with the flowers of purity, at another time strong in the gravity of widowhood, and yet again abounding with the fruits of marriage. For though they are diverse, yet they are the fruits of one field; there are not so many lilies in the gardens as ears of grain in the fields, and many more fields are prepared for receiving seed than lie unseeded after the crops are gathered in.

Widowhood is good then, and is so often praised by the judgment of the Apostles, for it is a teacher of the faith and a teacher of chastity.

The widow, like a veteran, having served her time, lays aside the arms of married life, yet orders the peace of the whole house. Though now freed from carrying burdens, she is watchful for the younger who are to be married. With the thoughtfulness of old age, she arranges where more pains (as in marriage) would be profitable, where produce would be more abundant, which is fitting for the marriage bond. If the field is entrusted to the elder rather than to the younger, why should you think that it is more advantageous to be a married woman than a widow? If the persecutors of the faith have also been the persecutors of widowhood, most certainly by those who hold the faith, widowhood is not to be shunned as a penalty, but to be respected as a reward.

⁵⁷ Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Widows, XIV, 82-85.

Honor for the First Husband⁵⁸

The divine Law has bound together husband and wife by its authority, and yet mutual love remains a difficult matter. For God took a rib from the man, and formed the woman so as to join them one to the other, and said, ‘They shall be one flesh’ (Genesis 2:24). He said this not of a second marriage but of the first, for Eve didn’t take a second husband, nor does the holy Church recognize a second bridegroom. ‘This is a great mystery in Christ and in the Church (Ephesians 5:32). Neither, again, did Isaac know another wife besides Rebecca (Genesis 24:67), nor bury his father, Abraham, with any wife but Sarah’ (Genesis 25:10).

In holy Rachel (Genesis 29:28) there was the figure of a mystery rather than a true order of marriage. In her we have something which we can refer to the grace of the first marriage, since he loved her best whom he had first betrothed, and deceit did not shut out his intention, nor the intervening marriage destroy his love for his betrothed. And so the holy patriarch (Jacob) has taught us how highly we ought to respect a first marriage, since he himself respected his first betrothal so highly. Take care, then, my daughter, lest you be unable to hold onto the grace of marriage, and also increase your own troubles.

John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom felt an early desire for the monastic life, but he was delayed in doing this because of care for his widowed mother. He lived at first under a monastic rule at home before becoming a hermit, and later Bishop of Constantinople and “Doctor” of the Greek-speaking Church⁵⁹. He addressed⁶⁰ Paul’s words to the Corinthians about whether or not virgins should marry or widows should remarry. The underlying issue was whether to live a celibate life as the Apostles were doing. Marriage is not sin, unless a previous vow was broken in order to marry. But marriage is a burden that can distract one from prayer and the things of God.

“Paul had said, ‘Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek one’ (1 Corinthians 7:27). Paul’s caveat was, ‘Except it be by consent’, as here he says, ‘Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek separation’. This is not a contradiction if both husband and wife consent both live celibate, with no breakup of their marriage.”

“To make it clear that he is not laying down a law, he adds, ‘but if you marry, you have not sinned’ (1 Corinthians 7:28). Paul next addresses the existing state of things, ‘the present distress, the shortness of the time’ and the affliction’ (1 Corinthians 7:29-33). For marriage draws along with it many things and an additional burden. In the discussion about celibacy, he said, ‘the wife does not have power over herself’ (1 Corinthians 7:4); and here he says the same thing, by the expression, ‘You are bound’” (1 Corinthians 7:39).

⁵⁸ Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Widows, XV, 89-90.

⁵⁹ That is, along with Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus.

⁶⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, XIX, 7.

“‘But if you marry, you have not sinned’. He is not speaking about her who has made a choice of virginity, for if it comes to that, she has sinned⁶¹. Since if the widows are condemned for entering a second marriages after they have once chosen widowhood, much more so the virgins.”

John Chrysostom commended⁶² celibate widows for choosing a hard life over a second marriage. He also encouraged us to help the widows in their hardship, and thus store up for ourselves treasure in heaven.

“The Apostles had cast away all wickedness from their souls, and had accompanied Christ with a pure mind; therefore He said according to the word of the Prophet, ‘he that is washed is clean already’ (John 13:10-11). For in that place also it does not mean the ‘washing’ of water, practiced by the Jews; but the cleansing of the conscience.”

“Let us be clean also and learn we to do well. ‘Judge for the fatherless, plead for the widow; and come, let us reason together, says the Lord’ (Isaiah 1:17). There is frequent mention in the Scriptures of widows and orphans, but we make no account of this. Yet consider how great is the reward. ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, I will whiten them as snow; though they are red like crimson, I will whiten them as wool’ (Isaiah 1:18). For a widow is an unprotected being, therefore He takes much care for her. For they, when it is in their power to contract a second marriage, endure the hardships of widowhood through fear of God. Let us all then, both men and women, stretch forth our hands to them, that we may never undergo the sorrows of widowhood; or if we should have to undergo them, let us lay up a great store of kindness for ourselves. Not small is the power of the widow’s tears, it is able to open heaven itself. Let us not trample on them, nor make their calamity worse, but assist them by every means. If we do so, we shall surround ourselves much safety, both in the present life, and in that which is to come. For not here alone, but there also will they be our defenders, cutting away most of our sins by reason of our benevolence towards them, and causing us to stand boldly before the judgment-seat of Christ.”

John Chrysostom addressed⁶³ the issue of married couples living a celibate life in order to attain a better prayer life. It must be by consent of both, or it could lead to adultery by the spouse with less self-control. Lack of sexual relations can be a tyranny for those with less self-control; Paul said to withdraw from this pain in order that we aren’t subverted to sin.

“Consider an actual case. Suppose a wife lives celibate without the consent of her husband; if he commits fornication, or though abstaining from fornication frets and grows restless, gets heated and quarrels, and gives all kind of trouble to his wife; where is all the gain from the fasting and the celibacy, if a breach is being made in their love for each other? This spells much trouble, and suggests that a great war will arise! When man and wife are at variance in a house, the house will be no better off than a ship in a storm, when the captain is

⁶¹ That is, she has broken a solemn vow to the Lord, where she had abandoned the things of this world in choosing celibacy; but now she has decided to return to the things of this world to get married.

⁶² John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LXX, 2-3.

⁶³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, XIX, 3.

on bad terms with the helmsman. Therefore Paul says, ‘Do not deprive one another, unless it is by consent for a season, that you may give yourselves unto prayer’ (1 Corinthians 7:5). It is prayer with unusual earnestness that he here means. For if he is forbidding those who have intercourse with one another to pray, how could ‘pray without ceasing’ (1 Thessalonians 5:17, Ephesians 6:18) have any place? It is possible then to live with a wife and yet pay attention to prayer. But by abstinence prayer is made more perfect. Paul did not say merely, ‘That you may pray’; but, ‘That you may give yourselves to it’; as though marital relations might cause not uncleanness, but much preoccupation.”

“Paul followed his advice about depriving one another with coming together again, that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Corinthians 7:5). Understand that it is not the devil only who causes this crime of adultery, but also you’re your lack of self-control.”

“Paul said this by way of permission, not of commandment. He wished that all men could be like himself, in a state of abstinence. This he does in many places when he is advising about difficult matters; he brings forward himself, and says, ‘Be imitators of me’” (1 Corinthians 4:16, 11:1).

“Paul said to the unmarried and to widows, ‘it is good for them if they continue as I do’ (1 Corinthians 7:8); that is, celibate. ‘But if they do not have self-control, let them marry?’ Do you see the strong sense of Paul, how he both signifies that celibacy is better, and yet he puts no force on the person who cannot attain to it; fearing that something offensive to God arises?”

“Paul stated that ‘it is better to marry than to burn’ (1 Corinthians 7:9). He indicates how great is the tyranny of sexual desire. What he means is something like this: ‘If you have to endure much violence and burning desire, withdraw yourself from your pain, in order that you aren’t subverted.’”

Jerome

Jerome, a celibate by choice, devoted himself to an ascetic life after his baptism. He was the Abbot of a monastery in Bethlehem, devoted his life to study, and is referred to as a “Doctor” of the Latin-speaking Church⁶⁴. He wrote letters to several women, urging them to seriously consider celibacy. Following is an excerpt of a letter he wrote⁶⁵ to the young widow Salvina, a lady of the Imperial Court, and whom he had never met, on the occasion of the death of her husband. Jerome encouraged Salvina to live up to the standard for widows that Paul spoke of in his pastoral letters. Salvina evidently followed Jerome’s advice. She raised her two young children and consecrated her life to celibacy and deeds of piety, and later became one of John Chrysostom’s deaconesses.

“Salvina, you have those to nurse, who may well represent to you your absent husband. ‘Children are a heritage of the Lord; and the fruit of the womb is his reward’ (Psalm 128:3 LXX). In the place of one husband you have received two children, and thus your affection has more objects than before. All that was due to him you can give to them. Temper grief with love, for if he is gone they are still with you. It is no small merit in God’s eyes to bring up children well.

⁶⁴ That is, along with Ambrose of Milan, Augustine and Gregory the Great.

⁶⁵ Jerome, Letter to Salvina, LXXIX, 7.

Listen to Paul's counsel, 'Do not let not a widow be taken into the number less than 60 years old, having been the wife of one man, well reported for good works. If she has brought up children, lodged strangers, washed the saints' feet, relieved the afflicted, and diligently followed every good work' (1 Timothy 5:9-10). Here you learn the roll of the virtues, which God requires of you, what is due to the name of widow, which you bear, and by what good deeds you can attain to in that second degree⁶⁶ of chastity, which is still open to you. Do not be disturbed because Paul allows none to be chosen as a widow less than 60 years old, neither suppose that he intends to reject those who are still young. Believe that you are indeed chosen by him who said to his disciple, 'Let no man despise your youth' (1 Timothy 4:12), your lack of age that is, not your want of abstinence. If this is not his meaning, then all who become widows less than 60 years old will have to take husbands. Paul is training a Church that still untaught in Christ, and making provision for people of all stations but especially for the poor, the charge of whom had been committed to himself and Barnabas (Galatians 2:9-10). Thus he wishes only those to be supported by the exertions of the Church, who cannot labor with their own hands, and who are really widows (1 Timothy 5:3), approved by their years and by their lives. The faults of his children made Eli the priest an offense to God. On the other hand He is appeased by the virtues of such as 'continue in faith, charity and holiness with chastity' (1 Timothy 2:15). 'O Timothy', he cries, 'keep yourself pure' (1 Timothy 5:22). Far be it from me to suspect you capable of doing anything wrong; still it is only a kindness to admonish one whose youth and opulence might lead her into temptation. You must take what I am going to say as addressed not to you but to your girlish years. A widow 'that lives in pleasure is dead while she lives' (1 Timothy 5:6). So speaks the 'chosen vessel' (Acts 9:15) and the words are brought out from his treasure who could boldly say, 'Do you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me?' (2 Corinthians 13:3) Yet they are the words of one who in his own person admitted the weakness of the human body, saying, 'The good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice' (Romans 7:19). And again, 'Therefore I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified' (1 Corinthians 9:27). If Paul is afraid, which of us can venture to be confident? If David, the friend of God, and Solomon, who loved God (1 Kings 3:3), were overcome like other men, if their fall is meant to warn us and their penitence to lead us to salvation, who in this slippery life can be sure of not falling?"

"You have buried every favor in your husband's tomb; over his bier you have cleansed with tears a face stained with rouge and white lead. You have exchanged a white robe and jeweled boots for a somber tunic and black shoes; and only one thing more is needed: perseverance in fasting. Let paleness and squalor be your jewels from now on. Do not pamper yourself with a bed of down or kindle your young blood with hot baths. If common glass is worth so much, what must be the value of a pearl of great price? If some Gentile widows can condemn all sensual indulgence, what must we expect from a Christian widow

⁶⁶ The three degrees of chastity that Jerome refers to are virgin, widow, and wife.

who owes her chastity not to one who is dead but to one with whom she shall reign in heaven?”

Jerome set⁶⁷ celibacy as a higher standard than married life, but only if freely chosen and not forced. He described Old Testament life as revolving around marriage, children and working the land and had a different standard of blessedness. As a result of the Cross, we have returned to Paradise, where mankind lived celibate prior to the Fall. Jerome quoted Paul as also preferring celibacy for anyone who could live that way by his/her own choice. Some of the Prophets foresaw this and lived celibate lives; being unmarried, their focus was on the things of the Lord and on how to please Him, rather than on how to please their spouse.

“Someone may say, ‘Do you dare detract from marriage, which is a state blessed by God?’ I do not detract from marriage when I set celibacy before it. No one compares a bad thing with a good. Married women may congratulate themselves that they come next to virgins. ‘Be fruitful’, God says, ‘and multiply, and fill the earth’ (Genesis 1:28). He who desires to fill the earth may increase and multiply if he will. But the train to which you belong is not on earth, but in heaven. The command to increase and multiply first finds fulfillment after the expulsion from paradise, after the nakedness and the fig leaves, which speak of sexual passion. Let them marry and be given in marriage who eat their bread in the sweat of their brow; whose land produces thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:18-19), and whose crops are choked with briars. My seed produces fruit a hundredfold. ‘All men cannot receive God’s saying, but they to whom it is given’”.

“Some people may be celibate from necessity; I am one of free will (Matthew 19:11-12). ‘There is a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. There is a time to throw stones, and a time to gather stones together’ (Ecclesiastes 3:5). Now that out of the hard stones of the Gentiles, God has raised up children to Abraham (Matthew 3:9), they begin to be ‘holy stones rolling upon the earth’ (Zechariah 9:16 LXX). They pass through the whirlwinds of the world, and roll on in God’s chariot on rapid wheels. In paradise Eve was a virgin, and it was only after the coats of skins that she began her married life”.

“Now paradise is your home too. Keep your birthright and say, ‘Return to your rest, O my soul’ (Psalm 116:7). To show that celibacy is natural while marriage only follows guilt, what is born of marriage is virgin flesh, and it gives back in fruit what in root it has lost. ‘There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a flower shall grow out of his roots’ (Isaiah 11:1 LXX). The rod is the mother of the Lord — simple, pure, undefiled; drawing no germ of life from without but fruitful in singleness like God Himself. The flower of the rod is Christ, who says of Himself, ‘I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys’ (Song of Solomon 2:1). In another place He is foretold to be ‘a stone cut out of the mountain without hands’ (Daniel 2:45), a figure by which the prophet signifies that He is to be born a virgin of a virgin. For the hands are here a figure of marriage as in the passage, ‘His left hand is under my head and his right hand embraces me’ (Song of Solomon 2:6). It agrees, also, with this interpretation that

⁶⁷ Jerome, Letter to Eustochium, XXII, 19-21.

the unclean animals are led into Noah's ark in pairs, while an uneven number of the clean is taken" (Genesis 7:2).

"I praise marriage, but it is because they give me virgins. I gather the rose from the thorns, the gold from the earth, the pearl from the shell. 'Will the ploughman plough all day? Or will he prepare the seed beforehand, before he tills the ground?' (Isaiah 28:24 LXX) Shall he not also enjoy the fruit of his labor? Marriage is honored more when what is born of it is loved. Why, mother, do you resent your daughter's virginity? She has been reared on your milk; she has come from your womb; she has grown up on your bosom. Your watchful affection has kept her a virgin. Are you angry with her because she chooses to be a king's wife and not a soldier's? She has conferred on you a high privilege; you are now the mother-in-law of God. 'Concerning virgins', Paul says, 'I have no commandment of the Lord' (1 Corinthians 7:25). Why was this? His own celibacy was due to his free choice, not to a command. When Paul discussed celibacy and perpetual chastity, he used the words, 'I wish that all men were as I myself'. And farther on, 'I say, therefore, to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they remain even as I' (1 Corinthians 7:7-8). And in another place, 'have we not power to lead about wives even as the rest of the apostles?' (1 Corinthians 9:5) Why then has he no commandment from the Lord concerning celibacy? Because what is freely offered is worth more than what is extorted by force, and to command celibacy would have been to abolish marriage. It would have been a hard act to compel opposition to nature and to extort from men the angelic life; and not only so, it would have been to condemn marriage, which is a divine ordinance."

"The old Law had a different ideal of blessedness: 'Blessed is he who has seed in Zion and a family in Jerusalem' (Isaiah 31:9 LXX); and 'Cursed is the barren who can't have children' (Isaiah 54:1 LXX); and 'Your children shall be like olive plants around your table' (Psalm 128:3). Riches too are promised to the faithful and we are told that 'there was not one feeble person among their tribes' (Psalm 105:37). But now to celibates it is said, 'Don't say, I am a dry tree' (Isaiah 56:3); that is, having no children, for instead of sons and daughters you have a place forever in heaven. Now the poor are blessed (Matthew 5:3), now Lazarus is set before Dives in his purple (Luke 16:19). Now he who is weak is counted strong (1 Corinthians 4:10). But in those days the world was still sparsely populated; accordingly, only those were considered happy who could boast of children. It was for this reason that Abraham in his old age married Keturah (Genesis 25:1); that Leah hired Jacob with her son's mandrakes⁶⁸ (Genesis 30:14-16), and that fair Rachel — a type of the church — complained of the closing of her womb (Genesis 30:1-2). But gradually the crop grew up and then the reaper was sent forth with his sickle. Elijah lived a celibate life, so also did Elisha and many of the sons of the prophets. To Jeremiah the command came, 'You shall not take a wife' (Jeremiah 16:2). He had been sanctified in his mother's womb (Jeremiah 1:5), and now he was forbidden to take a wife, because the captivity was near. Paul gives the same counsel in different words. 'I think that celibacy is good because of the present distress, namely that it is good for a

⁶⁸ The mandrake is a plant of the nightshade family having narcotic properties.

man to be as he is' (1 Corinthians 7:26). What is this distress, which does away with the joys of marriage? Paul tells us later, 'The time *is* short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none' (1 Corinthians 7:29). In Jeremiah's day, Nebuchadnezzar was coming. What good will marriage be to me if it is to end in slavery to the most arrogant king? What good will little ones be to me if their lot is to be that which the prophet sadly describes, 'The tongue of the sucking child cleaves to the roof of his mouth for thirst; the young children ask for bread and no man gives it to them?' (Lamentation 4:4) But now that a virgin has conceived (Isaiah 7:14) and has borne to us a child of whom the prophet says that 'Government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called the mighty God, the everlasting⁶⁹ Father' (Isaiah 9:6), now the chain of the curse is broken. Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary. And thus the gift of celibacy has been given most richly upon women, seeing that it has had its beginning from a woman. As soon as the Son of God set foot on the earth, He formed for Himself a new household there; as angels in heaven adored him, angels might serve Him also on earth. Then chaste Judith once more cut off the head of Holofernes (Judith 13). Then Haman, whose name means iniquity, was once more hanged on the gallows of his own construction (Esther 7:10). Then James and John left father, net and ship and followed Jesus (Mark 1:19-20); neither kinship nor the world's ties, nor the care of their home could hold them back. Then were the words heard, 'Whoever will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34). No soldier goes to battle with a wife. Even when a disciple would have buried his father, the Lord forbid him, and said, 'Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head' (Matthew 8:20). So you must not complain if you have little room in your house. In the same strain, Paul writes, 'He that is unmarried cares for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but he that is married cares for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife' (1 Corinthians 7:32-33). There is a difference also between a wife and a virgin. 'The unmarried woman cares for the things of the Lord that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she that is married cares for the things of the world how she may please her husband'" (1 Corinthians 7:34).

Jerome referred⁷⁰ to honorable marriage, celibate widowhood and virginity as the yields of thirty, sixty and a hundredfold (Matthew 13:23), which each come from one soil and one sowing. "Marriage is honorable and the bed undefiled"; we allow marriage, but we prefer virginity. Celibate widows, who are placed in a position of distress and tribulation, are in an extremely trying position, since when one has once tasted pleasure, it is difficult to abstain from its enticements. So the reward of doing this is proportionately greater. Similarly with virgins, who have abandoned tasting pleasure completely. This does not condemn marriage, but shows the proportionately greater reward for celibacy.

⁶⁹ Or the Father of the Ages.

⁷⁰ Jerome, Letter to Pammachius, XLVIII, 2.

Jerome noted⁷¹ that Paul allowed second marriages, but he qualified this with the advice that people will be happier if they don't. In urging abstinence, Paul appeals to his experience in sensing the Will of God.

“Paul allows second marriages, but only to such women as are resolved to do so, such as cannot control themselves. Lest ‘when they have begun to grow sensuous against Christ they marry, having condemnation because they have rejected their first faith’ (1 Timothy 5:11-12), and he makes this concession because many ‘are turned aside after Satan’ (1 Timothy 5:15). But they will be happier if they remain as widows. To this he immediately adds his apostolic authority, ‘after my judgment’. Moreover, lest any should consider that authority, being human, to be of small weight, he goes on to say, ‘and I think also that I have the Spirit of God’ (1 Corinthians 7:40). Thus, where he urges men to abstinence he appeals not to human authority, but to the Spirit of God. But when he gives them permission to marry he does not mention the Spirit of God, but allows prudence to turn the balance, relaxing the strictness of his code in favor of individuals according to their several needs. Having first mentioned that second marriages are allowed by Paul, we added, ‘As marriage is permitted to virgins by reason of the danger of fornication, and as what in itself is not desirable is thus made excusable, so by reason of the same danger widows are permitted to marry a second time. For it is better that a woman should know one man, though he should be a second husband or a third, than that she should know several at the same time.’”

Jerome noted⁷² Paul's words to unmarried men warning them not to touch a woman to avoid being consumed by lust. If as Solomon said all the things of this life are vanity, this doesn't mean that heavenly things are vanity also. It is merely in comparison to heavenly things that the things of this life are of less value.

“Notice Paul's carefulness. He does not say: ‘It is good for a man not to have a wife,’ but, ‘It is good for a man not to touch a woman’ (1 Corinthians 7:1); there is danger in the touching of a woman, where he who touches cannot escape. I am not expounding the Law as to husbands and wives, but simply discussing the general question of sexual intercourse, in comparison with celibacy, the life of angels. The Preacher says, ‘all is vanity’ (Ecclesiastes 1:2). But if all created things are good, as being the handiwork of a good Creator, how is it that all things are vanity? If the earth is vanity, is heaven vanity too? Are the angels, thrones, dominations, powers, and the rest of the heavenly creatures vanity also? No; if things, which are good in themselves as being the handiwork of a good Creator, are called vanity, it is because they are compared with things which are better still. For example, put the moon beside the sun, and it no longer looks bright; compare the sun with Christ, and it is darkness. Now it was in a similar sense that I declared it to be a bad thing to touch a woman — I did not say a wife — because it is a good thing not to touch one. I call virginity fine grain, marriage barley, and fornication cow-dung. Surely both fine grain and barley are creatures of God.

⁷¹ Jerome, Letter to Pammachius, XLVIII, 8.

⁷² Jerome, Letter to Pammachius, XLVIII, 14.

Jerome took⁷³ his lead from Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, who wrote a three-volume set “Concerning Virgins” and another book “Concerning Widows”.

“What I have said about virginity and marriage diffusely, Ambrose has stated tersely and pointedly, compressing much meaning into a few words. He describes virginity as a means of recommending abstinence, marriage as a remedy for lack of self control. And when he descends from broad principles to particular details, he significantly holds out to virgins the prize of the high calling, yet comforts the married. While eulogizing the one class, he does not despise the other. Marriage he compares to the barley bread set before the multitude, virginity to the body of Christ given to the disciples. There is much less difference, it seems to me, between barley and fine grain than between barley and the Body of Christ. Finally, he speaks of marriage as a hard burden, to be avoided if possible, and as a badge of the most unmistakable servitude.”

Jerome elaborated⁷⁴ on Paul’s advice to the unmarried and widows, that they remain celibate as he does; but if they can’t control themselves, it is better to marry than to commit fornication. The comparison is abstinence is better, marriage is good and fornication is bad.

“I say to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they remain as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn’ (1 Corinthians 7:8-9). This section I have interpreted thus: ‘When Paul has granted to those who are married the use of marriage, and has made clear his own wishes and concessions, he shifts to those who are unmarried or widows, and sets before them his own example. He calls them happy if they remain as he is; but he goes on, ‘if they cannot control themselves, let them marry’. He thus repeats his former advice, ‘to avoid fornication,’ and ‘that Satan doesn’t tempt you for your inability to control yourself’ (1 Corinthians 7:5). When he says, ‘If they cannot control themselves, let them marry,’ he gives as a reason for his words that ‘it is better to marry than to burn.’ It is only good to marry, because it is bad to burn. But take away the fire of lust, and he will not say ‘it is better to marry.’ For a thing is said to be better in comparison to something, which is worse, and not simply in contrast with what is admittedly good. It is as though he said, ‘It is better to have one eye than none’”.

“Paul wishes unmarried women and widows to abstain from sexual intercourse, incites them to follow his own example, and calls them happy if they remain as he is. But if they cannot control themselves, and are tempted to quench the fire of lust by fornication rather than by abstinence, it is better to marry than to burn. I have made this comment: ‘It is good to marry, simply because it is bad to burn’. This is not my view; I am just explaining Paul’s precept, ‘It is better to marry than to burn’; that is, it is better to take a husband than to commit fornication. If marriage is only a little better than the evil to which it is preferred, it cannot be that unblemished perfection and blessedness which suggest a comparison with the life of angels. Suppose I say, ‘It is better to be a virgin than a married woman’; in this case I have preferred what is better over what is good. But suppose I go a step further and say, ‘It is better to marry than to commit

⁷³ Jerome, Letter to Pammachius, XLVIII, 14.

⁷⁴ Jerome, Letter to Pammachius, XLVIII, 17.

fornication'; in that case I have preferred, not a better thing to a good thing, but a good thing to a bad one. While virginity is related to marriage as better is to good, marriage is related to fornication as good is to bad.”

Jerome wrote⁷⁵ to Demetrias, a noble Roman lady who had just chosen celibacy, about some principles to guide her in her new lifestyle. Many writers, both Greek-speaking and Latin-speaking, have advocated celibacy, but most writers have addressed only those who haven't chosen yet; Jerome addressed those who have already made the choice.

“It is about thirty years since I published a treatise⁷⁶ on the preservation of virginity, in which I felt constrained to oppose certain vices and to expose the wiles of the devil for the instruction of the virgin, to whom it was addressed. My language then gave offense to a great many, for everyone applied what I said to himself, and instead of welcoming my admonitions, turned away from me as if I was an accuser of his deeds. I have also written short exhortations to several virgins and widows, and in these smaller works I have gathered together all that there is to be said on the subject. I am reduced to the alternative of repeating exhortations, which seem superfluous or of omitting them to the serious injury of this treatise. The blessed Cyprian⁷⁷ has left a noble work on virginity; and many other writers, both Greek-speaking and Latin-speaking, have done the same. The celibate life has been praised both with tongue and pen among all nations and particularly among the Churches. Most of those, who have written on the subject, have addressed themselves to such as have not yet chosen virginity, and who need help to enable them to choose rightly. But I, and those to whom I write, have made our choice; and our one object is to remain constant to it. Therefore, as our way lies among scorpions and adders, among snares and poisons, let us go forward staff in hand, our belt on and shoes on our feet (Exodus 12:11). We desire to come to the sweet waters of the true Jordan, and enter the land of promise and go up to the house of God. Then we shall sing with the prophet, ‘Lord, I have loved the beauty of Your house and the place where Your glory dwells’ (Psalm 26:8 LXX); and again, ‘one thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life’” (Psalm 27:4).

Jerome and the Western Church

In the early 4th Century, a difference of opinion arose between East and West regarding whether priests should live a celibate life. The Bishops of the West felt that since the Apostles did so, the priests should do so also. The Bishops of the East, however, felt that this was too great a burden on the priests. This topic was discussed at the 1st Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in c. 325 AD; since agreement could not be reached, it was decided that this should be left to the Bishop of each region whether his priests would be celibate. This difference between East and West has remained to this day.

⁷⁵ Jerome, Letter to Demetrias, CXXX, 19.

⁷⁶ Jerome, Letter to Eustochium, XXII.

⁷⁷ See Jerome, Letter to Eustochium, XXII, 22 for this and other references.

Jerome, writing in c. 394 AD, reflected⁷⁸ recent decisions of the Western (Latin-speaking) Church to require celibacy for priests and deacons as well as bishops. The Eastern Church has never required priests or deacons to be celibate. The Latin-speaking Church ordered a celibate clergy to imitate the lives of the Apostles.

“The apostles were either virgins or, though married, lived celibate lives. Those persons who are chosen to be bishops, priests, and deacons are either virgins or widowers⁷⁹; or at least when once they have received the priesthood, are vowed to perpetual celibacy⁸⁰. Why do we delude ourselves and feel bothered if, while we are continually straining after sexual indulgence, we find the palm of celibacy denied to us? We wish to fare sumptuously, and to enjoy the embraces of our wives, yet at the same time we desire to reign with Christ among virgins and widows. Shall there be but one reward, then, for hunger and for excess, for filth and for finery, for sackcloth and for silk?”

Some heretics⁸¹, who claimed that any form of marriage should be condemned, harassed Jerome for his views. In fact, Jerome spoke⁸² of a threefold graduation in honor, with virgins at the top followed by celibate widows and married women. He didn't undervalue the merit of wives who live in chastity with their husbands; he just thought that virgins and celibate widows would receive a greater reward from God.

“It is only heretics who condemn marriage and tread under foot the ordinance of God; we listen with gladness to every word said by our Lord in praise of marriage. For the Church does not condemn marriage, but only subordinates it. It does not reject it altogether, but regulates it, knowing that ‘in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of clay; and some to honor and some to dishonor. If a man cleanses himself, he shall be an honorable vessel and prepared for every good work’ (2 Timothy 2:20-21). I listen with gladness to every word Paul said in praise of marriage. Whether you like it or not, marriage is subordinated to virginity and widowhood. Even when marriage continues to fulfill its function, the Church does not condemn it, but only subordinates it; it does not reject it, but only regulates it. It is in your power to mount the second step of chastity. Why are you angry if, standing on the third and lowest step, you will not hurry to go up higher?”

⁷⁸ Jerome, Letter to Pammachius, XLVIII, 20.

⁷⁹ Jerome was writing from the viewpoint of the Western, or Roman, Church. In the Eastern Church, priests are allowed to marry, but only before they receive the priesthood. If their wife passes away, they must either remain celibate or give up the priesthood.

⁸⁰ This rule of celibacy for the clergy in the Western Church was first established at the local Council of Elvira (Spain) in Canon 33 (c. 300-306 AD) and at the local Council of Carthage in Canon 3 (c. 390 AD). When this issue was brought to the 1st Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in Canon 80 (c. 325 AD), it was rejected by the bishops of the Eastern Church as being too great a burden on the priests and their wives. The agreement at the 1st Ecumenical Council was to leave the decision for celibacy to the Bishops. Pope Siricius (c. 385 AD), issued official statements that clerical sexual abstinence was an Apostolic practice that must be followed by ministers of the Western Church.

⁸¹ For example, Tatian, the chief of the Encratites, stated that Jerome also condemned marriage.

⁸² Jerome, Letter to Pammachius, XLVIII, 9-11.

Jerome took⁸³ his lead from John's vision on Patmos where the 144,000 virgins, the first fruits to God and to the Lamb, were the only ones able to sing a new song before the Throne of God (Revelation 14:1-4). If these are the first fruits, celibate widows and married women must come in second and third place respectively. Married women, on the other hand, are bound to their husbands in labor, childbearing and servitude.

“I have spoken of virginity as gold and of marriage as silver. In discussing the 144,000 sealed virgins who were not defiled with women, I have tried to show that all who have not remained virgins are reckoned as defiled when compared with the perfect chastity of the angels and of our Lord Jesus Christ. If anyone thinks it hard that I have placed the same interval between virginity and marriage as there is between fine grain and barley, let him read the book of the holy Ambrose ‘On Widows’, and he will find, among other statements concerning virginity and marriage, the following: ‘Paul has not expressed his preference for marriage so unreservedly as to quench in men the aspiration after virginity. He begins with a recommendation of abstinence, and it is only subsequently that he stoops to mention the remedies for its opposite. To the strong he has pointed out the prize of their upward calling (Philippians 3:14), yet he doesn’t want any to faint on the way (Matthew 15:32). While he applauds those who are leaders, he does not despise those who bring up the rear. For he had himself learned that the Lord Jesus gave to some barley bread, lest they should faint by the way, but offered to others His own body, that they should strive to attain His kingdom (Matthew 26:26, 29). ‘The nuptial tie, then, is not to be avoided as a crime, but to be refused as a hard burden. For the Law binds the wife to bring forth children in labor and in sorrow. Her desire is to be to her husband that he should rule over her (Genesis 3:16). It is not the widow, then, but the bride, who is handed over to labor and sorrow in childbearing. It is not the virgin, but the married woman, who is subjected to the sway of a husband’. And in another place, ‘You are bought with a price; do not be therefore the slaves of men’ (1 Corinthians 6:20, 7:23). You see how clearly he defines the servitude of the married state. And a little farther on: ‘If, then, even a good marriage is servitude, what must a bad one be, in which husband and wife cannot sanctify, but only mutually destroy each other?’”

⁸³ Jerome, Letter to Pammachius, XLVIII, 14.

Care for Widows and Orphans in the Church

Care for widows and an orphan in the Church was a major priority. Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome, reminded⁸⁴ people,

“If our Lord Himself by the testimony of Holy Scripture declares Himself to be the husband of widows and father of orphans (Isaiah 1:17, Psalm 68:5), we also, the members of His body, ought with the soul’s supreme effort to set ourselves to imitate the head, enforce justice, and stand by orphans and widows as need arises.

Ambrose of Milan stated⁸⁵ that the property of widows and of the faithful should be defended, even if doing so brings danger and wrath from government authorities. As an example, he used the case of Onias the priest defending the property of the widows against Heliodorus and King Antiochus during the time of the Maccabees⁸⁶. Antiochus had heard that there was a lot of money stored in the Temple to help the widows; Heliodorus was sent to confiscate it on the king’s behalf. While the priests and the people prayed that the Lord would stand by His Laws that He enacted for helping the poor, Heliodorus surrounded the Treasury with his army. Suddenly three angels, dressed as soldiers, appeared and started punching Heliodorus repeatedly until he was nearly dead. Finally some of the friends of Heliodorus begged Onias, the High Priest, to spare Heliodorus’ life. When Onias asked for this, the beating stopped. One of the angels then told Heliodorus, ‘Thank Onias the high priest, for your life. Having experienced a beating from God, go tell your friends how much you have learned about the sanctity of the Temple and the power of God’. Then the angels disappeared! A humbled Heliodorus offered a sacrifice, thanked Onias, and then returned to Antiochus saying, ‘If you have an enemy, who is plotting against your power, send him to Jerusalem and you will receive him back thoroughly beaten up’.

Ambrose gave another example of the defense of the trust-money of widows by himself and others at Ticinum, when it was about to be confiscated by the emperor.

“Great care must be taken that the property entrusted by widows remains inviolate. It should be guarded without causing complaint, not only if it belongs to widows, but to anyone at all. For good faith must be shown to all, though the cause of the widow and orphans come first.”

“Therefore, my sons, we must show good faith in the case of trust-money, and care, too, must be shown. Your service will glow the brighter if the oppression of a powerful man, which some widow or orphan cannot withstand, is checked by the assistance of the Church, and if you show that the command of the Lord has more weight with you than the favor of the rich.”

“Remember also how we entered in a contest against the royal attacks, on behalf of the trust-money belonging to widows in the recent case of the Church at Ticinum, which was in danger of losing the widow’s trust-money that it had received. For when he who wanted to claim it on some imperial edict demanded it, the clergy caved in. They supposed that they could not oppose the emperor’s

⁸⁴ Gregory the Great, *Epistles*, LXII.

⁸⁵ Ambrose of Milan, *Duties of the Clergy*, II, xxix, 144-151.

⁸⁶ 2 Maccabees 3

orders. The plain words of the edict were read; the orders of the chief officer of the court were there; he who was to act in the matter was at hand. They handed it over.”

“However, after taking counsel with me, the bishop took possession of the rooms to which he knew that the widows’ property had been carried. As it could not be carried away, it was all set down in writing. Later on we again demanded proof of the authenticity of the document. The emperor repeated the order, and would meet us himself in his own person. We refused. When the force of the divine Law, a long list of passages and the danger of Heliodorus were explained, at length the emperor became reasonable. Afterwards, an attempt was made to seize it again, but the good bishop anticipated the attempt and restored to the widow all he had received. So faith was preserved, and the oppression was no longer a cause for fear.”

Leo the Great, Pope of Rome, connected⁸⁷ the Lenten Fast with alms for widows, orphans and others. The measure of one’s mercy and goodness does not depend on the size of one’s means, and there is no difference in the works of rich or poor, where the purpose of the workers is the same.

“We are taught by our Redeemer’s precept, ‘Man does live on bread alone, but on every word of God’ (Deuteronomy 8:3). It is right that Christian people, whatever the amount of their abstinence, should rather desire to satisfy themselves with the ‘Word of God’ than with bodily food. Let us with ready devotion and eager faith enter the celebration of the solemn fast, not with barren abstinence from food, or the disease of avarice, but in bountiful benevolence. We wish to be those of whom the Truth speaks, ‘blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled’ (Matthew 5:6). Let works of piety be our delight, and let us be filled with those kinds of food, which feed us for eternity. Let us rejoice in the replenishment of the poor, whom our bounty has satisfied. Let us delight in the clothing of those whose nakedness we have covered with needful clothing. Let our humaneness be felt by the sick in their illnesses, by the weak in their infirmities, by the exiles in their hardships, by the orphans in their destitution, and by solitary widows in their sadness. In helping them, there is no one that cannot carry out some amount of benevolence. For no one’s income is small, whose heart is big; and the measure of one’s mercy and goodness does not depend on the size of one’s means. Wealth of goodwill is never lacking, even in a slender purse. Doubtless the expenditure of the rich is greater, and that of the poor smaller, but there is no difference in the fruit of their works, where the purpose of the workers is the same.”

John Chrysostom suggested⁸⁸ leaving provisions in the wills of the departed for a portion of their estate to be given to the orphans, widows and the needy. By leaving Christ as his heir, the departed will store up for himself treasure in heaven.

“We hear people finding fault with almsgiving. What excuse can we have at funerals, when we adorn a body, which is consumed by corruption and worms,

⁸⁷ Leo the Great, Sermons, XL, 4.

⁸⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LXXXV, 6.

and neglect Christ, when He is thirsting, going about naked, and a stranger? Let us perform the funerals for the departed, as is good both for them, and us to the glory of God. Let us give alms for their sake; let us send with them the best provision for the way. For if the memory of admirable men, though dead, has protected the living, much more will almsgiving affect this. For, 'I will defend', it says, 'this city for My Own sake, and for My servant David's sake' (2 Kings 19:34). This has even raised the dead, as when the widows stood round showing what things Dorcas had made, while she was with them (Acts 9:39). When therefore one is about to die, let the friend of that dying person prepare the funeral, and persuade the departing one to leave some things to the needy. With these garments let him send him to the grave, leaving Christ as his heir. For if they who write kings among their heirs, leave a safe portion to their relations, when one leaves Christ heir with his children, consider how great good he will draw down upon himself and all his relatives. These are the right sorts of funerals, these profit both those who remain and those who depart. If we are buried like this, we shall be glorious at the Resurrection."

Comparing the Treatment of Widows in the Old Testament

The Lord Himself said that He was 'a Father of the fatherless, and a Judge of the widows (Psalm 68:5). John Chrysostom stated⁸⁹ that because of this, multiple tithes were commanded from Israel under the Old Covenant, one of which was for widows. If we close our heart to such almsgiving, we deserve the place reserved for the devil and his angels.

"Why does God threaten those, who have not done works of mercy that they shall depart into the fire, 'prepared for the devil and his angels?' (Matthew 25:41) Because nothing so provokes God to wrath! Since it is our duty to love our enemies, he who turns away even from those that love Him shall be worthy of punishment, and is in this respect worse than the heathen. The greatness of the sin will make such a one go away with the devil. 'Woe to him, it is said⁹⁰, who does not give alms'; if this was the case under the Old Covenant, much more is it under the New. If, where the getting, enjoying and caring for wealth was allowed, there was such provision made for the helping the poor, how much more in this Dispensation, where we are commanded to give away all we have? What did they of old not do? They gave tithes, and tithes again upon tithes⁹¹ for orphans, widows, and strangers. What a load of disgrace it is, if what the Jews accepted has come to be unacceptable in the case of the Christians? If there was danger then in omitting tithes, think how great it must be now."

⁸⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Ephesians, IV, Moral.

⁹⁰ See Proverbs 15:27, Daniel 4:27.

⁹¹ Under the Old Covenant, there were three tithes: one for the priests, one for the Festivals, and another every three years for the orphans, widows and strangers. References

Behavior of Widows in the Church

How did Paul expect the widows in the Church to behave? Cyprian and John Chrysostom have some interesting insights into what Paul was advocating as he addressed widows in his Pastoral Epistles.

Cyprian gave three good examples of how widows should act in their service to God. First, He noted⁹² that the widows in Joppa, before Peter arrived, served a very useful role in service to the Church by weaving cloaks and giving alms (Acts 9:39). In addition, by their weeping and entreating, they drew Peter's aid to raise Tabitha, not by their words, but by her own deeds. She who had given to suffering widows the help they needed to live, deserved to be recalled to life by the widows' petition.

As a second example, Cyprian also considered⁹³ in the Gospel the widow who gave the two mites. She remembered the heavenly precepts, doing good even amid the difficulties of poverty, casting two mites, which were all that she had, into the treasury. When the Lord observed her work not for its abundance, but for its intention, considering not how much, but from how much, she had given, He said, 'Truly I say to you, that widow has cast in more than everyone into the offerings of God. All these have cast in out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has cast in all she had' (Luke 21:1-4). Greatly blessed and glorious woman, who even before the Day of Judgment was praised by the voice of the Judge! Let the rich be ashamed of their barrenness. The widow, needy in means, is found rich in works. Although everything that is given for alms is conferred upon widows and orphans, she gives, who ought to receive, that we may know what punishment awaits the barren rich man, when by this instance even the poor ought to labor in good works. In order that we may understand that their labors are given to God, and that whoever performs them deserves well of the Lord, Christ calls this 'the offerings of God'. He intimates that the widow has cast in two mites into the offerings of God, that it may be more abundantly evident that he who has pity on the poor lends to God.

As a third example, Cyprian used⁹⁴ the widow of Zarephath. In the drought and famine, having consumed everything, she made of the little meal and oil, which was left, a small loaf. After eating this, she was about to die with her children; Elijah came and asked that something should first be given him to eat, and then of what remained, she and her children should eat. She did not hesitate to obey; the mother did not prefer her children to Elijah in her hunger and poverty. What was done pleased God; promptly she presented the food that Elijah asked for. The whole out of a little was given, and another was fed before her hungry children. Even in poverty food is not thought of before mercy; in a saving work, the life according to the flesh is despised, the soul according to the spirit is preserved. Therefore Elijah, being the type of Christ, and showing that according to His mercy He returns to each their reward, answered, 'Thus says the Lord, the vessel of meal shall not fail, and the cruse of oil shall not be diminished, until the day that the Lord gives rain upon the earth' (1 Kings 17:10-16). According to her faith in the divine promise, those things, which she gave, were multiplied to the widow; and her righteous works and acts of mercy were rewarded, the vessels of meal and oil were filled. The mother did

⁹² Cyprian, Treatises, VIII, 6.

⁹³ Cyprian, Treatises, VIII, 15.

⁹⁴ Cyprian, Treatises, VIII, 17.

not take away from her children what she gave to Elijah, but rather she conferred upon her children what she did kindly and piously. And she did not as yet know Christ; she had not yet heard His precepts; she did not, as redeemed by His cross and passion, repay meat and drink for His blood. So that from this it may appear how much he sins in the Church, who, preferring himself and his children to Christ, preserves his wealth, and does not share an abundant estate with the poverty of the needy.

John Chrysostom went into some depth regarding Paul's words about who is truly a widow. Paul's emphasis is a widow who is celibate, dedicated to fasting and prayer, and who has no family nearby to lean on for support.

“A woman may have lost⁹⁵ her husband, and yet not be truly a widow. In order to be a virgin, it is not enough to be a stranger to marriage, but other things are necessary, such as blamelessness and perseverance. So the loss of a husband does not constitute a widow, but patience, with chastity and separation from all men. Such widows he justly asks us honor, and support. They need support, being left desolate, and having no husband to stand up for them. Their state appears to the multitude despicable and poverty-stricken. Therefore he wishes them to receive the greater honor from the Priest, and the more so, because they are worthy of it.”

“A widow, who has not made⁹⁶ a choice of a worldly life, is a widow indeed; she who trusts in God as she ought, and continues constant in prayer night and day, is a widow indeed. She, who has children, could be a widow indeed, for he commends her who raises children, as she ought. But if anyone does not have children, she is desolate, and he consoles her saying, that she is most truly a widow, who has lost not only the consolation of a husband, but also that arising from children, yet she has God in their place. She is not worse off being childless; but He consoles her, in that she is without children. What he says amounts to this: Don't grieve, when it is said that a widow ought to bring up children, as if, because you have no children, you are inferior. You are a widow indeed.”

In contrast to the life that Paul advocated, Chrysostom noted that Paul stated that some widows use their state to promote a worldly life that is more sensuous. For this case, Paul advocates that the widows remarry in order to bring some control to the sin that would result.

“Many, who have children, choose⁹⁷ the state of widowhood, not to cut off the occasions of a worldly life, but rather to enhance them, that they may do what they will with the greater license, and indulge the more freely in worldly lusts. Therefore Paul says, ‘She that lives in pleasure is dead while she lives’ (1 Timothy 5:6). Let us see what is the state of the dead, versus the living, and in which shall we place such a widow? Those, who are living, perform the works of true life, of that future life. Christ has declared what are the works of that future life, with which we ought always to be occupied. ‘Come; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you

⁹⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, XIII, v. 3.

⁹⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, XIII, v. 4.

⁹⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, XIII, v. 4

gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink' (Matthew 25:34-36). The living differ from the dead, not only in that they see the sun and breathe the air, but in that they are doing some good. If the living do no good, they are no better than the dead. That you may understand this, hear how it is possible that even the dead should live. For it is said, 'God is not the God of the dead, but of the living' (Matthew 22:32). Men, who live in pleasure, are dead while they live, for they live only for their belly. In their other senses they are not alive. He doesn't see what he ought to see, he doesn't hear what he ought to hear, he doesn't speak what he ought to speak. Nor does he perform the actions of the living. But like the dead man, who is stretched out on a bed, with his eyes closed, perceives nothing that is passing; so it is with this man, or rather worse. For the dead man is equally insensitive to good and evil, but the man who lives in pleasure is sensitive only to evil things."

"That some of the younger widows had already fallen away⁹⁸ is plain, in that he says, 'When they have begun to grow sensuous against Christ, they will marry' (1 Timothy 5:11); and again, 'For some have already turned aside after Satan' (1 Timothy 5:15). That is, they have become scornful and luxurious. Though they chose widowhood, it was not the choice of their judgment. A widow, by the state of widowhood, is espoused to Christ, for He has said, 'I am the defender of the widows and the father of the orphans' (Psalm 68:5). Paul shows that the young widows do not choose being widows, as they ought; however he bears with them. When he says, 'they have cast off their first faith' (1 Timothy 5:12), by faith he means, fidelity to their covenant. As if he had said, 'They have been false to Christ, they have dishonored Him, and transgressed His covenant'".

"For idleness is the teacher of every sin. While it is unbecoming for a married woman 'to go from house to house', and 'not only idle, but tattlers and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not' (1 Timothy 5:13). When the care for the husband is withdrawn at the husband's death, and the care to please God does not constrain them toward godliness, they naturally become idlers, tattlers, and busybodies. For he who does not attend to his own concerns will be meddling with those of others, even as he who minds his own business will take no account of and have no care about the affairs of another. And nothing is so unbecoming to a woman, as to busy herself in the concerns of others. This is a great sign of impudence and forwardness. 'I will therefore', Paul says, since they themselves wish it, 'that the younger widows marry, bear children, guide the house'" (1 Timothy 5:14).

"They ought to be concerned for the things of God; they ought to preserve their faith. But since they do not do this, it is better to avoid a worse course. Their remarrying does not dishonor God, but at least they do not fall into the practice of idleness when they are married. From a widowhood of idleness, no good could arise, but good may come out of this marriage. By marrying, the women will be able to correct their indolence and vanity of mind; marriage is a safeguard for them."

⁹⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, XV, vv. 11-15.

“If remaining a widow and having⁹⁹ the same pomp, the same show, the same attire, as you had while your husband was living, it would be better for you to marry. It is not the union that is objectionable, but the multitude of cares that accompany it. On this account ‘some have turned aside after Satan’, because they have not been able to live properly as widows.”

On the other hand, Chrysostom noted¹⁰⁰ that Paul spoke of the requirements for true widowhood almost as strictly as the requirements for the Bishop.

“Paul mentioned the qualities, which would render a woman worthy to be reckoned among the widows (i.e. and be supported by the Church). Are we to receive her just for her years? There is no merit in that; it is not her own doing that she is 60 years old. Even if she has reached those years, she may not yet, without good works, be reckoned among the widows. Is she ‘well reported for good works, if she has brought up children’ (1 Timothy 5:10); especially they must be brought up well; as he said before, ‘If they continue in faith, love, and holiness’ (1 Timothy 2:15). But what if she is poor? This does not prevent her from bringing up children, lodging strangers, relieving the afflicted. She is not more destitute than the widow, who gave the two mites. He exhorts them to contribute bodily service, for women are peculiarly fitted for such service, such as making the bed for the sick.”

“Paul requires almost as much strictness as of the Bishop himself, for he says, ‘If she has diligently followed every good work’ (1 Timothy 5:10). He means that, if she could not herself perform it, she shared and cooperated in it. When he cuts off luxury, he would have her continually persevering in prayer. Such was Anna; such strictness he requires of widows, greater even than of virgins. When he speaks of ‘that which is appropriate’, and ‘that she may wait on the Lord without distraction’ (1 Corinthians 7:35), he gives a summary of all virtue. It is not merely avoiding a second marriage; many other things are necessary. He discourages second marriages so that he would have her occupied in spiritual things, transferring all her care to virtue. Marriage is not an impure state, but one of much occupation. He speaks of their leisure, not of their being more pure by remaining unmarried. Marriage certainly implies secular engagement. If you abstain from marriage that you may have leisure for the service of God, and yet do not so employ that leisure, it is of no advantage to you, to perform services to strangers, and to the Saints. If you don’t do this, you abstain from marriage not for any good end, but as though you condemned marriage.”

“Observe, the hospitality he speaks of is not merely a friendly reception, but one given as if one were receiving Christ Himself. The widows should perform these services themselves, not commit them to their handmaids. For Christ said, ‘If I your Master and Lord have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another’s feet’” (John 13:14).

⁹⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Timothy, VII.

¹⁰⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, XIII, v. 9-10.

The Ministry of the Word

When the Twelve said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables”, what did they mean by “leaving the Word of God?” Their impact on Jerusalem had been incredible. The life of the Church had developed very quickly, and an amazingly mature life of the Church had developed in the first year after Pentecost. John Chrysostom characterized¹⁰¹ the Early Church after Pentecost as full of wonder, from the character of the Apostles, but also from the virtuous character of the people. It was like earth had become a heaven, even though there was danger from their enemies.

Cyril of Jerusalem quickly summarized¹⁰² the working of the Holy Spirit in the Early Church. The healing from Peter’s shadow (Acts 5:15) was not an isolated event, but represented the spirit of the times.

John Chrysostom noted¹⁰³ that when, “All that believed were together, and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44), this early Christian community was a collection of cheerful givers. The result was very beneficial not just to them but also to the community. They immediately obtained a reward, that is, the ‘hundredfold’ that Jesus spoke of (Mark 10:29-30), for having left everything for Christ’s sake. In this case, the reward was ‘the favor with all the people’ (Acts 2:47).

“They had become angels all of a sudden, all of them; continuing in prayer and hearing, they saw that spiritual things are common, no one there had more than another, and they speedily came together, to the same thing in common. This does not mean that they were together in one place, but that this was an angelic commonwealth, not to call anything of theirs their own. The root of evils was cut out; by what they did, they showed what they had heard. This was what Peter said, ‘Save yourselves from this perverse generation’ (Acts 2:40), and ‘daily continuing with one accord in the temple’ (Acts 2:46). Daily they went up as to a sacred place, and frequently we find Peter and John doing this; for at present they disturbed none of the Jewish observances¹⁰⁴. Observe the increase of piety; they abandoned their riches, rejoiced and had great gladness, for greater were the riches they received without labor.”

This was the “ministry of the Word”, and the Twelve were getting a very strong reaction from the Sanhedrin. Chrysostom noted¹⁰⁵ that the Sanhedrin thought that the Apostles were bloodthirsty and bent on revenge for Jesus’ crucifixion. “You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us” (Acts 5:28). But yet the Apostles did not answer with defiance (Acts 5:29), even with the whole city backing them (Acts 5:26) and being endowed with so great Grace at Pentecost. Instead they pleaded with them that they, too, might obtain forgiveness (Acts 5:31). Hearing this, the Sanhedrin “was furious and plotted to kill the

¹⁰¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Acts, XII.

¹⁰² Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, XVII, 21-22, 25-27.

¹⁰³ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, VII, v. 46.

¹⁰⁴ This is interesting to note that their worship in the Temple did not bother the Jewish leaders, only their teaching about Jesus. This suggests that they used a liturgy similar to the Old Testament liturgy, and even participated in the on-going Temple liturgy.

¹⁰⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Acts, XIII.

Apostles” (Acts 5:33). Yet what was there that was deserving of death? Such was their intoxication; they did not even see what had taken place.

As a result of all this, the Twelve couldn’t just stop what they were doing and start serving tables. They had much greater responsibilities in Jerusalem; plus they were making preparations to “go and make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19). The Twelve had divided the world up into regions, and had drawn lots to determine where each Apostle would go. A few months after choosing the first Seven Deacons, they would be scattered (Acts 8:1) and would leave on their various missionary journeys. Thus, the choosing of the first Seven Deacons was a turning point in the life of the Church.

John Chrysostom noted¹⁰⁶ that it was the Twelve that had the “ministry of the Word” committed to them, at least initially. The deacons needed great wisdom, however.

“Do not think, because the deacons did not have the word committed to them, that they had no need of wisdom; they did need it, and greatly also. ‘But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word’ (Acts 6:4). They pleaded for themselves, beginning and ending with this, ‘Will give ourselves continually’. The Twelve needed to do what they did, not in any chance way, but to be continually doing them.”

Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome, compared¹⁰⁷ one important aspect of the ministry of the Word to the distribution of grain in a time of famine. Those who shrink back from doing it out of humility, hide their talent in the ground, and may be guilty of a brother’s death.

“Those who are able to preach, but are afraid by reason of excessive humility, should consider by a lesser matter how faulty they are in a greater one. If they were to hide money from their poor neighbors, they would be promoters of their famine. They are guilty of hiding away the remedies of life from dying souls, by withholding the word of preaching from their sinning brethren. Solomon says well, ‘Wisdom that is hidden, and treasure that is unseen, what profit is in them both’? (Ecclesiasticus 20:30) If there were a famine plaguing the people, and they kept hidden grain, they would be the authors of death. Let them consider what punishment is theirs, when souls are perishing from famine of the word, and they do not supply the bread of grace, which they have received. Solomon said, ‘He that hides grain shall be cursed among the people’ (Proverbs 11:26). To hide grain is to selfishly retain the words of sacred preaching. Everyone that does so is cursed, because through his fault of silence, he is condemned in the punishment of those, whom he might have corrected. If doctors were to see a wound that required attention, and yet refused to treat it, by their inactivity they would be guilty of a brother’s death. Let them see in how a great guilt they are involved, knowing the wounds of souls, if they neglect to cure them by the treatment of words.”

Ambrose stated¹⁰⁸ that Paul’s sense of the ministry of the Word was so strong that it dwarfed concern for his own life.

¹⁰⁶ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, XIV, v 4.

¹⁰⁷ Gregory the Great, Book of Pastoral Rule, III, 25.

“He follows Christ who is able to say, ‘It is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me’ (Galatians 2:20). Paul denied himself, when, knowing that chains and tribulation awaited him in Jerusalem, he willingly offered himself to danger, saying, ‘Nor do I count my life dear to myself, if only I can accomplish my course, and the ministry of the Word, which I have received from the Lord Jesus’ (Acts 20:24). And at last, though many were standing around, weeping and begging him, he did not change his mind, so stern a censor of itself is ready faith.”

Choosing the Seven Deacons

“The Twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said: ‘It is not desirable that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word’” (Acts 6:2-4). John Chrysostom stated¹⁰⁹ that not just Stephen, but each of the Seven were “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom”, implying that all seven performed miracles, not just Stephen and Philip.

One might ask why the Twelve would appoint others for this, since the Lord had told them that the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven is the servant of all (Matthew 18:4, 20:26-27). The answer is that the Lord had also told them to go to all nations with the Gospel (Matthew 28:19-20), and they had to prepare for that.

Some have pointed out that these first seven are not called deacons in the Scripture. This is correct, but the Greek word *diakonos* is used to describe their activities. For example (Acts 6:1), the widows were “neglected in the daily deaconing” (i.e. *diakonia*). The Twelve did not think it desirable that they should “leave the Word and deacon (i.e. *diakonein*) tables” (Acts 6:2). Instead the Twelve gave themselves “continually to prayer and to the deaconing (i.e. *diakonia*) of the Word (Acts 6:4). Modern usage refers to these seven as the first deacons, even though their role does not correspond to later deacons.

As the Church developed, the office of deacon, as distinct from that of a presbyter (or priest) and bishop, came into being. In this later context, a deacon had a defined liturgical role that these first seven don’t seem to have. They were not deacons in the sense that we know deacons today. Chrysostom stated¹¹⁰ that their designation was neither Deacon nor Presbyter. However in Orthodox ordinations, a presbyter is first ordained as a deacon, then as a presbyter. A true Bishop still considers himself as a deacon at heart. (Compare 2 Timothy 4:5, Titus 1:7, Colossians 1:23, 25).

According to Hippolytus¹¹¹, all seven of these men had been members of the Seventy Apostles that Jesus sent out two by two in late 29 AD (Luke 10:1-20). Chrysostom pointed

¹⁰⁸ Ambrose of Milan, “Epistle 63”, *Letters*, 72-73.

¹⁰⁹ John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Acts*, XIV, v 2.

¹¹⁰ John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Acts*, XIV, v 7.

¹¹¹ Hippolytus, “On the Seventy Apostles”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 5, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1995.

out¹¹² that the Apostles did not choose them by lot - although they could have done that - but they wanted the testimony of the people. The fixing of the number, the ordaining them, and the setting them for this kind of business rested with the Apostles. But the desire of the men they left to the people, just as God left it to Moses to choose elders from those he knew (Numbers 11:16).

John Chrysostom noted¹¹³ how necessary the ordination of the Seven Deacons was; it was the result of alms and good order.

“They separated the Seven from the multitude, and it is the people that draw them, not the Apostles that lead them. Observe how he avoids all that is superfluous: he does not tell in what way it was done (Acts 6:6), but that they were ordained (Greek: *echeirotoneisan*) with prayer; for this is the meaning of *cheirotomia*, (i.e. ‘putting forth the hand’) or ordination¹¹⁴. The hand of the man is laid upon the person, but the whole work is of God, and it is His hand, which touches the head of the one ordained, if he is to be properly ordained. ‘And the word of God increased, and the number of the disciples multiplied’ (Acts 6:7). Luke says this purposely to show how great is the virtue of alms and good order.”

John Chrysostom stated¹¹⁵ that Titus later served as a deacon to the Apostle Paul in very much the same manner that the first seven deacons served James in Jerusalem. Both were appointed to this work to become a dispenser of the sacred money; and this was not a small matter. Both were chosen because of a good report from the people (Acts 6:3), and with both there was a vote of the people.

The Work of the Seven Deacons

John Chrysostom also pointed out¹¹⁶ that these men needed a great deal of wisdom and discernment.

“This business was not simply handed over to them without further ceremony, but the Apostles prayed over them, that power might be given to them. But observe, if there were need of seven men for this, great in proportion must have been the sums of money that flowed in, great in proportion also the number of widows. So then, the prayers were not made in an off-hand way, but with much deliberate attention; and this office, as well as preaching, was thus brought to good effect”.

Peter’s criterion for selecting the seven men (Acts 6:3) was:

1. A good reputation
2. Full of the Holy Spirit
3. Full of wisdom

¹¹² John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, XIV, v 3.

¹¹³ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, XIV, v 5-6.

¹¹⁴ See Acts 14:23, 2 Corinthians 8:19 for examples of the use of *cheirotomia* in context.

¹¹⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, XVIII, v. 19.

¹¹⁶ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, XIV, vv 5-6.

This implies that all seven men chosen had continued to perform miracles regularly. All of the Seventy had done so a year earlier (Luke 10:9), but when the Seventy returned from their mission, their ability to perform miracles had been temporarily suspended. Jesus had given them the authority to perform miracles, but they had not received the Holy Spirit yet. Following Pentecost, when they received the Holy Spirit, the ability to perform miracles returned.

Chrysostom also noted¹¹⁷ that Stephen (and the others) received rewards just for faithfully distributing the alms donated to the Church in Jerusalem. Similarly we can receive similar rewards, but more so if we distribute our own alms ourselves

“Instead of giving your alms to those in the Church to distribute alms, give it yourself, that you may have the reward not of giving merely, but of kind service. Give with your own hands. Here it is not required to handle the plow, to yoke the ox, to wait for the season, to break up the earth or to contend with the frost. No such trouble is required, where you sow for heaven, where there is neither frost nor winter. You sow in souls, where no one takes away what is sown, but it is firmly retained with all care and diligence. Cast the seed yourself; why deprive yourself of your reward. There is great reward in dispensing even what belongs to others. There is a reward not only for giving, but also for dispensing well the things that are given. Why will you not have this reward? That there is a reward for this, hear how we read that the Apostles appointed Stephen to the ministry of the widows” (Acts 6:5-7).

“Be the dispenser of your own gifts. Your own benevolence and the fear of God appoint you to that ministry. Vainglory is excluded. This refreshes the soul, this sanctifies the hands, and this pulls down pride. This teaches you philosophy, this inflames your zeal, and this makes you to receive blessings.”

Cyril of Jerusalem noted¹¹⁸ that it was not just the Twelve Apostles who worked by the grace of the Holy Spirit, but also their first-born children, the seven Deacons, of whom Stephen was the first fruits of the martyrs.

It is interesting to note that the complaint against the Hebrews by the Greek-speaking widows that they were neglected in the daily distribution resulted in the ordaining of seven men with Greek names to oversee the entire daily operation. These men were Greek-speaking Jews except for Nicolas, who may have been a Gentile proselyte (Acts 6:5). The Greek-speaking widows were also Greek-speaking Jews; their being left out was probably not intentional, but it was rectified rather dramatically. The Apostles could have been democratic and chosen three Greeks and four Hebrews to oversee this, but they didn't. Care and attention for the poor was a very high priority in the early church (Galatians 2:10).

Their first task was to even out the daily food distribution. This was a considerable task since 3,000 people (mostly visitors from out of town) were added to the Church on Pentecost alone (Acts 2:41). Additional people were added to the Church daily after that (Acts 2:47) including 5,000 at one time (Acts 4:4). One can conclude that because many were from out-of-town and had no livelihood in Jerusalem, everyone “sold their possessions and divided them

¹¹⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, XIV, Moral.

¹¹⁸ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, XVII, 24.

among all, as anyone had need” (Acts 2:45). Another interpretation is that everyone had begun to imitate the Apostles, who were following the words of Christ, “Sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Mark 10:21). The Twelve had already done those things three years earlier (Matthew 19:27).

As persecution developed later, especially at the hand of Saul (Acts 8:3), the Jewish leaders would raid houses occupied by Christians, drag people off to prison, and plunder the house of food and clothing. In Jerusalem and vicinity the long-term effect of the persecutions was the impoverishment of the Jerusalem church. By 57 AD, it was so bad that the Apostle Paul took up a major collection among the Gentile churches in Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea), Achaia (Corinth, Athens) and Galatia (Iconium, Lystra, Derbe), to bring relief to the Jerusalem church (Romans 15:25-27, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:1-4, Acts 24:17). The deacons and their successors were responsible for distributing what Paul brought.

The Expansion of the Roles of the Seven Deacons¹¹⁹

Meanwhile, in Jerusalem and vicinity the long-term effect of the persecutions was the impoverishment of the Jerusalem church. By 57 AD, it was so bad that the Apostle Paul took up a major collection among the Gentile churches in Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea), Achaia (Corinth, Athens) and Galatia (Iconium, Lystra, Derbe), to bring relief to the Jerusalem church (Romans 15:25-27, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:1-4, Acts 24:17). The successors to the first seven deacons were responsible for distributing what Paul brought.

The Deacons did more than just distribute food, however. As the Church was scattered, Deacon Philip went to Samaria (Acts 8:5) to preach. As a result of his preaching (sometimes called the Samaritan Pentecost), Peter and John were sent by Bishop James to check it out (Acts 8:14). After this, Philip was traveling toward Gaza when he came across the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-27). In opening up the Scriptures to the eunuch, Philip prepared the Ethiopians to receive Matthew and Matthias who would go there soon. Then, Philip was bodily translated to Azotus (Acts 8:40); he finally settled in Caesarea. When Paul came through Caesarea in 57 AD, he stayed with Philip, who by then had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses (Acts 21:8-9). Philip later became Bishop of Tralles in Lydia in Asia Minor.

Like the rest of the Twelve and the Seventy, Philip practiced celibacy even though he was married. Peter had asked Jesus about this saying, “See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?” (Matthew 19:27) Jesus replied, “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My Name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29). The point was that the Twelve and the Seventy had left behind the things of this world, both possessions and pleasure, and they were rewarded for this. They didn’t abandon their wife and children; instead their wives and children became part of their work. Just prior to these comments by the Lord, He had offered a young synagogue ruler (Matthew 19:16, Luke 18:18) the lot and reward of an apostle, but the young man went away sorrowful, because he couldn’t give up his great possessions (Matthew 19:21-22).

¹¹⁹ For a more detailed study of the lives of the First Seven Deacons, see Mark Kern, The First Seven Deacons, St Athanasius Press, 2007.

When Philip went out with the Seventy, he traveled very simply, carrying nothing but the clothes on his back (Luke 10:4). Some of the Apostles took their wives and families with them when they were old enough to travel (1 Corinthians 9:5). Philip may not have done so when his children were very young. After he was ordained as a Deacon by the Twelve, Philip applied himself to the work that he was called to do; that is, initially he dealt with the offerings of the faithful and attended to the concerns of the widowed, the orphaned and the needy. After his meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch, he remained in Caesarea until his children were grown.

After serving as a deacon in the Church in Jerusalem, Deacon Prochorus was ordained¹²⁰ by the Apostle Peter to be the bishop of Nicomedia. For about 40 years, he was in the service of the Apostle John, both in Ephesus and on the Island of Patmos, much like Luke was in the service of Paul. After that he returned to Nicomedia where he exerted much effort and labor to convert the people to the Faith. He died a martyr's death in Antioch¹²¹, where he was slain by unbelievers after converting many pagans to Christ.

Deacon Nicanor was a black man that we know little about. Jesus chose him as one of the Seventy Apostles (Luke 10:1-17), and the saints in Jerusalem chose him as one of the first seven deacons for being “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). This implies that he performed miracles along with the other six deacons. Along with Deacon Stephen, Nicanor was murdered¹²² by stoning along with 200 others.

After serving as deacon in Jerusalem, Timon was established¹²³ by the Apostles as bishop of the city of Bostra¹²⁴ in Arabia and suffered from the Jews and pagans for preaching the Gospel. He was thrown into a furnace, but by the power of God, he came out of it unharmed. The tradition of the Roman Church says that Timon died by crucifixion.

After serving as deacon in Jerusalem, which implies that he performed miracles along with the other six deacons, Parmenas zealously preached¹²⁵ Christ in Macedonia, and Hippolytus lists¹²⁶ him as Bishop of Soli. He died¹²⁷ after being afflicted with an illness, and died before the eyes of the Apostles and was mourned and buried by them. Some are of the opinion that Parmenas suffered under Trajan (98-117) in the final year of his reign, and suffered martyrdom

¹²⁰ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, July 28.

See also <http://www.oca.org/FSlives.asp>

¹²¹ See <http://www.oca.org>, January 4th.

¹²² Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, July 28.

Hippolytus, On the Seventy Apostles, 9.

See also <http://www.oca.org/FSlives.asp>, July 28, December 28.

<http://www.goarch.org/en/chapel/saints.asp?contentid=144>, July 28.

¹²³ <http://www.oca.org/FSlives.asp>, July 28.

Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, July 28.

<http://www.goarch.org/en/chapel/saints.asp?contentid=144>, July 28.

Hippolytus, On the Seventy Apostles, 10.

¹²⁴ Also called Bastoria.

¹²⁵ See www.oca.org.

¹²⁶ Hippolytus, On the Seventy Apostles, 11.

¹²⁷ See <http://www.oca.org>, July 28th.

Although Jesus chose Nicolas of Antioch as one of the Seventy Apostles (Luke 10:1-17), and the saints in Jerusalem chose him as one of the first seven deacons for being “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3), Nicolas later abandoned the Faith to follow the teachings of the sorcerer and arch heretic Simon Magus. This has rather dire implications since he performed miracles when Jesus sent him out with the Seventy, and he did so again along with the other six deacons.

Hippolytus referred¹²⁸ to Nicolas as the Bishop of Samaria. The Apostles must have sent Nicolas to Samaria to oversee the work started by Deacon Philip (Acts 8:5-13). Simon Magus, who had grown up in Samaria, must have turned Nicolas from the Faith. This occurred after Philip, Peter and John left Samaria (Acts 8:25-26). Simon remained in Samaria for some time, and a great debate occurred¹²⁹ later between him and the Apostle Peter in c. 40 AD. After his debate with the Apostle Peter, Simon went to Antioch, and Nicolas may have followed Simon there.

When Simon went to Antioch in the 40’s AD, Nicolas began to follow Simon’s teaching that God is the author of evil. Nicolas took this to its extreme, and ended up¹³⁰ with “lechery that knew no rest by night or day, where Nicolas indulged in his filthy dreams”.

Eusebius gave¹³¹ a good description regarding how Nicolas came to be this way. Nicolas tried to imitate the holiness of the Apostles, where they gave up the things of this world for the Kingdom of God (Matthew 19:29). Since the Apostles had given up the pleasures of the flesh in their relationship with their wives (those Apostles that were married), Nicolas did this also. But whereas the Apostles traveled with their wives (1 Corinthians 9:5), living as brother and sister¹³², Nicolas gave blanket permission to anyone to marry his wife. Nicolas’ followers took his words literally and practiced open fornication with her (Revelation 2:6, 15), and Nicolas was branded a heretic because he didn’t correct them. Thus he sought to be perfected in the flesh instead of setting his mind on the Spirit (Galatians 3:3, 4:9).

¹²⁸ Hippolytus, On the Seventy Apostles, 12.

¹²⁹ For details of this debate, see Mark Kern, Simon Magus the Heresiarch, St Athanasius Press, 2002. Also see Clement of Rome in Roberts and Donaldson, “Recognitions of Clement”, I:72 to III:49, PseudoClementine Literature, Ante-Nicene Fathers, v. 8.

¹³⁰ Jerome, “Dialogue Against the Luciferians”, 23, Treatises, Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, v. 6.

¹³¹ Eusebius, Church History, III, 29.

¹³² Paul referred to the other Apostles, including Peter and the brothers of the Lord (Jude and Joseph Barsabbas) as traveling with “a sister, a wife” (1 Corinthians 9:5).