



Theological Critique of Gender Disparity in Christian Leadership

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Abstract:

It is generally observed that the under representation of qualified women in leadership positions has created a gender gap that exists in many areas of workplace including the Church. Society generally and the church in particular have determined that only males make good leaders; therefore they continue to deny easy access for women seeking leadership roles because they do not fit the norm. Despite the undisputable roles of women as homemakers and nation-builders many arguments have been advanced in support of male chauvinism mostly prevalent in African society. Such discrimination against women leadership in the church is attributable to several sources including culture, church traditions, Biblical evidences, inherent biological make-up of the female person, religion itself among other things. The prejudices, inequalities and injustices suffered by women seem to be deep-rooted. What is even more unfortunate and scandalous is that religion has been and is still being misused to reinforce the oppression and subordination of women today. The study is aimed at theological evaluation of the various arguments against and for favoured women leadership with special reference to Christian leadership in order to disprove their logical veracity with valid theological models. Finding of the study revealed that some churches don't totally support women leadership. The study concluded that Christian leadership should transcend the factor of gender but be based on God's prerogative and infinite grace. The church should be gender friendly in her appointments, selections, and elections at all levels of the Christian family.

Keywords: Theological, Gender, Disparity, Christian, Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Gender disparity in leadership positions of any kind is a common phenomenon all over the world. It is a fact that today patriarchal tradition has established a system that allows the alienation of women in the leadership of any organization. By this women are expected to play a subservient role in a world where equal beings have been effectively placed. This thinking has been explicitly expressed by Joel Krieger (1985) who said that it is a social or political order in which the things that masculine people do are deemed of greater social value, more productive, more serious, more skilled than the things that feminine people do. In corroborating this apartheid against women as leaders, Geisler¹ submitted that what accounted for such tradition is that obnoxious belief that the male is by nature superior while the female inferior. This therefore suggests that nature bestows upon the male the perpetual right of leadership. This view was not only upheld in Judaism, but also in the old Graeco – Roman and Indian societies where a woman was regarded as a slave, commodity, pest, serpent or even hell (Mala, 1991). Conversely, Jesus Christ refused to conform to the established norms of his society by giving the women the necessary recognition. Jesus viewed such discrimination against women as injustice. There is perhaps

no more hotly debated issue in the Christian community today than the issue of women serving in positions of leadership.

Theological Critique: In the context of this study, this is an *assessment* based on Christian theology and theological models in order to develop a deep understanding of the issues invoked in the arguments for and against gender disparity in leadership.

Gender Disparity: In the context of this paper, it means the differences in outcomes observed between different sexes as regard to Christian leadership, specifically, observed disparity in the key leadership positions in most churches where one sex is being disadvantaged over the other.

Christian: One who professes belief in the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Christian:

Leadership: According to J.D. Batten (1989) leadership is a development of a clear and complete system of expectations in order to identify evoke and use the strengths of all resources in the organization the most important of which is people.

In the context of this study women leadership is discussed within the contexts of Christian theology. Women leadership in this context is the conception that bestows on Christian women the ability to occupy leadership positions and discharge effectively responsibilities pertaining to those positions.

The Role of Women and Men in the Church

G. Maina 1995 opines that the role of women in the church is a very crucial one because of the roles of men and women in the church are more clearly stipulated than in the Secular World. This is because the church seems to have dictatorial ideas than in the ordinary life where women are taken for granted. Maina in her book states that church has continuously been accused of supporting and perpetuating the unjust social institution customs and myths which the church itself should evaluate. One finds that the Church is more rigid than the secular society in her approach to gender issues. For instance, the society has opened up avenues for women to participate in any sphere of the society which the church has still kept some roles as men's roles. It is on that note that Crabtree (2001) stated that the church has given rise and supported the myths of dependency and emotionality the nuclear family system - the all-male Trinity. David Crabtree (2001) on the same note states that women do comprise the large majority of active church members and are the sustaining force in the almost every congregation. In that note, women cannot be ignored in their church participation.

Relevance of Feminist Leadership

In the view of P.E. Nmah (2013) some feminist believe in the reinterpretation and reconstruction of scriptures and choose to work within existing denominations while others prefer to create their own empowering religious texts and organizations. However, as a matter of emphasis the African feminist particularly in Nigerian did not see possibility in the reconstruction of biblical text as this cannot change the patriarchal teachings and ideas in our society. He explained further that rather, it is their priorities to identify women in theological institutions and work towards creating theology that seeks the liberation of women from oppression and discrimination. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians is one of such groups comprising scholars and members of churches who target the gospel from African perspectives. The mission of the circle is to undertake research writing and publishing on African issues from women's perspective. The vision of the Circle is to empower African women to contribute their critical thinking and analysis to advance current knowledge (Chopp, 1995). However, if the above is the case, it could be said that theological education can be enriched if

Women in Leadership

W.E. Porat (1991) contended that good church administration can be well more attuned to feminine than masculine modes of leadership behaviour. Female attributes of nurturing, being sensitive, empathetic, intuitive, compromising, caring, cooperative, and accommodative are increasingly associated with effective administration. While these characteristics are innate and valuable, women possessing the qualities of a good leader still face higher attrition and slower career mobility particularly in higher education. Data on equality of opportunity in church as well as educational administration reveals that

gender, more than age, experience, background, or competence determines the role an individual will be assigned in education (Whitaker and Lane, 1990).

In sundry career generally, African American women who hold leadership positions in the educational system or otherwise face dual burdens of sexism and racism and confront special challenges in promotion and tenure. Race more than gender is the major obstacle to career advancement (Allen, Jacobson and Lomotey, 1995; Singh, Robinson and Williams-Green, 1995). Since gender is a hindrance to women leaders, some believe that they should be compelled to lead in the manner that is considered the norm, that is, the way that men lead. Utilizing men's method of leadership is the easiest way for a woman to be hired for administrative positions or any position of leadership, especially since this approach to leadership has repeatedly been established as acceptable to the public and successful in attracting promotion and recognition (Porat, 1991).

Claassens (2012) along with many other Biblical scholars, points to the way in which biblical texts play a key role in forming and sustaining a worldview where the males in society are privileged and thus in power. She goes on to point to the patriarchal world view in many of the Biblical texts which contribute to a worldview in contemporary society where the same and were said to be true. In this regard many women and men have internalized these values and worldview reflected in the biblical text and cannot look at the text or their world in any other way. In part of a course on teaching gender at Stellenbosch University, Claassens helped the students to understand the ways in which feminist biblical interpretation serves as tool to deconstruct the power of the text to uphold patriarchal values thus, helping to understand the equality of male and female so that full humanity may be achieved and illustrate in the ways a reconstructed reading of the texts may serve as a powerful source of resistance in the fight for gender justice.

Arguments against Women Leadership

1. Arguments from Natural Configuration of the Female Person

One fact that cannot be separated from the perception of the female child by some churches is the negative perception of the natural configuration of the female person. When it comes to the matter of education, the girl child in most African societies is usually restricted to the home, based on the fact that education given her would not be useful for her since she is going to end up in her husband's house and kitchen. For that reason, she is to be taught all she needs to know from her mother. She is taught in the preparation of food, housekeeping, and how to generally fend for her family.

The fact remains that this discrimination continues for the whole life time of the woman, and continues even after her generation into the next and on and on. Hence, the girl child grows into womanhood with the notion that it is right for her to be discriminated against. She accepts the fact that the male child is better than she is and thus develops a subservient stance to life. She sees it as natural phenomenon. Commenting on this situation, Funmi Iyanda (in Makanjuola, 2013) commented, "I do not like the way women are raised here. I would like to raise a girl who understands that she is as important as the next person in building a society and building our country" (p.33). Thus, since time immemorial, women have had their rights discriminated against, even right of leadership.

2. Arguments Premised on Culture and Traditions

Those who refuse women religious leadership positions do so based on their perceptions and adherence to culture and traditions. In several traditional societies for instance, women are excluded from secret cults because they are not supposed to have knowledge of esoteric matters. For example, among the Yoruba, women generally do not actively participate in the Oro and Egungun cults (Olademo, 2010). Several reasons may account for this. Leo Frobenius (in Kasomo, 2010) suggested that men merely used this occasion to terrify women in order to keep them in holy fear of the great roarer. Another is that women are believed to be inquisitive but yet cannot keep secrets. Most importantly, women's tenderness may hinder swift and drastic decisions which elders of the Oro cult are bound to take from time to time.

Howe, Margaret E (1974) holds that women should particularly be commended for cooperating with the entire members of the community which places the ban on them to go into religious confinement. He says

that “obedience as a sacred role is emphasized by the fact that if defiled, it is believed to result in misfortune for the entire community” (p.14). In the traditional society, the economic roles of women were generally segregated; even where both the man and wife farmed; there was usually a division of labour into male and female tasks. Men often prepared the soil and planted the crops while women would weed and help with the harvest.

3. Arguments from Biblical Evidences

Those who argue against women leadership in most churches site evidences from the Bible to buttress their claims. They have argued, for instance, that all the twelve apostles of Jesus were men. It is indisputable that Jesus had twelve male apostles. But as Jewett (1980) rightly observed, the choice of the twelve Jewish males was a “matter of time and circumstance, not an inviolable truth of revelation” (p.90). Many proponents of non-women leadership have argued that Paul forbade Women to speak in the church. Two specific injunctions which Paul gave to the Church in Corinth as well as Timothy have been interpreted as constituting Paul’s opposition to women speaking in a leadership role during worship:

Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression (1 Tim. 2: 11-14).

And again, 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 husbands at home; for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church (1 Cor. 14: 33-35).

The philosophy of Socrates was reinforced by both his star pupil, Plato, and the latter’s most distinguished disciple Aristotle (Bristow, 1991). Thomas Aquinas against the ordination of women as priests is an outcome of this integration. Thomas Aquinas, a foremost medieval scholar and theologian argued that the female sex cannot signify eminence of degree (Wijngaards, 2001). His argument is based on a presumed three-fold inferiority of women namely:

- i. Women are biologically inferior: Following Aristotle’s view of procreation, Aquinas believed that a woman is born by some defect in the generative process. A woman is a ‘defective male’. The biologically secondary status is also clear from the belief that the male seed contains the generative power. The mother only provides a womb that gives nourishment to the seed/fetus.
- ii. Women are socially inferior: That is, a woman is subject to man by nature, because human reason, though common to both men and women to some extent, predominates in the male.
- iii. Women are created as dependent on men. This means that man was created first. Though both men and women are the image of God as to our intellectual nature, man is the image of God in a special sense. Aquinas argues that, on account of these inherent defects, women cannot signify eminence of degree and cannot, therefore, represent Christ as an ordained minister. Today, with advancements in scientific knowledge, especially the biological and with the demonstrated equal capabilities and abilities of women and men in all areas of human endeavour, people will not argue as crudely as Plato. Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, and others like them (Wijngaards, 2001).

Arguments for Women Leadership

1. Evidence of Women in the Gospel Narration

The genealogy of Christ as recorded in the synoptic gospels placed women in a vintage position against the traditional Jewish view which saw them as mere property. Mention is made of Rahab, Ruth, Mary, Anna the prophetess and Joanna the disciple, Mary Magdalene among others. In the gospel of John however, he is seen to be especially sympathetic to women. He is even argued according to Schussler Fiorenza to have depicted an ‘alternative’ Christian community in which women share fully in leadership (Edwards, 2003). In his gospel some women were portrayed sensitively, other ambiguously, but they were not represented in such a stance as bad a Judas.

Reacting to comments by different scholars which tend to portray women in bad light, Schneiders (1999) is highly critical of their treatment in the major commentaries, describing it as case of the trivialization, marginalization, and even sexual demonization of biblical women, which she sees as reflecting and promoting similar treatment of real women in the church. Either way, John makes a good representation

of women and men on equal grounds (Jn. 11:5). When it came to the narration of resurrection story of Jesus Christ, women were also said to have played tremendous roles. All four gospels recount that women were first to go to the tomb and found it empty. Mark describes the women at the cross to the indicative of discipleship when he says that they “had followed him and ministered to him” (Mk. 15:14). He also mentioned the women as eyewitnesses of the Crucifixion in anticipation of their eyewitness role at Jesus’ burial (15:47) and His resurrection (16:1-8). Their devotion surpassed that of the 11 disciples who had deserted Him (14:50). Mark may have intended these words as an encouragement of faithful discipleship among women in the church at Rome.

The use of the term ‘minister’, in Luke 8:3 probably conveys the above logic and this is also true of the story of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Mt. 8:14-15; Mk. 1:29-31; Lk. 4:38-39), whose concluding notice that she “ministered to them/him” adds the notion of discipleship to a healing story. The gestures and attitudes Jesus portrayed in relation to women made for an example of gospel tradition, which was transmitted to the early church and thus made for the subsequent way in which women were treated. Women were considered disciples and equally with men. It was said that the ministry of Jesus was supported by these women, whom He had interacted with.

2. Misconception of Paul’s Idea

Proponents of women leadership also base their arguments on the fact that Paul’s idea is grossly misconceived. As pointed out earlier, the two specific injunctions which Paul gave to the Church in Corinth -1 Cor. 14:34-35 as well as to Timothy-1 Tim. 2: 11-14, have been erroneously interpreted as constituting Paul’s opposition to women speaking in a leadership role during worship. One needs to ask what was the context of these two passages? The first and greater part of 1 Corinthians 14 is a teaching on the relative values of prophesying and speaking in tongues, and the need to have tongues interpreted for the benefit of all. The second part, from which the two verses quoted above come, is a lesson on orderliness in church during worship.

In enjoining the Corinthians to maintain orderliness and reverence during worship, Paul mention four scenarios that could cause confusion, disorder of chaos (Sowunmi, 2009).

- i. Everyone speaking in tongues at the same time; if such happened, there would be absolute bedlam and a visitor would think he was in a madhouse: Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? (Verse 23).
- ii. Numerous messages in incomprehensible tongues, uttered simultaneously and without immediate interpretation: If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let on interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God (Verses 27-28).
- iii. The speaking of too many prophesies simultaneously; Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. But if anything is revealed to another who sits by let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged? And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints (Verses 29-33 – emphasis mine).
- iv. Women speaking during worship. The pronouncement of Paul on this is contained in the verses quoted above, which will be repeated at this juncture: 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 husbands at home; for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church (1 Cor. 14:34-35). In ending the lessons on the necessity of maintaining order and reverence during worship, Paul gives a final, terse summary: Let all things be done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14: 40).

A careful and objective study of the two verses (1 Cor. 14:34-35) in their context will show clearly that Paul could not have been referring to women teaching in the church, but to their speaking freely and thus disturbing worship. The Greek word used here for “to speak”, as Torjessen (1995), for example, reiterates, is *lalein*, which in Greek society was used for “free-ranging discussion rather than formal

teachings". Women and men most probably sat apart during worship hence, Paul enjoined the former to keep their questions till they got home instead of shouting across to their husbands.

3. Equality of Men and Women before God

Proponents of women leadership in the NBC have argued that both female and male are equal before God. One of the most heartening and reassuring verse of scripture they quote is Genesis 1:27. This is very significant because it counters the discrimination against women directly. It underscores the fundamental scriptural truth that women and men are of equal value in the sight of God, who created them in His own image. It should be stated right at the outset and without any equivocation, that it is blasphemous and heretical to consider one gender inferior to the other. Such a heretical view is illogical. If women and men are both made in the image of God, how can one be intrinsically inferior or superior to the other?

The first of two other passages, among many, in the scriptures, which proclaim the fundamental Biblical truth of the equality of men and women before God, is Romans 8: 16-17: "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together". The second is Galatians 3: 28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Indeed, the latter is one of the most powerful and compelling Biblical pronouncements in favour of not discriminating against anyone, let alone fellow believers in Christ, on the basis of gender. This verse states categorically and specifically the equality of all believers in Christ. It also underscores the equality of all God's creatures. This teaching was pointedly made by Paul in view of the situation in the Early Church when there was a prevalent view among Jewish and Greek cultures, from which many of the early Christians had come, in which women were generally regarded as inferior to men.

4. Theological Consideration of Authority

Every leadership position is a position of authority. Often when people are opposed to women in leadership positions in the church, the real issue is not the Bible, but authority. They argue that women ought not to be in positions of authority. Such persons need to ask themselves what authority really is and why men may have it and women may not. Misunderstood texts dealing with husband-wife relationships have wrongly been applied to the question of women in Christian ministry. For example, people have viewed the term "helpmeet" in Genesis 2:18 as a basis for arguing for the inferiority of the woman in the church. The words in question, however, mean "a helper suitable for him" and do not suggest inferiority, for the same word "helper" is also used of God in Deuteronomy chapter 33 verse 7.

Similarly, people argue that women are not to be in positions of authority because in Genesis 3:16 Eve was told that her husband would rule over her. However, these words are descriptive of life after the fall, not descriptive of what God had intended for humanity (Mary, 1985). The biggest offense is that people have assumed this world understanding of authority and applied it to the Church, but not knowing that Christ's authority must be understood differently. The classic text dealing with authority is Matthew 20:25-28 in which Jesus instructed his disciples that the world's views on authority and greatness ought not to be their view rather than leaders lording over and having authority over others; the leaders should be their servants. This teaching is valid, not only for the church, but for family relationships and all other kinds of leadership roles.

Ephesians 5:22, however, is often used to argue that women should not be in authority since wives should be in submission to their husbands. It is questionable whether texts dealing with the marriage relationship should be applied to the question of women in church leadership. But apart from that, the more important point is that Ephesians 5:22 is one of the most abused texts in the Bible (Oyeronke, 2011). The submission of wives must be seen only as one example of the mutual submission that is required of all Christians in 5:21. In fact, in the manuscripts of 5:22 followed by most editions of the Greek New Testament, the word "submit" is not even present; it is assumed from verse 21. From this world's perspective mutual submission does not make sense but it is merely another way of expressing the point of Matthew 20:25-28.

In the context of the ancient world, wives were instructed to submit to their husbands because Christianity with its call of total commitment to Christ was viewed as a threat to the family (Makanjuola, 2013). In Titus 2:5 wives were asked to submit so that the word of God is not blasphemed. Husbands are referred to as “head” in Ephesians 5, but only to place greater responsibility on the husband in caring for the wife. He is to give himself for her in love as Christ gave himself for the Church. Both in the family and in the Church mutual submission is the controlling principle. In recent times some people have granted that women may minister, but argue that women ought not be in positions of ultimate authority. Such a distinction cannot be defended, for no biblical texts indicate two levels of authority in service. The church does not need a view of authority that will keep women from functioning in Christian ministry.

5. Theological Consideration of Diversity of Spiritual Gifts in the Church

Closely related to the discussion of the ministry of all the Church is the focus on the variety of gifts in the Body of Christ. By recognizing the diversity of gifts within its fellowship the Church recognizes that the Spirit of God functions in different ways in different people. A person’s task in the ministry of the Church is determined by the way the Spirit is manifested in that person’s life and actions (1 Corinthians 12:11). Whether a woman or a man is granted the privilege of serving the Church as a pastor is not based on that person’s choice to do so, but on the recognition that the Spirit of God has led and empowered that person for pastoral ministry (Howe, 1974; Kasomo, 2010; Wijngaards, 2010). The requirement for pastoral ministry is manifestation of the Spirit not being a male. Nowhere in the New Testament are the gifts of the Spirit determined by gender.

Some people have opposed women in ministry merely because the Church rarely has had women ministers before. There were exceptions, but basically this is true. Still it is not a valid objection. While tradition should be valued, only the Scriptures are authoritative. At numerous times in the history of the Church Christians have realized that the Gospel in their time required new thoughts, definitions, and actions that had not been expressed in earlier times. The doctrine of the Trinity is an obvious example of such developing theology. If women are encouraged to take leadership positions within the NBC and her churches such a new power for the spread of the Gospel could be decisive for the growth and health of the Convention and her churches.

CONCLUSION

The fact that many traditions are giving way for new and progressive innovations that we see in other facets of life, calls for an articulate rethinking of the position of women in the 21st century church in Africa. The dynamism of tradition has affected societal structures and resulted in some women from various societies emerging as President of nations, Vice Presidents, Directors of World organizations, Deputy Governors, Senate Presidents, Speakers of House of Assembly, Chairpersons of governmental establishments or institutions and of course Vice Chancellors of universities. Presidents Orroyo of the Philippines and Sirleaf Johnson of Liberia are typical examples of this claim. It is high time, therefore, that Christian men (and of course some Christian women too) overcame their fear, and allow women leadership of the NBC in order for them to contribute more to the religious sphere of the society. If consideration is given to this advocacy, then the Convention, most especially her churches would be pulling down the evil wall of apartheid against women.

The ministry of the Church is an enormous and sometimes difficult task. The gifts and abilities of women are needed as much as those of men. Women will encounter the same kinds of problems that men do, but the Church cannot afford to erect additional obstacles that will inhibit their ministry. It is time to let the Spirit of God work through all of God's people, including women. Enjoying the freedom of the Spirit will not only mean that women are allowed to minister, but that God's people will also allow themselves to be ministered to by all those who are gifted and called by God. Also, women’s relevance and contributions can be hampered if not allowed to put in their optimum. To avoid this, the researcher suggests that the Nigerian Baptist Convention should not discriminate against any gender, but should work to bring about gender justice by involving the women leaders in all her institutions including the churches. It is hoped

that by pursuing these steps, the Convention and her churches would be preparing the way to sustainable development of the propagation of the full gospel of Christ on earth.

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