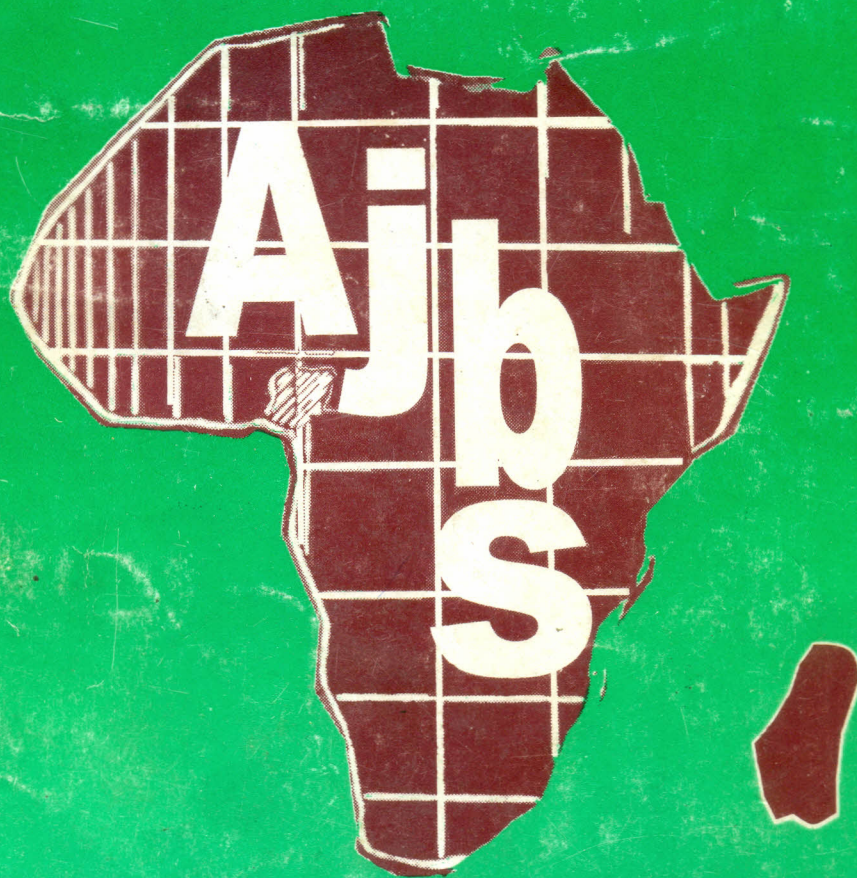


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Book reviews, adverts of new books, conferences, research notes and Ph.D. thesis title are also welcome.

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## **DECOLONIZING SAINT PAUL'S TEACHING ON WOMEN'S POSITION IN THE CHURCH**

**Akande, L. B. (Mrs)**

### **Introduction**

Issues relating to women in the churches of God today can not be over-emphasized. They have been discovered to be relevant and even indispensable if the church of God is to progress. Women constitute greater percentage of the population in most churches.

However, over the years, the church have used religious doctrines of Saint Paul against women which stated that women should keep silent in the church, thus creating myths and superstitious beliefs that have made women less superior or inferior to men.

In the African society too, women are looked upon as male dependants who have to be under the protection and control of men. Most often than not, they are regarded as objects of use, abuse, exploitation and a source of wealth to men who handled them like their personal property. Despite the subordination, African women still excel in "seering,



divining, mediating," rainmaking and as mediums in prophesying, healing and counseling (Alao 1997:56).<sup>1</sup>

The Western Culture under which the teaching of Saint Paul on the issue falls has seriously discriminated against women barring them from priesthood and public teaching. The traditional African culture too does not regard the dignity of women as such. Many are of the view that women are prone to devilish influences. All these were attributed to the lack of recognition accorded women. Jewett summarized the reasons for discriminating against women as lying the "the nature of things, which when spelled out, includes the nature of women, the nature of the ministerial office and the nature of God Himself."<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, Christ the founder of Christianity was not in support of this view. Women were part of his ministry. Thus it becomes most unfortunate that despite Christ involvement of women in His ministry, biblical phrases of Saint Paul have been misused to paint women with negative qualities that literally disqualified them from holding ministerial posts.

However, in Africa today, women in the church are no longer passive but very active. They now feature prominently in evangelism and can attain greater level of leadership without being discriminated against.

<sup>1</sup>J. O. Akqano, "Ordination of Women, Arguments for and Against with a Nigerian perspective" *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*. Vol. XXXII, No.1 & 2 June and December, 2000, 56.

<sup>2</sup>P. K. Jewett. *The Ordination of Women* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. 1980), 1.

## Paul's Teaching on Women's Position in the Church

The genesis of the problem faced by women regarding their position in churches today is not unconnected with Paul's theological treatise which seems to discriminate against women prohibiting them from taking any leadership or authoritative position in the church. Churches today are still debating this issue.

The following are some of the passages Saint Paul was noted to have said on the issue:

### 1Cor 14: 34-35

Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but they are to be submissive as the law also says, And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home. For it is shameful for women to speak in the church.

### Ephesians 5: 22-24

Also, in this Epistles, Paul opines that:

Wives submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife as also Christ is head of the church, and He is the Saviour of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, be let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

A similar view is expressed in 1 Peter 3: 1-7 that:

Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husband... for in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him Lord.



In 1 Timothy 2: 11-14, Paul is also noted to have said that:

"Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no women to teach or to have authority over men, she is to keep silent."

The above passages of Saint Paul have been used in several ways to demoralize and discriminate against women. But a critical assessment of these passages had revealed that, the message had no universal application. Saint Paul wrote those passages then, as a result of the prevailing circumstances of that period. Then women were considered as inferior creatures. Today, they have realized their numerous capabilities. Omoyajowo also supported this view when he says:

This passage (that is, 1 Cor. 14: 33-34) however, should be considered in its local context. Paul was writing to the Corinthian church, which had a tradition of general discrimination against women of which Paul himself was well aware.<sup>3</sup>

But Reed in his own explanation on why Saint Paul gave such restriction of women says:

It is not that women were not to pray and prophesy in public, but rather to restrain the practice with dignity for the sake of order. In other places Paul speaks with obvious gratitude for the service of devoted Christian women<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>J. A. Omoyajowo, *Cherubim and Seraphim Church: The History of an African Independent Church*, (New York: 1982), 210.

<sup>4</sup>O. F. Reads "Corinthians" in W. M. Greathouse and W. H. Taloy (eds.) *Beacon Bible Expositors*, Vol.7 (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1976), 15.

After all, Paul himself appreciates the service of some women in the church at Rome and even commended them. The part played by these women can never be forgotten. Such women include Priscilla, Phoebe, a *diakones* and patroness. If Paul's teaching on women's silence in the church is universal, he would not have actively involved these women in his ministry. Thus, his teaching has no universal application.

Moreover, in addition to the view above. Scansoni and Hardestry commented on why Paul so addressed the women in Ephesus. In his own assertion, he concluded that:

The women addressed here (in Ephesus) were doing something wrong trying to teach without the necessary gifts acting bossy or putting their husbands down in public, and therefore the statement in the passage does not apply to women in its absolute sense.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the prohibition according to Ogunkunle "is not universal but restricted to the Ephesians situation alone."<sup>6</sup>

From the above discussions, indications have shown that Paul's teaching on women's position in the church is all culturally based. It has neither universal nor global application. Keener concludes this view when he eventually says that:

<sup>5</sup>L. Scansoni and N. Hardestry (1975), *all We're Meant to be* (New Jersey: Word Books), 71.

<sup>6</sup>A.J. Ogunkunle "Women in Church Leadership Position: Hermeneutical Implications for Theological Education). Being a Paper Presented at the Biennial Conference of West African theological Institutions WAATI 2003). 7.



If Paul does not want the women to teach in some sense, it is not because they are women but because they are unlearned. His principle here is that those who do not understand the scriptures and are not able to teach they accurately should not be permitted to reach others. This text is unfortunately quite applicable today; there are all too many people teaching unhealthy interpretations of the bible today, and most of them are men.<sup>7</sup>

### Decolonizing Women's Position in the church:

In the time past especially in African societies, women's position is closed to that of slaves. They are not to be heard but only see to bear children, and go to farm. In fact, they are believed to be marginalized, deprived and inhibited by restrictions imposed by tradition and culture. Many atimes, women are regarded and seen as very weak vessels that need the assistance and support of men in order to perfectly handle situations.

The above view, coupled with wrong interpretations of the teachings of Paul on women's position in the church, have been used by, many to deny women of entry into the church ministry. Many have contemplated that there are some deep and significant reasons in the very nature of things why men and only men should be ministers in Christ's church. Jewett summarized the reasons given as lying in:

The nature of things, which when spelled out, includes the nature of women, the nature of the ministerial office and the nature of God Himself.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>C. S. Keener *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers. 1992), 117.

Additionally, many people have also considered the nature of women as sinful which consequently had to do with the fall of man in the garden of Eden. Thus, women's involvement in the ministry would only have led to disaster and a similar scene that occurred in the garden of Eden.

The pronouncements of the early church fathers too had also negatively promoted the exclusion of women from ecclesiastical leadership. Such statements from Tertullian in Canada are this:

Women, you are the devil's gate way;  
You have led astray one whom the devil would  
not dare attack directly. It is your fault the  
Son of God had toddlers you should away  
Go in morning and rags.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, it is against this background that, this section of the paper points out the fact that in Africa today, women's position in the church has changed from being passive to active. They play significant roles in churches today. They can now be seen taking the lead in evangelism. They have now stood up to face the challenge. In the Christ Apostolic church which belongs to belong to, the Good Women Fellowship has been in the forefront of evangelical activities and they constitute greater percentage of those who prophesy in the church.

<sup>8</sup>P. K. Jewett. *The Ordination of women* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmann Pub Co. 1980), 1.

<sup>9</sup>Gnanadason A "Women's Oppression: A Sinful Situation" in Fabella, V. O. Oduyoye M. (eds.), *With Passion And Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (Manyknoll), 70-71.



The genesis of Cherubim and Seraphim church also has a woman as one of the founders, in person of Captain Christiana Abiodun Akinsowon. The experience of this woman on June 18, 1925 can never be forgotten in the history of the church.<sup>10</sup>

### Council of Great Britain<sup>11</sup>

Equally of interest is the inception of Christ Apostolic Church in the whole of Africa and the universe at large today. This could be traced to a woman Miss Sophie Odunlami, a co-founder. The same could also be said of women in other African countries. In Liberia for instance William Harris was a fore runner of African Independent church movement. This man recognized the place of women in his Church and the important role they could play. Harris showed great respect for woman hood as opined by Aiyegboyin and Isola that he prohibited:

The custom of keeping menstruating female segregated, and secondly, by condemning certain funeral customs and setting free newly widowed women from taboos that set them apart.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup>J. A. Omoyajowo, *Cherubim and Seraphim Church: The History of an african Independent Church*, (New York: 1982), 210.

<sup>11</sup>D. O. Akintunde, "No Longer Bd. Silent A Critique of Women's Silence in Christ Apostolic Church, Nigeria." In D. O. Akintunde (ed); *African Culture and the Quest for Women's Rights* (Ibadan: Sefer Book Ltd. 2001), 98.

<sup>12</sup>D. Ayegboyin & S. A. Ishola, *African Indigenous Church: An\_Historical Perspective* (Lagos: Greater Heights Publications, 1999), 53.

Presently, women in the Redeemed Christian Church of God and in many other African Independent churches too numerous to mention now enjoy some level of leadership role as they are now ordained as Pastors. Ministers or Reverend. For instance, worthy to note is Pastor (Mrs.) Folu Adeboye, Pastor Mrs. Odeleke, Rev. (Mrs.) Samson. We can confidently say that, the uniqueness of women especially in African Indigenous Churches today have been elevated. Ayegboyin and Isola has this to say about them that:

They serve as "mothers," "Prophetesses," "Overseers" and other roles. In most of these Churches, women are always in the majority, though they are also the most beneficiaries. In recent times, there are several of them who are now "Bishops" and even "Archbishops" with many men serving under them.<sup>13</sup>

It is now time for Churches in Africa especially and the world at large to realize that it can not be enriched without the contributions of women. Women would be fully supported by the Church to be ordained as priesthood, so that they can utilize their God-given talents. God is no respecter of any gender. He gives spiritual gifts to all. Keener rightly opines and supports the above view when he says.

There is in the entirety of the New Testament no evidence for the subordination of women, that is a practiced in many of our churches today, and certainly not sufficient evidence for men to rule out the validity of women's calls to minister the word of God. When men claim that God has called them we do not question their call if their lives and ministry bear witness to that

<sup>13</sup>Ayegboyin



claim: when women claim God called them, we ought to evaluate their calls on the same terms.

If we judge other people's calls on the basis of a narrow and I'll considered interpretation of several texts, ignoring the clear examples of other texts we may succeed only in, silencing some of God's servants needed for a our generation.

And if we do that, we invite God to pass judgment on our own call as interpreters of God's word.<sup>14</sup>

Also, there are some Christ Apostolic Church branches too whose inception can be traced to women. Examples are Christ Apostolic Church, Bethel at the University of Ibadan. Mrs. J. D. Ogunranti founded it in 1969 with branches now in Ile-Ife, Port Harcourt, Ajaokuta, Lagos, London and the United States of America.

Christ Apostolic church, Agbara Olorun Kibati was founded by Mrs. Bola Odeleke. Today she is the first Nigerian female to be ordained as a Bishop on 20th July. 1995 by the International Ministerial. Silencing some of God's servants needed for our generation, and if we do that, we invite God to pass judgment on our own call as interpreters of God's word.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

In view of the above, we have seen that Saint Paul's teaching about women has no universal application. He was only addressing a specific cultural situation then. Even in his own ministry. Women actively contributed positively. He can never forget their prominent role. It was for this reason, Mickelsen comments that:

<sup>14</sup>C. S. Keener Paul, *Women and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992),

..... 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 are not the total statements of the truth. Read within the content of the whole of the New Testament, they do not eternally prohibit women from leadership in the church.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, leadership in Christianity should be irrespective of gender. The fact that one is a woman needs not be seen as hindrance to God's salvation. Whatever decision the Church takes should remove barriers militating, against gender equality. Thus women's expectation in the Church of God has to be fully fulfilled. Theological education has a lot to implement in this regard. They have to thoroughly educate the Church to this important evangelism truth. The Church authority should not allow sentiment to dominate their thoughts on the issue, but allow the spirit of God to guide and direct them in acting objectively.

<sup>15</sup>A. Mickelsen (eds). *Women Authority and the Bible* (Dorons Grore: Inter varsity press, 1984), 301