

RE-READING ICOR.14:26-40: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF MALE CHAUVINISM IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Women play vital roles in human society. They could be considered indispensable given their viability and productivity in virtually every aspect of human endeavour. That notwithstanding, observations have shown that in African society where the traditional gender roles are usually hijacked by patriarchy ideology, men are seen as pre-eminent human beings and women as inferior and second class citizens. The story appears to be same even in the church (especially the mainline churches) where women are not allowed to take certain offices and some scriptural passages are cited not excluding ICor.14:34-35 in support of male dominance and female inferiority. Such claims undermine the human dignity of women. Data for this work is basically from the secondary source while redaction critical method would be employed for data analysis. It is the conclusion of this work that Paul's injunctions in ICor.14:26-40 is geared towards maintaining order in the church and not for marketing male chauvinism as it appears to be the case in Africa. Women form the integral part of the liberation that Christ gained for the human race through His vicarious death on the cross.

Key words: women, patriarchy, church, male dominance

Introduction

The role of women in the family, church and the society at large cannot be underestimated. They are indispensable in the actualization of a viable and productive human society. Exclusion of women from any human society is tantamount to the collapse of human existence. In fact, no socio-economic progress could adequately and effectively be attained without the active involvement, support and participation of the womenfolk. In the family, women's God-given gift of caring, nurturing, loving, and managerial skills among others is superlative. In the political terrain, the voices of women are firm

and their positions strong at any seemingly given opportunity. In the religious circle, women are zealous and their participation and commitment to duty for the actualization of progress in the ecclesiastical domain is appreciable. In spite of the outstanding roles of women in the family, church and the society, women still suffer problems like dehumanization, denial of rights, exclusion from some pastoral offices, prohibitions from having jurisdiction especially over men and others. Some of these issues which are derogatory in tune and time are posed on women based on some selected scriptural passages. Among these biblical passages are 1Cor.11:2-16 ;14:34-35 where women are warned not to prophesy with their heads uncovered and forbidden neither to teach nor speak in the liturgical assembly.

However, Jesus aware of the indispensable roles of women elevated them to a dignified status hence his attitude to women was not only innovative and creative but highly revolutionary. As the incarnate God, Jesus turned a new page by putting to an end such obnoxious practices meted against women by being born of a woman to redeem those under the bondage and influence of the law, women inclusive (Gal.4:4-5). To the greatest dismay of his disciples, Jesus broke the barrier placed against women by conversing publicly with the samaritan woman (Jn.4:27); He never considered the state of impurity of the woman with the issue of blood (Mtt.9:20-22). He recognized and appreciated women's role in the family and also directly enhanced their role by expanding it to include their being witnesses to his resurrection. Nevertheless, there is no gospel evidence to account for women not being part of Jesus' twelve apostles during his public ministry.

There could also be traces of positive attitude towards women as reflected in some Pauline epistles especially in Acts of the Apostles and in the book of Galatians. There are records which point to women's participation and influence in Pauline churches that explain Paul's liberal attitude towards women in the Christian community. Scriptural instances include: Acts 16:13-15;17:4-12;18:24-28, Rom.16:3-4,7. In these instances, it could be noted that men and women matter in the economy of divine salvation and Paul did not lose sight of this pertinent message.

Be that as it may, Onwu (2004) observes that:

We also have certain passages in Pauline epistles which deal with the status, role, and/or general demeanor of women in such a manner as to support Paul's negative attitude toward women and the principle of male dominance and female subordination, both in the home and in the Church and, by implication, in the society as well (p.223).

From the foregoing, one captures the different pictures of the roles and status of women reading through 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 14:33-36 respectively. These passages often described as Deutro-Pauline letters stimulate worries about the taunting position of Paul with regard to women's position in the Christian assembly. The questions that follow are: Did Paul in subsequent writings backed out or betrayed the egalitarian ideal expressed in Galatians 3:28? Did Paul fall prey to the idea of misogyny? Did Paul refer back to the attitude of Jesus towards women when conferring or denying women's role in the Christian assembly? It is the goal of this work to attempt to resolve these taunting issues. We shall adopt redaction critical method which is an exegetical method in x-raying the theological rationale behind Paul's position in this regard.

The Socio-Cultural Setting of the Corinth

A survey of the background of the Corinthian community would enable us to have an insight about the situation that influenced Paul's decisions on certain matters concerning the Corinthian believers specially as it pertains women's position in the liturgical assembly. According to Gundry (1970), Corinth is the capital of the province of Achaia with a population of about 500,000. It was one of the rich and populous Mediterranean cities. Its location attracted people from all walks of life hence a commercial centre and a meeting point of cultures. It was characterized by a mixture of social, cultural and religious diversities. The early converts in the Corinthian Church were of social class as Ford and Young (1987) observed thus: "the city was multi-religious in nature while mystery religion constitutes part of the Corinthian culture. In fact, there was no clear cut in different facets of life, as such Corinthian believers were found between and betwixt" (189). Garland (2011) submits that there was no insistence on exclusive loyalty to a religion within the Hellenistic world. Most of the Christian converts had pagan background and were enticed by the pagan feasts which had social implications. It is most probable that their religious and socio-political life were interwoven. This was the situation in Corinth when Paul arrived from Athens

and probably being the first Christian missionary to visit the city, he needed to stream line things within the religious circle.

Delimitation of Text

The texts under study (1Cor.11:2-16;14:34-36) among others fall within the distinct pericope that deals with the problems in liturgical assemblies. O' Connor (2000) reports that "the way in which certain men, and possibly some women, dressed their hair suggested homosexual tendencies. Paul's response is to stress the importance of the difference between the sexes" (P.808). Within the context of the study, Byrne (1988) opines that the logical backbone to the passage appears in four sets of parallel statement, about man and woman respectively. Again the Corinthians having concluded their discussion on idol-meat and being convinced to hold unto the traditions given to them by Paul, it follows therefore, that coming to prayers and eucharistic celebrations is apt and adrem. This neatly explains the transition, " but, having just dealt with social occasions involving pagans (10:14-22,27), Paul may simply have decided to treat social occasions within the christian community at this point" (O' Connor, 2000:808).

Analysis of the text

There is a scatter of references to women in the pastoral letters (ITim 2:9-15; 3:11;5:3-16; 2Tim 3:6-7;Tit.2:3-6). In some of these passages, women formed part of the Pauline ministry and are conferred with certain positions as ministers in the church. For instance, in Acts 16:11-15, the tradition has it that it was with women that the gospel was first preached in Philippi. A woman called Lydia was the first Christian convert who played host to Paul and his companions and that probably explains Paul's liberal attitude to women within the Christian circle. In Gal.3:28, Paul through the baptismal statement lifted the ban that was placed upon women. At some other times, women are denied certain rights and are subserviently positioned in the Christian community. In ICor.3:18, women are instructed to be subjects to their husbands. This injunction gains deeper theological backing in Eph 5;21-33.

According to Byrne (1988) "the debate concerning Paul's attitude towards women intensified in the early 1970s as the feminist movement began to make an impact upon New Testament studies" (XV). In recognition of the apparent

egalitarian and ideal statement made by Paul in Galatians 3:27-28, one cannot but worry at Paul's instructions in ICorinthians 11:2-16;14:34-35. Some scholars regard the pastoral letters (I&2Tim.Tit.,Eph.) as not Paul's initial composition.They attributed those literatures not to Paul but as product of later period. Such opinion that regard these letters as Deutro-Pauline work makes positive inroad towards excluding Paul from misogyny. If these claims are true what about ICor.11:2-16;14:34-35? They still remain problematic passages.

Some scholars regard them also as later passages; as an interpolation by a later writer having much affinity with the author of the pastoral letters. Kizhakkeyil (2006) opines that "it is a post-pauline interpolation because of two reasons: its appeal to the law (probably Gen.3:16) is non-Pauline, and it contradicts what Paul already said in 11:5. The text asks women to keep silent in the Church, and it is like the misogyny of ITim.2:11-14." While some scholars subscribed to this opinion others submit that the judgement as whether or not Paul wrote these passages under discuss as against the ideal position expressed in Gal.3:28 would be determined by the interpretation one places upon ICor.11:2-16. Sequel to this, Barclay (1975) recorded that "it would certainly be very wrong to take these words that is Paul's position in ICor.11:2-6;14:33-36 (personal addition) out of their context and make a universal rule for the church" (p.136). We shall at this point examine a few key words and verses and trace their meaning within the context of our study.

Paul begins his instruction by praising the Corinthian believers for holding firm to the traditions they received from him (v.2).Then follows the chain of headship from God-Christ-man-woman which is quite distinctive in (vv.3-12) while the remaining cf.vv.5b-6;7b-9 serves to ground these parallel assertions. The word head (Gk.kephale) ethymologically refers to the physical head as it would appear in its first usage in (vv.4;5;10). Subsequently in v.3-12 one gets another meaning which traditionally means "superior". Byrne (1988) approaching this issue from the traditional point of view remarks that Paul in ICor.11:3-16 deploys an argument that is frankly subordinationist with respect to women. He has declined from the radical equality expressed in Gal.3:28 and to some extent also in ICor.7. Although this may not be the chief idea that Paul wants to present. Perhaps, Paul wanted to present head as "source" where Christ, man and woman have God as their source and this position rhymes with the idea presented in (v.8;12) . Umoren (2005) sharing in the above view maintains that

the use of the word head (Gk.kephale) does not advocate for the subjugation of women rather “it is the figurative word for leadership. It advocates, rather, for mutual self-giving among partners, which is anchored on Christ”(p.79). Jones (2005:294) maintains that Paul in this regard speaks of men and women in a closely parallel terms. Macdonald (1995) in support of the same view says that presenting men as the head of women does not suggest subjection. He substantiates his opinion by remarking that “at the outset it should be emphasized that subjection does not mean inferiority. Christ is subject to God the Father but He is not inferior to him. Neither is the woman inferior to man, though she is subordinate to him” (p.1784). Nevertheless, the fact that a woman has a man as her head could imply a certain measure of subordination but in the main, the woman derives her own authority from the man while God remain the ultimate source of authority.

The argument presented in vv.4-7 about woman praying or prophesying with her head veiled and the man doing same with his head covered calls for understanding of the word “unveiled”. In the era of St. Paul,veil is a material that not only conceals a woman but confers on her power, honour and dignity. Thus, she could go anywhere in security and profound respect. In other words, it was a tradition for a woman to veil herself before she goes out lest she runs the risk of being misjudged. Indeed,veil has two significance : It was a sign of inferiority and also serves as a means of great protection to the woman. The woman’s authority disappears along with all- covering veil that she discards. The points above, however, could have informed Paul’s assertion in v.10.The phrase still in v.10 that women should be veiled for the sake of the angels is not yet clear. Barclay(1975) submits that “ it is not certain what this means but probably it goes back to the strange old story in Gen.6:1;2 which tells how the angels fell prey to the charms of mortal women and so sinned; it may well be that the idea is that the unveiled woman is a temptation even to the angels, for an old Rabbinic tradition said that it was the beauty of women’s long hair which tempted the angels” (p.99) .

The influence of the prevailing socio-cultural milieu of Paul’s time cannot totally be dichotomized from the blunt response given by Paul. He most probably may have been influenced by the Greco-Roman and Jewish cultural civilization of his era.Within these cultural settings according to Mamman (2006) women were men’s property.They were considered legally impure; had no status apart from

their husbands. They were neither allowed to go to school nor read from the Torah at the synagogue services. They can only listen to the readings of the Torah but not without hiding behind a lattice barrier. The wives while in the temple were separated from husbands and confined to the courts of women. And this was purely based on legal and ritual impurity. There is no doubt that such a background could have influenced Paul's opinion with regard to women in the Christian assembly.

Theological Import of the Study

That Paul may have been influenced by the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures of his time cannot be totally dismissed. Consequently, it is unthinkable within the Jewish custom for women to rise to a status that suggests equality with men. Therefore, issuance of instructions that purport subordination of women most probably obtains in Pauline document. However, Paul, still shows that there is a light at the end of the tunnel by establishing directly the need for Partnership between man and woman using the God-man -woman chain statement in vv.3-12 where God is the ultimate authority. To concretize this point Macdonald (1995) notes that at the outset it should be emphasized that subjection does not mean inferiority. Christ is subject to God the Father but He is not inferior to Him. Neither is the woman inferior to man, though she is subordinate to him

Again, the scripture establishes unity of all men (both male and female). In order to actualize this fact, equality that both men and women share in Christ by the virtue of their baptism should be held high. This equality, Chiegboka (2007:70) states must be seen in the context of unity (and never uniformity or levelling). To actualize this unity, Barclay (1975) reiterates that neither man nor woman can live without the other. If there is subordination, it is in order that the partnership may be more fruitful and more lovely for both.

It is most probable as observed by Byrne (1998) that the baptismal statement about the lifting of bans of divisions 'in Christ' embedded in Gal.3:28 also formed part of Paul's original evangelization of Corinth (Acts 18:1-18). Thus: "Along with the other Pauline communities, the Corinthians heard and continued to proclaim in their on-going baptismal celebrations the good news that in Christ there is 'no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female'" (p.50). It would seem among the female folk that the tendency to celebrate their freedom

pushed them to the the level of extremism. Just as Byrne (1988) interpreted using traditional approach that “experience has shown that the new freedom and equality granted to woman made for difficulties and even abuses in community life” (p.35). Given this prevailing situation, it is most likely that Paul instructs the Corinthian women believers in such terms to checkmate excesses and most importantly to uphold orderliness in Church services.

Hermeneutical application of text in relation to the Dignity of African Woman

It has been observed in African societies that the traditional gender roles are usually maintained by a patriarchy, which according to Uchem (2005) “sees men as pre-eminent human beings and women as secondary whose roles are meant to complement those of men. Men are not generally seen as complementing women and this one-sided notion of complementarity is therefore, problematic” (p.46). Women are often considered as helpmate, weaker sex, therefore, dependent on men and not really beings in their own rights. Oftentimes, selected biblical passages are employed as basis of the practices and beliefs that purport male chauvinism and female inferiority. However, Okure in Chiegboka (2001) avers that “appreciating that the bible is the word of God, a manifestation of God’s revelation in a concrete human, social, cultural structure and containing the liberation enjoyed by humanity from God” (p.66), women, therefore, form the integral part of the great liberation that God has gained for human race through the singular sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The notion that women are helpmate to men emanates from a literal reading of the second account of creation (Gen.2:7,18,21-22). This notion originally was meant to front interconnectedness as well as bonding and attraction between men and women only to be influenced by the cultural patriarchy gender sentiments of male dominance and female inferiority of the communities of the authors and later redactors. Such notion has caused women’s oppression and does not in any way suggest true manifestation of God’s revelation as shown in the bible. The use of selected biblical passages to support male superiority and discriminatory and derogatory practices against women as Uchem (2005) asserts go to prove that “people do not seem to realize that those passages are not prescriptive rather descriptive (of the world in which the authors lived). They are not directives on how Christians should act.(p.11).

Conclusion

It is incontestable that the New Testament is clear on certain issues about women. Both Jesus and Paul encountered women in their different ministries hence their liberal attitude to women while women discharged commendable roles. We are also aware that the New Testament provided formidable platform for the equality of all human persons redeemed in the image of God. Nmah (2003) submits that:

Christianity upholds the fundamental equality of all human races by posting that all baptized in Christ are equal and there is no more distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female but all of you are one in Christ Jesus(Gal.3:28) (p.163).

The passages under study and the arguments Paul employs to drive home his message may not impress us. Byrne (1988:), opines that,

We may feel that in using the creation accounts to explain the derived authority of woman he betrayed the legacy of Genesis and set in train a baleful influence on subsequent Church practice and theology (notably the idea that only the masculine could truly image God) (p.52).

The fact remains that Paul appreciates women as human persons who did pray and prophesy in the Corinthian Church implying their participation in the liturgy. The way these passages are understood often times raise dust and questions Paul's acclaimed liberal attitude to women. Women are part of the salvific parcel of Christ which was paramount in Paul's ministry. It is most probable that Paul's instructions about women covering of head and keeping silence in the Church are geared toward promoting orderliness and checkmating excesses and not in support of male chauvinism.

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