

Ordained Women in the Early Church: A documentary history

Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek (John Hopkins University Press, 2005)

This is a fascinating book, giving 'all known evidence for women deacons and presbyters, at least in the Greek- and Latin-speaking worlds.' It includes New Testament texts, with their patristic commentators, and literary texts, allusions and inscriptions referring to deacons and presbyters. Each text is printed in full, in English, together with a brief commentary.

While contemporary debates cannot be resolved simply by referring to history, it is important to see what evidence there is of women's ministry, since this itself is often disputed.

The texts show a large number of references to deacons, and highlight who they were and what they did. References show that in some times and places, women presbyters existed, and that there were more in the West than in the East, despite the efforts of various councils to eliminate them. Thus 'the claim that women have never functioned as presbyters in the "orthodox" church is simply untrue.'

At £32, this is an expensive book, but it enables us to have a glimpse into history, and read original documents for ourselves. Its conclusions are an additional piece in the jigsaw, as we seek to understand more about the ministry of women in the early church.

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