Christianity is based on the teachings of Jesus, a man born in the early first century who preached compassion and forgiveness, however, controversy exists regarding the perceived repression of women in Christianity. Were women as a class, placed on a lower scale than men by a religious organization that based their ideology on a man who taught spiritual equality and respect for all humans regardless of class or gender? The Christian Church, once organized, treated women as an inferior species that had to submit to man and could even be described as misogynic. How did this happen, that the organized religion could be so far removed from the ideals and the life of the man on which it was based? In order to answer this question, we have to examine both the life of Jesus and the emergence of the Christian Church in the Western Roman Empire. Theories exist that the subordination of women was merely a blending of the patriarchal culture with the newly organized religion; however, Rome was liberal in its policies towards women when compared with earlier Greek societies. Then, to what do we attribute the fierce change in attitude towards women once the Christian Church became firmly established in Rome? Certain powerful Church leaders believed in a new theology which held that celibacy would bring one closer with Jesus which became the determining factor that caused Christianity to dehumanize women in an effort to suppress the perceived threat of women’s power in society.
When Jesus roamed the earth to carry his message, women were an integral part of Jesus’ followings, which can be seen through the Bible stories highlighting Jesus’ relationships with Mary Magdalene, his mother Mary, and Mary of Bethany, among others. As a matter of fact, “the New Testament Gospels, written toward the last quarter of the first century CE, acknowledge that women were among Jesus’ earliest followers.” (King) These New Testament Gospels highlight several stories in which women interacted with Jesus and were a part of his teachings. Both “Mark 7:24-30” and “Matthew 15:21-28” describe a Gentile woman who taught Jesus that “the ministry of God is not limited to particular groups or persons, but belongs to all who have faith.” (King) This was imperative in shaping Jesus’ teachings of God’s love for all people. Furthermore, Jesus was a frequent visitor to the home of Mary and Martha and commonly visited with women as well as men. (King) In summary, “Jesus challenged the social conventions of his day: He addressed women as equals, gave honor and recognition to children, championed the poor and the outcast, ate and mingled with people across all class and gender lines, and with bold rhetoric attacked the social bonds that held together the patriarchal family.” (Torjesen) Jesus understood that women could have a separate spiritual identity from that of wife and mother; and, furthermore, that spirituality included overcoming social injustice and human suffering. (King) Therefore, evidence suggests that Jesus did not dehumanize women, but embraced them as equals within humanity.

Women were instrumental in his support circle, not deserting him, but accompanying Jesus to the cross where he was crucified as a criminal. In addition, women were among the first witnesses to his resurrection, specifically Mary Magdalene who was one of Jesus’ most constant companions. As a matter of fact, Mary Magdalene is referred to as one of three Mary’s “who always walked with the Lord.”” (King) The Gospel of Philip also noted that “the Lord loved her
more than all the disciples, and… [Jesus and Mary Magdalene shared] a special relationship…based on her spiritual perfection.” (King) Mary Magdalene, the strong leader among Jesus’ followers, was also the one who rallied the despondent disciples after Jesus’ crucifixion, securing her role as the “Apostle to the Apostles.” (Torjesen) Furthermore, The Gospel of Mary, which is named for her, presents Mary Magdalene as a woman leader among the disciples and she is the only one who unwaveringly follows her faith and belief in Jesus and his teachings. (King) Not only were women viewed as equals through Jesus’ eyes, but Mary Magdalene was regarded as a leader amongst the other male disciples, thus allowing for a woman to hold a leadership role during Jesus’ life.

During his life and after his death, early followers of Jesus’ teachings, before Christianity was organized, and there were no church buildings established for worship, individual prayer and teachings happened in the home. Furthermore, since women’s sphere of influence was in the home, it would only follow that women would be the leaders of these unorganized religious gatherings. Women’s socially assigned role as household leader made them perfectly adept at becoming church leaders as well because of their familiarity with the “administrative, economic, and disciplinary tasks” in the role of household manager. (Torjesen) In these early days, women were “well known evangelists, apostles, leaders of congregations, and bearers of prophetic authority.” (Torjesen) Women’s roles as prophets and church leaders would have included “preaching, teaching, leading prayer, and perhaps even performing the Eucharist meal.” (King) This shows the significance of the role of women as experienced leaders in early Christian teachings.

Evidence supports that women were instrumental in the early Christian movement and were definitive leaders in that movement. New Testament Gospels confirm that women held
leadership roles including Lydia of Thyatira described in “Acts 16:15” and Nympha of Laodicea described in “Colossians 4:15.” (King) Paul even greeted a deacon named Phoebe in “Romans 16:1;” and Paul concluded that women are prophesying in “I Corinthians 11.” (King) Paul also ended his letters with personal greetings to those in leadership positions within the Roman Christian community, including Prisca, Junia, Mary, Typhaena, Tryphosa, and Persis confirming that women held important roles within early Christianity. (Torjesen) Therefore, much evidence exists to support the conclusion that women were significant figures and well respected within the early Christian movement.

Having established that women were instrumental and prominent in both Jesus’ life and the teachings of Christianity directly after his death, what happened to change the status of women within the sphere of Christianity? It can be argued that the blending of a patriarchal Roman culture with the organized Church led to the suppression of women’s roles; however this explanation is much too simple to truly explain what happened. It was truly a combination of things that caused the subjugation of women, including the legalization of Christianity within Rome for the purposes of unifying the kingdom, the decisions and canonization of the New Testament by men with their own agendas, and the early Church leaders’ fear of sexuality as a sinful pleasure to be avoided completely.

First, we will examine the organization and legalization of the Church through Constantine the Great. Emperor Constantine is often thought of as the founder of the Church because he is credited with legalizing Christianity within the Western Roman Empire in 313 CE through the Edict of Milan. However, Constantine’s motives were not genuinely for the sake of Christianity, but were an effort to unify Rome in every way possible, “unity in politics, in religion, and in territory.” (Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln) His view of Christianity, therefore, was
purely political, and he did not convert to Christianity himself until he was on his deathbed. (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) It is important to remember that Constantine’s ultimate goal was unity and the theology itself was not of consequence as shown by his reluctance to convert to Christianity himself.

Constantine had already unified the economy by instituting wage freezes and price control, and he assured basic services and social order by implementing a system of inherited occupation. (Carroll) However, the question of religion continued to be a struggle as Pagans and Christians practiced within Rome; and, furthermore, different sects of Christianity had started a “theological dispute concerning the divinity of the Son of God.” (Horn) Constantine’s goal then became to unify Rome through a single state religion that could encompass all of the diverse Christian cults as well as the Pagan cults, thus developing a single theology.

Christianity was the ideal religion in which to encompass both the Pagan traditions within the sphere of its own theology. For example, Sunday was declared the day of rest within Christianity by Constantine because it was the “venerable day of the sun” under the cult of Sol Invictus which he himself practiced. (Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln) Before Constantine’s declaration, Saturday was the day of worship, the Jewish Sabbath, but through Constantine’s edict, Christians began to honor Sunday as that day of worship, enveloping Sol Invictus and, at the same time, separating from Jewish traditions. (Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln) Furthermore, December 25th became the day to celebrate Jesus’ birth instead of the previously honored January 6th because December 25th was a crucial day in the cult of Sol Invictus – the festival of Natalis Invictus, which was the rebirth of the sun. Since Christians were also celebrating the birth of their deity, December 25th was the ideal day to incorporate into a single celebration honoring both religions. “In this respect, too, Christianity brought itself into alignment with the
regime and the established state religion.” (Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln) Constantine’s goal, then, was to unify the religious state by blurring the distinctions between Christianity and the Pagan religions.

To further unify Rome’s religion, Constantine convened The Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. to make the decisions regarding the Christian religious theology. This Council determined the rules defining the authority of bishops within the Church, the date to celebrate Easter, and even that Jesus was a god, not a mortal prophet, in order to make a single sect of recognized Christianity, again stressing the importance of unifying Rome. (Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln) The question of the status of Jesus as human or divine threatened to separate the Christian Church and instigate civil unrest within Rome; and therefore was of utmost importance for the Council to resolve. (Horn) The Council, by vote, declared Jesus as Christ and the Son of God, “homoousios, or ‘of the same being,’ to establish equality of the Father and the Son.” (Flinn) This is a significant doctrine within the Christian Church, that Jesus was divine and the Son of God, and was decided by a vote of a Council of men, and not by a declaration from either Jesus or God himself.

Furthermore, Constantine had “commissioned and financed new copies of the Bible… enabling the custodians of orthodoxy to revise, edit, and rewrite their material as they saw fit.” (Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln) We must remember here, that although theological grounds were used to determine which gospels would be considered authentic and which were considered heretical, “very human decisions were made, based upon very human priorities – mostly concerning control and power.” (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) Therefore, the choices for authentic orthodoxy gospels becomes a subjective process by which men are again deciding what should be indoctrinated as truth in the Christian Church.
The Council of Nicaea had completed its task and was successful in its goal to issue a universal statement of Christian faith. (Horn) However, because decisions were made by a Council of men, and overseen by an Emperor of Rome with an agenda of his own, this unified Christian Church was farther removed from the teachings of its founder, Jesus.

Constantine further fused the Church with his political reign through the Council of Nicaea by promoting the organizational structure of the Church through its administration of a hierarchy based in Constantinople, which was also the city in which Constantine founded upon his rise to power and established as the centralized political authority within Rome. (Horn) Unification of the physical structure of the Church in a centralized location was based on political control, utilizing the theory that it would be better to rule from a position of centralized power, furthering the thought that Constantine, as Emperor, would influence the Church. (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) Constantine’s linking of Christianity and government “led to the emperor presiding over church councils, such as Nicaea in CE 315, and leading to the Eastern Orthodox idea that emperors are supreme authorities over both church and state.” (Sheldon, Constantine I) Constantine ensured that he would have “a firm hand in guiding the organization and evolution of Christianity.” (Bunsen) He ensured that the authoritative patriarchs would have imperial status and that final authority would rest in Constantinople, thereby confirming his place as the overseer of the Church. Thus the Church became a strong political machine within the fledging Roman Empire and became “inextricably bound to the government.” (Bunsen) Because of this practice of “Caesaropapism,” whereby the emperors directly involved themselves in Church matters, the power of the Church became tied to the political matters; (Bunsen) and power became more important than the teachings of Christianity’s true founder, Jesus. This practice of blending Church and State continued past Constantine’s time. Even St. Thomas
Aquinas, a century later, believed that “the church advises the state so that political laws will line up with natural and divine law to the good of society.” (Sheldon) In either case, that of Constantine as emperor influencing Church decisions, or the Church advising the state in political matters, the ultimate sum is a combined political and theological power overseeing the empire, which became the established norm of the Christian Church.

Constantine surrounded himself with many great church buildings, the first dedicated to the practice of Christianity that had been erected, including the great Church of Saint Sophia (Bunsen) and Old St. Peter’s Basilica. (Flinn) Furthermore, the images of Jesus adorned on these church buildings began to take on “the regal posture of the churches’ imperial donors.” (Flinn) Even the image of Jesus displayed on the church buildings was modified in an effort to display the imperial status of the political machine bringing the Church even farther from the originator of the gospels, Jesus.

After the organization of Christianity as a recognized religion through Constantine, and subsequent Roman rulers, women were slowly dehumanized and eventually even considered incapable of holding any positions of importance within the Christian religious organization. The Council of Laodicea in the year 365 AD virtually annulled all rights of women as ministers of the teachings of Jesus because it “forbade the ordination of women to the ministry, and prohibited them from entering the altar.” (Stanton) This Council based its findings on the perceived “frailty” of women. (Stanton) St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century confirmed this tradition and solidified it when he stated that women “are inferior by nature and incapable of assuming leadership positions.” (Issue 4, 59) The Church leaders also attempted to convince its flock that Jesus’ closest disciples were all men justifying the removal of women from leadership positions such as priests, bishops, and popes. (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) However, we know
that women were also among Jesus’ followers, especially Mary Magdalene who was a constant companion. In addition, women held leadership positions in a successful Jesus movement before the Church was organized into what we now know as Christianity.

As a centralized authority figure, the bishop of Rome became the ultimate sovereignty of the Church, confirmed by Pope Damasus I who claimed to be the “true and direct successor to Peter and so rightfully inherited the Church that Christ had founded upon him.” (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) Because the Church theology stated that the Church was the only administrator on which the Apostle Peter passed on his authority as a disciple of Jesus, it also believed it was the only savior that could bring salvation to the world. This became known as the “unbroken apostolic succession.” (Flinn) Pope Leo I took this a step further and claimed that the bishop of Rome was the “primate of all the bishops’ and acted as the ‘mystical embodiment’ of Peter.” (Baigent, The Jesus Papers)

Under the authority of Peter, the Church, in the name of unity, sought to eradicate any “spiritual adversaries.” (Maricle) These “adversaries” included women in the eyes of many early Church leaders, which may have had roots in The Gospel of Mary. This Gospel relates that Mary Magdalene tried to encourage the disciples after Jesus’ crucifixion, attempting to relay “what the Lord had told her privately. Peter, furious at the suggestion, asks, ‘Did he then talk secretly with a woman, instead of us? Are we to go and learn from her now? Did he love her more than us?’” (Pagels) This clearly shows that Peter was in disbelief that a woman would be Jesus’ confidante; thus, a distrust in woman’s authority as a Church leader. Further evidence from the Wisdom of Faith indicates that Mary is cautious to speak freely around Peter: “Peter makes me hesitate; I am afraid of him, because he hates the female race.” (Pagels) If this is the man that the Church
views as the ultimate authority, it would only ensue that the Church would conform to that same analysis of women.

In order to justify Mary Magdalene’s status within the Gospels, especially by a Church that clearly despised the female race and could not fathom a woman as Jesus’ favorite companion, the Gospel was modified making her into a prostitute who was reformed by Jesus instead of an apostle and beloved prophet. In reality, Mary had a “special knowledge of Jesus’ teachings – an insight, or understanding, not necessarily shared by the other disciples.” (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) She was clearly Jesus’ companion and even arguably his wife; however, in the eyes of the Church, Mary could not have been a placed on a higher authority than the Apostle Peter, on whom the Church was based.

Therefore, revisions were made to the Gospels, through the agenda of man’s subordination of women, and a modified version of the Gospel was canonized. Originally, Mary was on equal terms with Jesus. It wasn’t until the fourth century that Mary was associated with an “unnamed sinner who anointed Jesus’ feet” in “Luke 7:36-50.” (King) Mary was then associated with every unnamed sinful woman in the gospels. “Mary the apostle, prophet, and teacher had become Mary the repentant whore. This fiction was invented at least in part to undermine her influence and with it the appeal to her apostolic authority to support women in roles of leadership.” (King) In addition to the change in her status from prophet to prostitute, her witness to Jesus’ resurrection was also modified. An alternative ending was added to the “Book of John, Chapter 21,” which made Peter the key witness to the resurrection during a fishing expedition in Galilee and “commissioned Peter to be the shepherd of the flock.” (Torjesen) This was most certainly done to diminish the importance of Mary’s role in Jesus’
resurrection because she was a woman as opposed to Peter, a man, and the unofficial leader of the Roman Church.

This is not the only example of the editing done by the Church in the interest of suppressing women’s prominence in the early Church. In “Romans 16:7,” the apostle Paul sends a greeting to a woman named Junia, however, Junia was later changed to Junias, a man, because the “textual editors and translators” could not have a woman as an apostle. (King) Other texts were eliminated or revised as well, including the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Philip which were both left out of the canonized New Testament because they portrayed women in a much more favorable light than the Church would have accepted.

So the question then becomes, why was the Church fearful of women? To some of the early Church leaders women were seen as a threat to salvation because of the Church’s fear of sexuality. The Bishop of Carthage, Donatus, in 313 CE, even held that the Church sacraments could not be administered by an “unclean priest,” (Bunsen) bringing the question of original sin into the forefront. This thought of an “unclean priest” brought about the forbiddance of priests to marry or to engage in any sexual relations by 1139 when this regulation was established. (Baigent, The Jesus Papers)

The concept of an “unclean priest” also brought about the question of original sin. When the Church fully developed the doctrine of original sin through the ideas of St. Augustine in the fifth century, women were completely dehumanized as the “weak and guilty author.” (Stanton) However, we have to remember that St. Augustine “hated all pleasure, especially encouraged by sex.” (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) Therefore, taking this into account, St. Augustine’s view of women being responsible for original sin was certainly tainted by his own opinions.
However, because of St. Augustine’s theology, women were then thrust into the character of temptress and a threat to salvation, the ultimate downfall of man. “2Tim 2:11-14” states, “Adam was formed first, then Eve and furthermore, Adam was not deceived, but the woman was utterly seduced and came into sin…” (Pagels) This clearly sets the stage for woman to take the fall for original sin which was established through the defiance of God’s word to not eat of the forbidden fruit.

Tertullian, another early Church leader who converted to Christianity in 197 AD, blamed women for all that was bad in the universe, including the crucifixion of Jesus. He concluded that women were the “‘devil’s gateway; you [woman] are the unsealer of that [forbidden] tree; you are the first deserter of that divine law… On account of your desert…even the Son of God had to die.’” (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) Women were, thus, the source of original sin in the eyes of many early Church leaders, encouraged by St. Augustine and Tertullian, and were responsible for all humankind’s sins on Earth as well as responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion.

All of this fear was based on an unfounded and exaggerated fear of sex. Sex was seen as the ultimate sin which was substantiated by Pope Gregory I’s statement, “‘Sexual pleasure can never be without sin’.” (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) Chastity was important in many early civilized societies; however, the Church regarded any sex as sinful, whether before or after marriage. Women were regarded as the sinful ones in sexual situations. Father John Chrysostom claimed “‘the eye of the woman touches and disturbs our soul, and not only the eye of the unbridled woman, but that of the decent one as well.’” (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) Therefore, the Church’s obsession with perpetual celibacy caused a great deal of the woman’s subordination.
The gradual authoritative shift towards virgin men as Church leaders heightened the Church’s fear of sex. One early Church father, Origen, went as far as to “castrate himself at the age of eighteen in order that he might become a more perfect Christian.” (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) This extreme measure by a Church leader would have only underscored the ideal that celibacy meant salvation. It also clearly shows that Church leaders thought the temptation offered by women could not be resisted through human means and this act would have sent a clear message to the father’s congregation about the evils of sex.

Because of the obsession with celibacy, and virginity for that matter, the question of Jesus’ birth comes into play. In order for Jesus to be divine, and yet be born of a woman, Mary would have had to have a virgin birth to coincide with the “cult of virginity.” (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) Many Christians are familiar with Mary, the mother of Jesus; however, she has been associated with virginity in order to purify her status within Christianity. The virgin birth is not written in the Gospels; however, it is written that Joseph was the father of Jesus. But the myth was created to endorse the notion that Jesus was not conceived and born from a sinful act.

Because of this view of woman as an evil temptress, women class in society was subjugated to the bottom rung. Furthermore this controversial theory was taken to the extreme in 1486 when two highly educated German Dominicans published *Malleus Maleficarum*. These two German Monks “feared all things feminine like the devil...fears the crucifix.” (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) This fear of women was evident in their publication which marked women as “all that was demonic in the world…. Women to them were incorrigibly imperfect and always sought to deceive. They were weaker than men and thus more likely to be corrupted and to corrupt others. They lacked discipline and were “beautiful to look upon, contaminating to touch, and deadly to keep.”” (Baigent, The Jesus Papers) The *Malleus Maleficarum* ultimately connects
woman’s evil to carnal lust, again concluding that women were responsible for sexual pleasure which was sinful and impure.

It is, therefore, evident that women went from spiritual companions, to teachers, to a subordinate class of humans throughout the history of Christianity. Women were prominent in the life of Jesus, traveling with him and even advising him in spiritual matters. Mary Magdalene was his most beloved disciple and followed him even when the other disciples questioned their own loyalties during his arrest and consequent crucifixion and resurrection. Unfortunately, in the name of unity, the Church was established based on a man’s agenda of retaining and furthering his own power. Subsequent leaders furthered the suppression of women by illogically believing that sex is sinful and that sinful pleasure is derived from the woman. The messages sent by these leaders, that woman is evil, the source of original sin, caused the crucifixion of Jesus, and even a castration to prevent one from falling into the sinful pleasures of sex, only intensified the hatred of the female class that was supported by the Apostle Peter. We have come a long way since the days of women’s suppression in society; however, the Catholic Church is still repressing women in their authoritative strongholds. Women are still banned from priesthood, and priests are still forbidden to marry, thus falsely ensuring they will remain celibate and pure. The Catholic Church needs to wake up and see the world through the eyes of its true creator, Jesus, who opened his heart to all people, regardless of gender or class, so long as they are on the path to the Kingdom of Heaven.
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