

Religion, Leadership and Society: Focus on Nigeria



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WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

L.B. Akande

Introduction

In this paper, an attempt is made to probe into women's leadership role in the church and the recognition given to them in the growth and development of the church. The paper will also examine the factors that are hindering the activities of women. The issue of women is a controversial one in many churches today. Ryrie says:

There is scarcely an ecclesiastical body which has not discussed the place and service of women within its group today and those which have not discussed the matter officially are facing the problem unofficially and on the local level.¹

This is a topic that needs careful consideration and discussion. At the same time, one needs to take the historical approach and remember also that the word of God is inspired and authoritative. Thus, it becomes very important to mention some of the women, God had used one time or the other to accomplish His purpose, considering first God's order of creation. Even in our changing society, equality of all people regardless of sex, race or religion have been stressed, especially by modern humanitarian thought. Also prominent role played by laity in most churches today equally includes women.

A young man once confessed during a premarital counselling that he was brought up by his mother and thus did not know what it meant for a man to be the head or leader in the home. For this, he must therefore not be expected to be the head of his home.²

Also, the Nairobi University sometime ago conducted a research and estimated that about 60% of Kenyan husbands were absentee husbands. Those who were not and could afford to stay with their family had failed in their domestic responsibilities. What does one expect from children of such homes? The truth is that the girls are modelled after what they see in their mothers, while the boys take after their absentee fathers, thus growing up well, failing in their responsibility as leaders at home and even in society at large.³

Based on all these views and many more, this paper will try to find convincing answers to some of the questions the issue is trying to raise and suggest some ways in which women in various churches can intelligently contribute to the spiritual, educational and evangelical growth of the church. Thus, because of the nature of

women, it should not be assumed that their activities in the church might be low. There are increasing interest of various sections towards the activities of women in the society and in the church in particular.

Historical Background of Women

According to the biblical story in Genesis 2:21,⁴ man and woman were created in the image of God. From this, a joint responsibility was bestowed on both male and female. They were to cooperate in matters affecting them, both having dominion over the living things on earth, and to increase and multiply. It is therefore clear that the world would be incomplete and without meaning if God had not created women. Ellison (1973) rightly said:

In God's purpose however, the male and female are part of the image of God in man. The resultant partnership, equality and voluntary subordination are in some measure a revelation of the true God's nature.⁵

Having understood that, both sexes were created in the likeness of God and for the same purpose, it is therefore valuable to look at women in all spheres of life. "They are both essentially for a fully functioning human race. God wants both men and women." One can therefore see that right from the on set both man and woman have equal right in the sight of God.

Women in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the book starts with the story of Eve, the first woman and "the mother of all the living" (Gen. 3:20). The Old Testament therefore made man and woman lord over the rest of the creatures. The ideal woman's portrait given in Proverbs 31:10-31 has a great variety. She is not confined to the house or the neighbourhood store. She has freedom of movement. She gives to the poor. She does not leave charitable works to the social welfare board or to the church elders or deacons alone. She is familiar with God's law and deserves admiration in her fear of the Lord.

The Old Testament further stated that women are permitted to weave cloth for the tabernacle and give gold offerings to the building of the tabernacle (Ex. 35:22). There were some women who ministered at the door of tent of meetings (Ex. 38:8).

Also, according to the Old Testament, the presence of women is required during the reading of the law (Deut. 31:12, Nell. 8:2), they (women) like men are expected to hear the law, read it, know it and obey it. The Old Testament mentioned that Hannah's religious devotion was much cherished as a mother. Her state of spiritual delight and songs of praise was very much appraised in Hebrew's lyric poetry (I Sam. 2:1-10) Her role and importance to God as a mother made her to be singled out as a mother in Israel.

Deborah, Lappidoth's wife was a prophetess, as well as a judge over Israel.

She authoritatively spoke as God's Prophetess to Barak to lead his men against Sisera, their enemy. . . Women also took part in pilgrimages to the holy places. (I Sam 1:3-5; 24-28; 19:20), their prayer was not restricted to special occasions, it permeated their entire life.

From what the Old Testament had said about women, the writer can say that a good work had been done, for it values women's participation in the tabernacle and preserves what is best for women. The Old Testament never neglected the role and ministry of women. It spoke of how some women rose to prominent positions.

Women in the New Testament

The New Testament clearly shows the importance of women in the Jewish society. It states that women as well as men listened to Christ's doctrine (Matt. 14:21; John 4:7-42), and they (women) were objects of His healing power and divine forgiveness. Jesus, according to the New Testament, accepted the services of the holy women (Lk. 8:1-13). Among his close followers, some women were faithful to him till the end (Matt. 27:55-56). The good news of Christ's resurrection were reported by some women (Matt. 28:1-10, Mk. 16:6-8).

Furthermore, in the New Testament, women's active participation in the proclamation of the gospel did not end after ascension of Jesus Christ. The gospel was available to all without regard to sex. Women received it and helped to promote it in the New Testament church. Men and women were dragged to prison for their faith (Acts 8:3, 9:2). Women served as deaconess in the early church. For instance, Phoebe was called a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae, and her activities promoted the growth of the infant church. Mary, the mother of John Mark, also donated her house as the meeting place for the mother church in Jerusalem.

According to Apostle Paul, "There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). The New Testament writers emphasized women's activities in the early Christian church. It gave the impression that women, as well as men, were prepared by God to carry out his missionary work. The role of the woman was never condemned in the proclamation of the gospel, throughout the first century of the Christian era. Women took prominent part in spreading of the gospel.

Despite the fact that the New Testament had done an impressive work on the activities of women in the early church, it has on the other hand refused to give a clear explanation on the teachings of St. Paul in I Cor. 14:34, and I Tim. 2:11-12, which says that women should be silent in the church. However, the writer found an explanation to this statement of Paul in *Sunday Concord* of November 23, 1986. The explanation was given by the Synod of the Presbyterian church when ordaining Mgbeke Okorie. The synod based its explanation on the conviction that St. Paul's teaching "was merely a specific response to the prevailing decadence of the Corinthian church and therefore has no universal application." Okorie also reinforced this position when she said:

We should not give a too literal interpretation of Paul's message of the Corinthians without thinking about the prevailing cultural background of the time.⁶

In short, in the New Testament, the ministry of women was not limited only to temporal affairs. We read of Priscilla and Aquila in Acts 18:26, who jointly ministered to Apollos.

Women and Leadership Role in the Church Today

The question regarding the leadership of women in the church should be resolved by looking at the issue from God's perspective and intention in the creation of man and woman. He assigned each sex his/her role based on his suitability to these roles. Both are equal in the sight of God.

Wanjau, moderator of the Presbyterian church, was of the view that leadership role in the church, should be accorded the individual without gender consideration. He went further to say: "I think the most important consideration is whether women can commune with God."⁷ For this reason, it can then be said that whoever receives communication from God is duty-bound (as a minister) to share with others what the message is.

However, based on the above view, women should be accepted to hold leadership roles in the church having determined that they are able to perform even better than some men. Some women are considered to be better organizers than some men. It is believed that women are more empathetic and more enduring than some men.

Moreso, the great commission is not gender-specific, so also the message, "Go ye therefore into the world" (Matt. 28:19). But in most churches today, women have been relegated to a listening position, and not as preachers. It was for this reason Bellis remarks that:

where ranking occurs, she is always inferior to the male. Only in her role as mother is she accorded status and honour equivalent to a man's. Nevertheless, she is always subject to the authority of some male – father, husband or brother. . . .⁸

Hence churches today should realize that reasonable degree of partnership is expected from both sexes in the spiritual assignments of the church.

Ryrie in his *Women in the Church*, mentions the capability of women in the spiritual growth of the church cannot be questioned. They were given spiritual gift by God to be used for His glory and also for His (God's) people. Ryrie pointed out that, all the people, including women were part of God's covenant relationship which He introduced through Moses. Therefore, to Ryrie, the leadership place of the modern Christian women in the church today exceeds preaching, teaching and administration. They build relationship among Christians and establish social situation which are more conducive to Christian life. Thus, women must be allowed to participate to their fullest capacity in the spreading of the Gospel and the maturity of the church.⁹

The Catholic Truth Society in their book, *Women and the Priesthood*,

mentions that women have played a decisive role and accomplished tasks of outstanding values. They gave examples of St. Clare and St. Teresa of Avila, who had left writings so rich in spiritual doctrine, and as such have been included among the doctrines of the Church. And great are number of women who have consecrated themselves to the Lord for the exercise of charity or for the missions.¹⁰

It was further stated that one of the greatest evangelists recorded in the Bible was a Samaritan woman, who encountered Jesus and proclaimed him to the people. Many believed Jesus because of the woman's testimony.

Sorril and Beverly in their *Associational Women's Missionary Union Manual*, mention that membership of the association consists mainly of women whose basic relationship is with the church. That is, they exist to assist churches. They carry out their work by taking actions and conducting activities to meet the needs of churches. Activities organized by the Women Missionary Union included pastoral ministries, Sunday school, church training, music ministry, evangelism and student ministries. They also conduct one or more training workshops to equip teachers to teach general mission action or personal witnessing skills in the churches.¹¹

Furthermore, it has often been observed that in most churches, when it comes to financial matters and church upkeep, women are always in the forefront. This view had made Odunaye to declare that "churches accept the material services of women but do not listen to their voices, seek their leadership or welcome their initiatives."¹²

According to Murikwa, in a book titled *A Woman's Place: The Pulpit or the Kitchen?* leadership "should be given on basis of character and training, not by the sex of the individual,"¹³ since God created them male and female, in His own image (Genesis 1:27). The church belongs to the two, hence, women's leadership should not be seen as an abomination. However, today, women in many churches have been seen to feature in important positions in the church. They take active part in ushering, Sunday school programmes, teaching children at the juvenile level of the church, president of the church training union, deaconesses, especially in the Baptist and Christ Apostolic churches.

Today, we have some women in history who through the help of the Holy Spirit founded some churches. For example, the genesis of the Christ Apostolic Church Worldwide (CAC) could be traced to a woman called Miss Sophia Odulami (Mrs. Ajayi). Other examples are Mrs. Amila who founded Christ The Messiah Church, Ilorin. Mrs. Bola Odeleke also founded Agbala Olorun kii Baati ministry, a Christ Apostolic Church with branches in Lagos and Ibadan.¹⁴ Another example is Mrs. Owuoye, who founded Christ Apostolic Church Prayer and Action Ministry, Amilegbe, Ilorin.

In some churches, however, women have not been allowed to give sermon in the church, but they could lead devotions like prayer meetings. In the Catholic church, only a priest could give sermons, not even a layman. The reason for this is that the Pope does not permit women to give sermon in the church.

Despite the various church activities exhibited by these women in the church,

it is worthy to note that the Lord is helping them to cope as house mothers without much problems. They try to make things balance, so that none of these duties suffered. According to Ogunyemi of Sabo-Oke, Ilorin, 40 percent of the population of the church membership are women. They are found in the organizations in the church, i.e., Good Women Association (majorly women), Youth Fellowship, Prayer Band, Visitation Committee and Evangelism Committee. Not only are women well represented in all the organizations, they are also very active in the various posts assigned to them. They are found in the Sunday school committee, teaching children at the juvenile church, organizing kindergarten classes for children of working mothers in the church, and also organizing social activities like home management for women in the church and home visitation. With the above view of Pastor Ogunyemi, one can say that women are vessels to be reckoned with in the church.

Mrs. Mary Musa, an adviser to women fellowship at ECWA (Ecumenical Church of West Africa) English Section in Kano, was asked how she has been able to cope with her duties as a mother and church worker. According to her, the Lord has been helping her. In her conclusion, she feels that the Lord has already ordained her with her present responsibility in the church. She prays to be more useful to the development of the church.¹⁵

In the Gospel song ministries, women are not left out. Examples are lawyer Nike Olawale (now late), Mrs. Dupe Shoetan, Mrs. Bola Are, and a host of others.

It could be said that women have made tremendous contributions to the growth and development of the church, as such their place is not neglected but appreciated in the church. The church too is a community of all believers regardless of whether male or female. Women thus should be on their feet to face the challenges ahead of them.

In this regard they have been able to pull their weight through their involvement in activities that shows that their leadership role is not only in the kitchen or as host during church programmes, but have been major contributors to the gospel message.

Conclusion and Recommendations

On the basis of the aforementioned views, it can be reasonably concluded that women have been relevant since the creation story. Some important points have been drawn out from both the Bible and other Christian views. Also, the issue of women ordered by Paul to be silent in the church was dealt with. Some of the many areas in which the present-day women have contributed and can still contribute to the church were discussed, basing our authority on the Bible.

It is hereby recommended that women should not be considered incapable in any area of church ministry. The church should both in words and deeds, demonstrate that women are very capable to hold any post in the church. God makes no distinction between men and women. Both sexes, for example, ministered unto Jesus in the Temple during his presentation to the Lord, according to Moses Law (Lk. 2:22-26). To deny women of God's given rights would be nothing short of apartheid in the church.

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