

Women Ministry in the New Testament and the Church in Africa

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ABSTRACT—*Feminism is at the heart of religion and cultural discourse in 21st Century Africa which has raised so much concern on the role of women in ministry? This has left the church in Africa into confusion in biblical interpretation. This paper examines some of the relevant New Testament views in respect of women, their roles and Ministry. Discover the cause of the shift in their original role and the implications to the contemporary African Church. The paper discovers that the women's role has nothing to do with priestly services or ordination. It found out that the cause of the shift in women's role is as a result of women quest to power and by most contemporary scholars under feminist influence which has created division, segregation, and impaired the mission of the church. The paper suggests that all members can do Gods work, women can be in ministry but not as ordained ministers and still make impact as it was in the New Testament times.*

Keywords: Feminism, Ministry, Ordination, Africa.

I. Introduction

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Feminism and its studies have taken a new facet in religious and theological sphere in the world and Africa not left behind. Feminism is derived from the Latin word *femia* (woman), which signaled having the qualities of females in issues of sexual equality and women's right and advocacy of women's right (Oxford Dictionary, 2003). This is to a certain extent the result of economic and social changes which have affected women's role in the family, places of work, educational institutional and the Church. In the same way, it reflects an apprehension to ascertain in gender relationship sphere what is biblically normative and static, what is legitimately an issue of individual choice and what is subject to cultural and historical variation.

In early 1960s to mid-1970s when most of the gender theories started tilted towards what might be called androgynous in its assumptions, feminism was in reaction to the long mainstream tradition of neglecting women status and role. John S. Posbee quoting Tuttle (2012) said "Feminism originates in the perception that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women: it attempts to analyze the reasons for and the dimensions of women's oppression and to achieve women's liberation". Little wonder Posbee (2012) suggest that feminist theology is a political movement donning religion. This paper therefore, looks at the role of women in the New Testament and the implication to the church in Africa.

II. Text and Context

The principle of New Testament Theology is text and context. This means, the reader must first locate and understand a text in its context, culture and then distill the message and meaning and then translate it across time and space to one's own context. Such a methodology demanded that the writings of each canonical author be studied in terms of them first and only then compared with other writings. A study of women in the New Testament must follow this route. No longer can we take texts at random and build up the picture we would like to see. Instead we must let the evidence produce the picture. The critical description of views on "women" in the New Testament should begin with Jesus' views on them and then to Paul. It is true that Paul's epistles were written first before the Gospels and Acts of Apostles, but it cannot be denied that Paul must have been influenced by Jesus' teachings which at this time circulated orally. This will

enable us to appreciate more fully the changing perception of women's roles and dignity in the apostolic and post apostolic times.

III. Women in the Gospels

The Scripture in the New Testament mention women's participation in a variety of historical events, circumstances and opportunities. Matthew begins with the story of Jesus mentioning His genealogy. He includes four women in the list of Jesus' genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba the wife of Uriah (Mtt. 1: 1-16) though four women not found in Lukan genealogy in (Lk.3:23-38) are also included which suggest the inclusion of women in the people of His covenant. However, Luke gives special prominence to women in his gospel to show that Jesus came for the salvation of both sexes and therefore there should be no discrimination against women. Thirteen women found in the gospel of Luke are not found in Mark and Matthew. Luke also records, that at Nain Jesus raised the only son of a widow from the dead (Lk 7:12ff), and forgave a woman caught in adultery (Lk 7:36ff). In Luke 8: 1-3 several of the Jewish women followed Jesus as disciples and some of them supported him materially (Lk 8:3). Jesus had sympathy for women. Women also featured in some the parables- the Lost Coin (Lk 15:8-10) and the Unjust Judge (Lk.18:1-8). This recognition of women's dignity is clarified as Jesus makes it clear that "the woman" is not someone's possession in "that age" (Wahlberg, 1975, p. 44).

It is worthy to note that the women are also featured in the resurrection episode. The synoptic writers agree that it was women who first found the empty tomb (Mk. 16:1 -8), and Matthew and John record that Jesus appeared first to women. Dunn (1975, p. 128) posits that Jesus encounter with the women is a scene of commissioning hence the instruction, by the Lord "Go and tell my brethren (Mtt 28:10cf. John 20:17). Here Jesus chose and commissioned the women to be first to proclaim the fact that "He is risen" and this raises the question of women apostles which requires a critical comment because the whole question about women's ministry is a pressing contemporary issue.

Many scholars have argued that Jesus did not at any time call the twelve, 'apostle' during his life time? It is suggested that Luke introduced the title "apostle" in his role as editor of the various historical sources he used (Lk. 1:1 -4). Luke added the word because

when a lukan passage has a Markan parallel the word does not appear (Lk.6:13) and he took it over from Mark (Lk 9:10; Mk.6:30) where it may well reflect something of Jesus own understanding of the twelve on mission. But this mission was limited to Israel (Mtt. 10:6). It was after the resurrection according to Matthew and Luke that Jesus commissioned his closest companions for a more permanent and universal mission (Dunn, 1969). The gospel writers agree that Jesus did not include any woman among the twelve. According to Mark which is held to be the earliest Gospel, the "the disciples and the twelve" are often used as synonyms but Matthew's distinctive title for the closest followers of Jesus is the "twelve disciple". The word 'disciple' stands in marked contrast to what have been observed in Mark and Matthew. He speaks unequivocally of many disciples (Lk 6:17; 19:37). A comparison between Luke and Mark's account of the choice of the twelve highlights the differences. According to Mark 3:13-19 the twelve are selected from an anonymous group whereas in Luke 6:12ff "the twelve apostles" are chosen from among Jesus' disciples. Gerhardson (1964, p. 221) said that Luke mentioned two groups who are followers of Jesus, namely: the many 'disciples' and "the twelve apostles". It was this momentous sending forth that earned those whom he had previously called his "disciple" the title "apostle". The qualification of those numbered the twelve apostles is set out in Luke. They must have accompanied Jesus from the time of his baptism until his death and be a witness of his resurrection (1:21 - 22). Trites (1977) Stressed that these followers had a special function, to act as witnesses and not missionaries or church leaders. .

In the early chapters of Acts, Luke repeats the claim .that all that is proclaimed is based on apostolic witness (2:22f; 3:12f; 4:8f ;5:29f; 10:34). In Acts 4:20(cf. 26:16) the apostles as a reliable witness only bear witness to what they have seen and heard. Other disciple may bear witness to Christ's life and resurrection (*cf.* 1:21-22) but for Luke the twelve are the witnesses par excellence in the early chapter of Acts. According to this definition of an apostle given in Acts 1:21-22 Paul cannot be included among the twelve, but he can be an apostle in the sense of "one being sent (Acts14:4, 14) out as a pioneer missionary". Similarly in this context women also qualified since they fulfilled two chief requirements namely: seeing the risen Christ and being sent forth by the Lord as we have earlier argued. Brown (1975, pp. 688-699) observed that John gave apostolic role to women, he cited the meeting of Jesus with the Samaritan woman in John 4 and argued that here John gave the woman an apostolic missionary status

because she is depicted as the founder of the Samaritan Church. He said,

in John 4:38 is the most important use of the verb *apostellein* and John intended to communicate that the women's role is an essential component in the total mission. Although John 4:37 speaks only of the male disciple being sent to harvest, his comment that many Samaritans believed, because of the woman's witness, is important (John 4:39).

Women's roles were not an issue in the time of Jesus and his disciples. Jesus accepted them among his large followers, taught that they have equal status with men in the resurrection (Lk. 20:27-40).

IV. Women in Pauline Epistles

A large number of people were documented by Paul as apostles (1 Corth. 15:5-6). Paul includes himself, Barnabas (1 Corth. 9:6; Gal 2:9), Peter (Gal 1:18-19), James (1 Corth. 15:7; Gal. 1:9), Timothy (I Thess.1:1; 2:6; II Corth.1:1) Apollos (I Corth. 4:6, 9) and Silvanus (1 Thess.1:1; 2:6). In Pauline understanding, there are four qualifications of an apostle:

1. The person must have seen the risen Lord (1 Corth 15; 6).
2. He must have founded a church (I Corth.9: 1-2).
3. He must proclaim the one true Gospel (2 Corth. 11 and 12; Gal. 1:6f).
4. Able to boast of visions and miracles (2 Corth. 11:16-33).

There is strong evidence of women's influence in Pauline Churches which reveal Paul's liberal attitude toward women in Christian work and worship. According to Acts 16:11-15, it was with women that the gospel was first preached in Philippi. Lydia became the first convert and Paul and his company stayed in her house. According to Acts 17:4, 12 some leading women of high standing became Christians in Thessalonica and Berea. In Athens, one of the two named converts was a woman (Acts 17:34). In Philippians 4:2-3 Paul referred to two women, Euodia and Syntyche, as Christians who labored side by side with him in the gospel together with Clement. in

Corinth Paul came upon Priscilla and her husband. Priscilla and her husband instructed "the gifted Apollos" (Acts 18:19; I Corth 16.19; Rom. 16:3-5) and she was a fellow-worker of Paul's (Rom. 16:3-4). To Rome in the service of the gospel came Phoebe of Cenchrea the only member of that church whose name we know. In the church at Rome, it appears that women had been more distinguished in the Christian service than men (Rom. 16). From Rome Paul sent greetings to Nympha of Laodicea who also had a church in her house (Col. 4:15). It is likely that these women who made their homes, churches would not have testified in corporate worship to the grace of God. Moreover, there is no evidence or any indication that the women named above were debarred by Paul from participating in public worship. It is, indeed, important that Euodia and Syntyche were described as fellow workers with Paul and Clement. It is against such a background that we must place the Pindian women and even see them as "ministers" in Paul's time.

The Greek word for "minister" or "servant" in the New Testament is *diakonos* it may mean the server at table (Matt. 22:13; John 2:5) or one who performs humble services (Mk. 9:35; Matt. 20:26) or one who is commissioned in the church for a specific sacred function. In this latter sense the term *diakonos* applied to the faithful in general (2 Corth. 6:4), to Apostle and their helpers who are promoting the cause of Christ (1 Corth. 3:5; Col. 1:7; 1 Tim.4:6) and especially to the helpers of Bishops and Priests (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim.3:8, 12)(Moulton,1978) In the ecclesiastical function as concerns the women, the only place where the word *diakonos* occurs is Romans 16:1 referring to Phoebe (woman). The whole question about deaconesses in the church takes its origin from this text (Raja, 1977, pp.213-220). In 1 Tim.3:8-12, Paul talks about deacons, their integrity and their prerequisite for this office. It has been argued that verse 11 referred to some women known as deaconesses with a specific function.

However in Romans 16:2 the word *prostates* meaning "helper" is applied once again to Phoebe. The verb *prohistemi* occurs in the New Testament eight times (Rom.16:2; 12:8; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:4,12; 5:17; Titus 3:8, 14), it means (1) to lead, to govern, to direct, and (2) to care for, to protect which agrees with the distinctive nature of office in the New Testament.(Kittel/ Friedrich(eds), 1968, pp. 700-703). In Romans 12:8 the gifts of grace imparted to different office-bearers were discussed implying so that *hoi prohistameno*i refer to special group separated by the spirit for the primary task of caring for

others, since "caring" was an obligation of leading members of the early church. But if there was ever such an office in the Church from Rom. 16:2 we could conclude that it was not a safeguard of the men folk as Phoebe was such an office-bearer. There does not seem to be any theological repulsion as to women being consecrated and given such a ministry in the church.

However, certain passages in Pauline epistles which include 1 Corth.11:3-16; 1 Corth. 14:34-35; Col3:18-19; Eph. 5:22-23; Titus 2:4-5) deal with the role, status, general conduct of women in the home, Church and society as well. The three aspects can be summarized as follows: (1) the religious role and status of women in the life and worship of the Church; (2) the domestic status and role of women in relationship to their husbands; (3) the general deportment of women in manners and their attire.

Only in Colossians and Ephesians was the second concern dealt with only. It appears that the three were interrelated. Thus, the discussion on attire and demeanor in 1 Tim. 2:9-10 is sandwiched between a restriction of the activity of praying to the men (v.8) and a ban of teaching by women (v.1:1-12) which also refers to the necessity for feminine submissiveness (v.11). Similarly, Titus 2:4-5 speaks of the general behavior of woman concluding the command that they be submissive to their husband. (cf. 1 Pet. 3:1-6) A closer look at the problem seen by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 was that of women not being properly "submissive" or "subordinate" to men. This problem then manifested itself voraciously in domestic relationships, religious matters, question regarding attire and demeanor in general. It is not only that woman should not speak in church, but it also includes directives that they are to be "subordinate" and "if there is anything they desire to know they are to ask their husbands at home". In the entire key motif is that women are to be "submissive". Paul is not question a woman's participation in public worship but her doing so in such a manner as to contradict her divinely appointed relation to her husband.

Paul upheld the dignity of women in the Church of Christ by affirming their equality (Gal. 3:26-28), and even acknowledging their positive influence in the Churches, and their role and status in the family and the Church. It is therefore clear from the New Testament texts examined that the role and position of women had become an issue in the Christian community of the first century which negatively affected the Church. It is important for us to identify the causes of the shift, the issues and the opinions held in order to locate them to

certain cultural and historical periods in the development of early Christianity.

V. Causes of the shift: Issues and Opinions

The issue of women status was more of the issue in the New Testament time and not ministry, looking at the texts considered in this paper. Consequently Jesus was not only open to them in accepting them as part of his followers but he also gave specific teachings that showed they had a dignity that had to be respected. But looking at the status of women in the cultures in which Jesus and Paul had been reared, Kroeger (2000, p. 1278) states

Within doors, the typical Jewish woman ground the meal, baked bread, Cooked, cleaned and washed the clothes, as well as spinning, weaving and sewing garment for the family. Outside the house she fetched water from the village well, gathered fire wood, worked in the fields, sold produce at market and drove animals pasture.

Leonard (1950, pp. 311-320) adds that women marriage in Jewish culture was a marriage of negotiation. Women had no right to divorce, property rights limited, not allowed to go to school or learn the Torah. Women were not competent to give evidence in the civil and criminal courts and so could not defend themselves even if they did try to obtain justice. The Jewish woman received significance status only through her motherhood in bearing a son. Against this background Jesus' acted in contrast to culture in His own attitude that is revolutionary to women. He did recognize women's role in the family, directly enhanced this role by expanding it to include them as witnesses to him in his resurrection. However, there is no evidence in the Gospel to explain why he did not include them among his twelve disciples during his earthly ministry. This omission is the origin of the prejudice against women ordination in most churches.

Paul's teachings in Acts and his epistles reflected this positive attitude toward women. In Acts 16:11-15, a woman (Lydia) became the first convert in Philippi and in Acts 17:4.1 2 some prominent women became Christians in Thessalonica. In Acts 18:24-28 Priscilla

and her husband taught the learned Apollos in Ephesus. In Romans 16:3-4 Paul referred to Priscilla as his "fellow worker in Christ Jesus and described Phoebe as a "servant" or "minister" of the church (Rom 16:1), and once referred to a woman (Junia) as an apostle (Rom. 16:7). Andronicus and Junia, Aquila and Priscilla were husband and wife working together as missionaries. This particular instance indicates that Christ calls both men and women to found churches and trusts them equally to be faithful teachers of the Gospel. In the same vein, the New Testament evidence presents Phoebe as an office-bearer. This implies that there is no theological hindrance for women being consecrated as "ministers" in church. Thinking and acting in this perspective is because Paul has no doubt in his mind about the equality of men and women in the divine economy (Gal. 3:27-28). Many women had accepted Christ as Lord and many of them had taken up positions of authority in the Christian communities in particular and in the Hellenistic environment and none took up priestly role.

Analyzing precisely the setting of the New Testament passages earlier noted in this paper, the Corinthian passages inform on a situation of conflict, disorder, rivalry and improper behavior in the worship of the church. In 1 Cor. 11:2-16 Paul discusses what he judges to be unbecoming conduct in public worship which has to do with their improper dressing. He acknowledges their roles in prayer and prophecy but criticizes the manner in which it is done. Paul's emphasis falls on verses 11-12 which underlines the interdependence of man and woman in the Lord, and concluded that the compliment and mutuality of men and women and not headship or subordination was what Paul intended to emphasize. This paper does not see any ordination issue here.

In 1 Corinthians 11 we have noted that Paul accepted that women were in fact legitimately speaking and prophesying in public. However in Cor.14:23-26 Paul seems to contradict that view. One solution to this inconsistency to this between the sentiments of this texts and the earlier one is to regard the passage as a later, non-Pauline, interpolation. However, in spite of the awkwardness about the connection between verses 33 and 34 there are not sufficiently strong reasons for regarding the passage to be an interpolation. The passage still points as the earlier one to Paul's understanding of a proper subordination of women to men as part of the created order which has to be reflected in the ministry of the community. While women may speak in public they may not take a lead in the official

worship of the Christian assembly. Admittedly as in Rabbinic Judaism of the time a woman must avoid questioning any man in public. These verses represent a piece of specific advice given to certain Corinthian Christian women whose behavior had created a problem in the church. For some the passage may be of particular relevance on the debate on women ordination but this paper holds that the question of ordination of women did not arise in Paul's day and we have no information about women who baptized

In 1 Timothy 2:11-14 (cf. 2 Corth. 11:13) women should be quiet and submissive but it does not make clear whether they are to be submissive in relation to male teachers, to husbands, or to men in general. Moreover, women are not to teach or to have authority over men. Paul's teaching here is consistent here with the view of Jewish teaching current at the time. They are also vulnerable to temptation that they are unsuited to public office. There God appointed rule is in childbearing and upbringing.

From the content of the letter it is gathered that the Christian community addressed to was in need of responsible leadership and sound teaching. An analysis of the content of the Epistle and the social background of life in Ephesus in the first century was significant. Admittedly the community was in danger of false teachers and women in particular were vulnerable for the teachings of the false teachers (fl Tim3:6). First Timothy gives a picture of a group of people that lacked cohesion and unity, a group that was involved in a constant power struggle. If we compare this letter to the Corinthians letters we find a similar social situation. Sociological research on various religious movements confirms that new religious groups where charismatic leadership is prominent tend to be threatened by relentless powers struggles. Paul as it were addressed the letter to a Christian community where struggle for power had jeopardized the climate of the loved community. It has been well argued that Paul here is specifically talking to the wealthy women of Ephesus. He is dealing with a specific problem of the need for submission of the wealthy women not to their husbands but rather to the teachers of the Christian community. The wealthy women are undermining the faith; they are to submit to those who teach the truth. Moreover to subversive women, and not women in general, Pauls idea is that women should not have authority over men in the Church and nothing stops them from holding authority within the church and uses the Eve-story as warning for women of his day. Paul went further to indicate that a woman will be saved through child-bearing

and if she continues in the faith (1 Tim. 2:15). What Paul intended to communicate is that the primary responsibility of the Christian women is in the home (Kamuel, 1975). Those pushing the ordination of women are not pushing it from based on any New Testament evidence but will be under the influence of Feminism.

VI. Implications for the Church in Africa

The New Testament is clear on certain facts about women. Both Jesus and Paul were very liberal toward them. For that reason women played prominent roles in the early church. It is obvious that much of what was known about early Christianity can to a great extent be attributed to women. This paper is also impressed about the biblical, witness to the equality of status of men and women created and redeemed in the image of God. For many, this perspective has been adduced as the main justification for the ordination of women (Gal. 3:28) (House, 1979, pp. 40-53). Yet this is an interpretation and application being forced on the text which primarily has to do with the issue of admission into the church. At least it is from here that the argument about women's ordination started to go astray. But let it be noted that the omission of a women's representative among the original twelve chosen disciples of Jesus was quite deliberate. Both Jesus and Paul were people of their time and culture. But the action of Jesus did not imply women's inferiority. The diverse opportunities of services in the church of Christ are many. Yet the primary responsibility of women in the home must not be overlooked. A Christian woman find in it an opportunity to fulfill her highest calling. It appears that most women now ignore that motherhood is a gift of God: that gift we know as mother's love which no power on earth can sever. When Paul speaks of subordination he is aware of this great gift of God to women.

However, there was no need for women's ordination in the time of Jesus and Paul. The passage that reflect Paul as being negative to women can only be understood in the context of his advice to them in the interest of peace, love and stability in the home and the Church. If there was deliberate aspiration on their part as at that time to become Church leaders, the New Testament evidence is unclear. Human society is dynamic. In any society, social and religious progress cannot be adequately attained without the active involvement of the womenfolk. And for this to be achieved conscious efforts must be

made to integrate women in the mainstream of religious and secular affairs. The Church must be cautious of women aspirants to the priesthood. This was a wind of change that started blowing in the world in the early sixties following what is commonly designated as the "women's movement" otherwise called "women's liberation". Thus the basic influence of this movement is secular which has now filtered into the religious atmosphere. It is therefore not a movement of the spirit. Most churches have become victims of the pressure of this movement Jesus' life and teaching must remain the model for the church. But it does not mean that creative changes cannot take Place. Women ordination is not a creative change. There is definitely no necessary need for it in our time. Our Lord Jesus did not make any mistake in not including women among his twelve disciples.

VII. Conclusion

The church of Christ in Africa is not a social, secular organization. It is a religious community. Within this community everybody has the opportunity to offer service. We must however, avoid the danger of seeking to cause the biblical text to speak the language we want to hear. African women, while continuing in their enthusiasm and service in diverse ways as the bible makes clear, must aspire living in the fullness of the holy spirit which alone is the power to become what God has called us to be. For in the measure that we partake of His Spirit, we shall fulfill His destiny for the Church in Africa in our day.

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