

THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH: A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON 1 CORINTHIANS 14:26-40

Mercy Uwaezuoke Chukwuedo
Trinity Theological College, Umuahia, Abia State.
mercychukwuedo@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper is motivated by the treatment being given to women in the church. Second class status has often been the lot of women in Judaism which has also crept into Christianity. It is, however, complicating when the New Testament gives evidence of texts that describe women as active participants in Christian ministry and the same time advocate the complete silence of women in ministry. This paper is provoked by Paul's injunction in 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 which has been used today in some religious circles to relegate women to the background. This study examines the intention of the writer of the text (1 Cor. 14:26-40). The hermeneutical approach is adopted to interpret 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 and apply the perspectives on the place of women in the Church. The findings reveal that the text has been used to prop up restrictive measures on women's full participation in the ministry of the Church. The study reveals that the text is centered on Paul's argument against disorderliness in the Church. Paul is more concerned that order and propriety be preserved in the worship assembly. This text is not a blanket prohibition on women generally rather the text should be understood in its proper context. Therefore this may not be taken as a status quo for a contemporary church without any similar situation. This work recommends that adequate opportunity be given to women to exercise their spiritual gifts.

Introduction

Women are relegated to the background in various cultures and societies. Second class status has often been the lot of wives and women in general in both Judaism and Christianity. This has been due mainly to the influence of other cultures, religious and social, which have given women a position of social inferiority to men. While certain restrictions were placed upon the female sex by the Old Testament order, there were also conferred on them certain honors, rights and privileges not known in the contemporary world. It was the traditional teachings of the rabbis outside the scriptures that tended to degrade them. The restrictions found in the New Testament on the ministry of women in the church pose a problem to many different contemporary groups.

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Various cultures and religions have marginalized women and wrongly interpreted the biblical terms, "weaker vessel" to mean inferior or something of lesser value. Genesis sees creation of man and woman as the crown of God's plan for making a world which He sees as very good. Both are created to belong to God and to one another. On the other hand, Batchelor (2008) considers men and women equal as humans but entirely unique as creatures.

There abound a lot of biblical examples of women in ministry. Obielosi (2015) notes: despite the Patriarchal and androcentric nature of the Old Testament times, many passages still view women at a very high esteem. Old Testament history includes accounts of strong female leadership in many roles. The following are striking examples: Miriam was a prophetess to Israel during the Exodus, alongside her brothers, Moses and Aaron (Exodus 15:20). Deborah was a prophetess and a judge who directed Barak to lead the army of Israel into successful combat against Israel's oppressors (Judges 4-5), Huldah, also a prophetess authenticated the scroll of the law found in the temple and helped spark religious reform in the days of Josiah (2Kings 22:14-2; 2 Chronicles 34: 22-28).

A thorough study of the Scriptures shows that women played active roles especially in the New Testament. In the Gospels, Christ recognized their active participation in his ministry and so did not relegate them to the background. In Matthew 28:1ff, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary witnessed the risen Christ and worshipped him. In Luke 8:1-3, women who were delivered by Christ of evil spirits, Mary Magdalene and others ministered to him with their substance. Mary Magdalene saw the risen Christ who also communicated with her in John 20. In John 12, Martha ministered to Jesus and her sister Mary anointed Jesus' feet with costly ointment. The early Church recognized Tabitha's effective benevolence ministry in Acts 9:36. Philip's four unmarried daughters were recognized prophets in Acts 21:8, 9. Paul singled out two women Eurodia and Syntyche, as "women who have contended at my side in the course of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers" (Philippians 4:2, 3). The treatment of women as second class worshippers is practiced in Judaism which influenced Paul's writing in 1 Corinthians 11:34 "women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says." This idea has also crept into modern Christianity.

The question of women's role in Church and whether or not they ought to be pastors is under serious debate within many Churches. Today, some denominations do not have any place for women. They seem to adopt Paul's

position. Not much importance was attached to women and their activities in the service of God, hence the gender difference which makes the position of women as well as their contributions less significant. However, it is necessary to discover why Paul had to make this statement. This paper will help deepen the understanding of the vital roles women play and will also bring a change of attitude towards their ministry. It will project women as inevitable force or group which is inseparable in the contemporary churches.

Kittel, Bromiley, and Friedrich (1976) reveal that the traditional position and estimation of woman is a saying current in different forms among the Persians, Greeks and Jews in which man gives thanks that he is not an unbeliever or uncivilized, that he is not a woman and that he is not a slave. Woman is seen in Greek world and Hellenism in the following light: fickle and contentious, with no claim to culture. "To instruct a woman is simply to increase the poison of a dangerous serpent. A house in which woman has the final say will inevitably perish. The normal fate of a woman is to be oppressed and despised, especially if she did not enjoy male protection" (pp.777-778). Woman in this context is treated as inferior being. The inferior status of women is indicated in economic terms by the valuation for the purpose of vows of women at thirty shekels and of men at fifty (Lev. 27:3-4). Women were to be isolated during the ritual impurity of their menstrual period (Lev. 15:19-24) and after childbirth (Lev. 12:1-8), when the period of impurity was double if the child was female. The concept of woman attempts to unify white and black women by appealing to something that they all share because they are women. This concept focuses on women and how they are oppressed as women.

Sowummi (1996) in Kemdirim and Oduyeye (1996) in a key note address exposed the unfairness of Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary in its definition of woman. She says the definitions reflect some of the fundamental and virtually universal prejudices, misconceptions and discriminations against women. Woman, here, is defined as an adult female of the human race; womanhood; the state; character; or qualities of a woman (but no qualities are specified), contrarily; man: a human being, manly, bold, courageous, vigorous, stout, noble minded, manly, brave, dignified, noble...not childish or womanish. To call a person woman connotes: to give way to weakness. These definitions are clear evidences to the ill treatment and debasement of the women folk.

Historical and Contextual Background of 1 Corinthians

Spence-Jones (2004) writes in his Commentary on 1 Corinthians that Paul left Athens after his memorable address in the Areopagus, and sailed to Corinth.

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His vessel dropped anchor in the bright waters of the Saronic bay, under the pine woods and low green hills of Cenchreae. According to McCain (1996), the city of Corinth was located on a narrow strip of land called an isthmus. It was the capital of the province of Achaia with a population of about 500,000. Corinth was a commercial city having two sea ports. Corinth was a city of low morals with a lot of money. Throughout the Roman world, the term “Corinthian” became associated with a person of low morals.

With the advantage of its two harbours, over which ships were dragged to avoid the circumnavigation of Cape Malea, the town flourished. People from different places flocked to it for trade and commerce, such as the Jews, Phoenicians, and Romans. Men of pleasure availed themselves of its immorality. Greeks were attracted in large numbers by the Isthmian games. It was the Greeks who stamped their own character upon the majority of the inhabitants. They became proverbial for litigious shrewdness, intellectual restlessness, and, above all, sensual indulgence.

Paul found his way into this city of about six hundred thousand inhabitants which included Jews, merchants, philosophers, ex-soldiers, retailers, and agents of vice, the lonely and suffering. Evidently his stay in Corinth impressed his imagination. He drew many illustrations from their stadium, their races, their boxing matches, their courts of justice, their theatres, their garlands of Isthmian pine (Ch. 9:24, 27; 4:9; 9:25; 2 Cor. 2:14-16; 5:10; 9:25). He learnt to love the Corinthians with intense affection, though he never had to deal with any Church so inflated and so immoral, so indifferent to his sufferings, so contemptuous towards his teaching, or so tolerant of the opposition and the misrepresentation of his personal enemies and rivals.

The worst moral sins of the city were dishonesty, drunkenness, and above all, sensuality, which were directly due to the worship of Aphrodite Pandemos, and to the thousand goddesses, who were consecrated to her service. Apostle Paul lifted up his voice against these sins (Ch. 5:10; 6:9-20; 10:7, 8; 11:21; 2 Cor. 6:14; 7:1; 12:21, etc.).

Theological Reflection on 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

Apparently some people in Corinth were extolling the gift of tongues as a mark of superior spirituality. Paul did not tell them to stop speaking in tongues. Paul is apparently trying to give some organization to what had been a rather chaotic worship meeting—several people speaking at once, speaking words that no one could understand. However, Hurley (1981) posits that he

did put some restrictions on how tongues should be used in the worship service:

- 1) There should be two or three speakers (14:27).
- 2) They should speak one at a time (v. 27).
- 3) There should be an interpretation (v. 27b).
- 4) If no one can interpret the tongues, "the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God" (v. 28).

However, this requirement should not be lifted out of its context to create a complete prohibition on the person ever speaking. Two statements in this section go together: "Let all things be done unto edifying" (1 Corinthians 14:26), and, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40). When a building is constructed, there must be a plan, or everything will be in chaos. The Corinthian church was having special problems with disorders in their public meetings (1 Corinthians 11:17-23). Wiersbe (1996) laments that the reason is not difficult to determine: they were using their spiritual gifts to please themselves and not to help their brethren. They were using their spiritual gifts for exhibition instead of for edification. Add to this problem the "liberated women" caused some difficulties in the assembly.

First Corinthians 14:26 gives us a picture of worship in the early church. Each member was invited to participate as the Lord directed. One would want to sing a psalm (Ephesians 5:19; Col. 3:16). Another would be led to share a doctrine. Someone might have a revelation that would be given in a tongue and then interpreted. Henry (1996) asks: Is not this perfect uproar? Can this be edifying? All religious exercises in public assemblies should have this view, "Let all things be done for edifying" (1 Corinthians 14:26). Apart from some kind of God-given order, there could never be edification. It is pertinent to note that the tongues speakers were the ones causing the most trouble, so Paul addressed himself to them and gave several instructions for the church to obey in their public meetings. First, speaking and interpreting, along with judging (evaluating the message) must be done in an orderly manner (1 Corinthians 14:27-33). There must not be more than three speakers at any one meeting, and each message must be interpreted and evaluated in order. If no interpreter was present, then the tongues speaker must keep silent.

Why were the messages evaluated? To determine whether the speaker had truly communicated the Word of God through the Holy Spirit. It was possible for a speaker, under the control of his own emotions, to imagine that God was speaking to him and through him. As Wiersbe (1996) noted, it was even possible for Satan to counterfeit a prophetic message (2 Corinthians 11:13-14). Therefore, in order to avoid this, listeners would test the message by Old Testament Scriptures, apostolic tradition, and the personal guidance of the Spirit, which is "discerning of spirits," according to 1 Corinthians 12:10. If while a person is speaking, God gives a revelation to another person, the speaker must be silent while the new revelation is shared. Wiersbe (1996) asserts; If God is in charge, there can be no *competition* or *contradiction* in the messages. If, however, the various speakers are "manufacturing" their messages, there will be confusion and contradiction. When the Holy Spirit is in charge, the various ministers will have self-control; for self-control is one fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23).

Paul instructs, concerning prophesy that two or three only should speak at one meeting (v. 20), and this successively, not all at once; and that the other should examine and judge what he delivered, that is, discern and determine concerning it, whether it were of divine inspiration or not. There might be false prophets, mere pretenders to divine inspiration; and the true prophets were to judge of these, and discern and discover who was divinely inspired, and by such inspiration interpreted scripture, and taught the church.

Secondly, Paul enjoins that, if any assistant prophet had a revelation, while another was prophesying, the other should hold his peace, be silent (v. 30), before the inspired assistant uttered his revelation. Indeed, it is by many understood that the former speaker should immediately hold his peace.

Paul wrote: "*As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says, v.34.*" Mac-Arthur (1996) observes that some have tried to evade the plain meaning of the text by arguing that "silently" refers to a woman's meek and quiet Spirit. Women, they argue, can preach or teach as long as they do it with the proper attitude. Others go to the opposite extreme and use the text to prohibit women from ever talking in Church under any circumstance, even to the person sitting next to her. 1 Corinthians 11:5 indicates women are permitted to speak the word at many times and places.

If we take 1 Cor. 11:34 literally, it would also mean that women are not allowed to sing in church nor respond when the pastor asks for comments or

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questions from the audience. Moreover, it would contradict what Paul said in chapter 11, where he said that women *could* pray and prophesy in church if they had the appropriate attire says Tkach (2015). Women are not the only people Paul tells to be “silent.” He uses the same word in verses 28 and 30 to tell tongue-speakers and prophets to be silent when others speak. In both of those verses, he is calling for a temporary silence, not a complete and permanent prohibition. The silence he commanded for women was a temporary silence, just as it was for prophets and tongues-speakers; the goal of all these commands was an orderly worship service. Warren (1996) says the context of this prohibition would indicate that some of the women in the assembly were creating problems by asking questions and perhaps even generating arguments. Paul reminded the married women to be submitted to their husbands and to get their questions answered at home. While addressing the topic of church order, Paul briefly digresses from his contrast of prophecy and tongues and regulations concerning them to address the interruptions of some women occurring during the teaching period of the church service.

Robertson (1997) opines that (ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις σιγατώσαν [*en tais ekklesiiais sigatōsan*]) that is *keep silent in the churches* is the same verb used about the disorders caused by those who speak in tongues (verse 28) and prophets (30). For some reason some of the women were creating disturbance in the public worship by their dress (11:2-16) and now by their speech. In church the women are not allowed to speak (λαλεῖν [*lalein*]) or even to ask questions. They are to do that at home (ἐν οἴκῳ [*en oikōi*]). He calls it a shame (αἰσχρον [*aischron*]) as in 11:6 (cf. Eph. 5:12; Tit. 1:11). Certainly women are still in subjection (ὑποτασσεσθῶσαν [*hypotassesthōsan*]) to their husbands. But somehow modern Christians have concluded that Paul’s commands on this subject, even 1 Tim. 2:12, were meant for specific conditions that do not apply wholly now.

Schloer (2016) comments that the silence enjoined in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 must be a specific, limited silence. Numerous suggestions have been offered, but only the major alternatives can be reviewed here. Some scholars have suggested either that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 was not written by Paul but was inserted by a copyist or that it is a question from Paul’s opponents in Corinth which Paul denounces in 1 Corinthians 14:36. One view is that the speaking prohibited here is mere babbling. There is, however, nothing specific in the

context to support this meaning of “speak,” and such misconduct would certainly have been prohibited to all persons in the worship, Paul described. Another view suggests that the speaking prohibited is speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*) since that is frequently mentioned in the preceding context (1 Corinthians 14). However, *glossolalia* is always referred to as “tongues” or “speaking in tongues” and never simply as speaking.

Secondly, Paul orders that, if any assistant prophet had a revelation, while another was prophesying, the other should hold his peace, be silent (v. 30), before the inspired assistant uttered his revelation. Indeed, it is by many understood that the former speaker should immediately hold his peace.

The Place of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 to Contemporary Women Ministry

Culture has a great influence on people’s religious beliefs and in the interpretation of the Bible. Most cultures and traditions in Nigeria depict male dominance in all situations and as such females are inferior. This unfortunate belief system has been a major obstacle to women’s position in the Nigerian Church. In the Igbo culture, women are not to lead men. They have their boundaries. They are restricted from performing certain rituals and entering some sacred places. This notion has affected the Church which exists within a culture in the interpretation of the biblical texts which have been used as a cover to subordinate women. According to Kemdirim and Oduyoye (1996), people have used the fact that references of God and Jesus in the Bible are predominantly masculine and male, and Jesus chose only twelve male apostles to degrade women. The writings of Paul have often been used to subordinate women. In the same vein, Kemdirim and Oduyoye (1996) analyzed the book, *Did I betray the Gospel? Paul’s letter and the place of women* by Arajah (1996) as brilliantly arguing that Paul has been grossly misunderstood and quoted out of context by those who use him to support and legitimize the denigration, oppression and discrimination of and against women.

Women are regarded as home makers and should not be engaged in anything that takes them out of the home. On the other hand, women are regarded as weak and easily taken by emotions. Consequently, they should not be given leadership roles or positions in the Church. Women are often unjustly treated in the Igbo traditional court. If there is a case between a man and his wife, it was always the woman that is declared guilty. Men are not reprimanded before their wives if they are found guilty to avoid humiliating them before their wives.

Women's status are been upgraded in recent times as a result of enlightenment, civilization and feminist theology. Culture is dynamic. This has reflected in some areas of the Igbo culture. We now have female Chiefs and even priestesses. With the rise of women liberation, feminist theology and gender related interpretive theories; women's position in the Church is gradually changing. This is a clarion call for the reinterpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 because people have been conditioned to silence women in the Church.

Paul allowed women to pray and prophesy in public worship in Corinth (1Cor.11:5). His *injunction for women to keep silent has been interpreted in various ways within different circles*. In some Pentecostal churches, it is believed that a woman who is married to a Pastor is called alongside her husband. She assumes leadership offices without restrictions. Courageous women serve on mission frontiers at home and abroad as missionaries, evangelists, church planters, pastors, educators, and in other roles. In other circles women are generally not allowed to minister or take up leadership positions. They literally interpret Paul's statement in 1Corinthians 11:34 to mean outright prohibition on female leadership.

Rather than restricting women in any way, Paul's letters contain the sharpest calls for women's full participation in the Church. Paul rebukes those who would arbitrarily limit the participants by sex in Gal. 3:28-29. He reveals a new view of the body of Christ in which gifts are not apportioned by worldly measures. When the church gathers, all are to participate and all are to learn and be encouraged.

The real work of evangelism in the churches today is being shouldered by the women. They perform various acts of mercy and charity, visit the sick and less-privileged, comfort the distressed especially the bereaved. The modern Church should emulate Christ who did not marginalize women but treated them as friends and models of discipleship. Women should be encouraged to bring out the best in them and use it for the edification of the body of Christ. This is because according to Nmah, (2008), women are equally children of God, equally part of the body of Christ and equally the recipients of the Spirit.

Conclusion

Considering the immense contributions of women in God's salvation plans, right from the Old Testament periods, it is pertinent that the church should at this time reconsider her stand on the position of women in the church. Churches have continued to enjoy the benefits from their efforts and

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contributions, but still neglect to recognize and honor them for their good works. In 1 Corinthians 14:26-40, Paul was addressing a specific situation rather than making a blanket prohibition on women speaking in Church. Paul intends to prohibit disruptive and disrespectful questions and comments coming from the women in the Corinthian Church. Just as he told the disorderly tongue speakers and prophets to control themselves because God is not a God of disorder, he also told the women to control themselves because the law teaches self control. If they want to learn, they can ask their husbands at home.

Only one person should speak at a time. Others should keep silent while someone else is speaking in the assembly. Just as Paul's call for tongue speakers or prophets to be silent should not be turned into a demand that they never give messages of spiritual value, women should not be discouraged from using their spiritual gifts. Paul admonishes that "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Corinthians 14:40).

Recommendations

This paper finds it disturbing that the passage is used to prop up restrictive views on women's participation, even after the plain meaning of the passage has been rejected. In many churches, women take care of Sunday school and Children Ministry. They even embark on major development projects. Despite the fact that the good efforts of these women have often been neglected and considered housewifely task, yet the women have not relented in their commitment to the formation of the Church and ecumenical movement. They have maintained an incalculable influence on the Church and society. They, therefore, need the respect, liberty, and recognition to allow them use their God-given talents, and spiritual gifts.

The paper is of the view that the Church should provide opportunities of training and higher education for the women leaders. Regular refreshers courses, seminars and workshops should be organized to update the women's knowledge. A baby may be born with good intelligence but show a significant lag in mental development from living in an environment where learning is not stimulated. So, a Christian may have an aptitude for ministry (a spiritual gift) that has not been encouraged to grow. Spiritual gifts need to be discovered and developed. A number of tools are available to help Christians discover their spiritual gifts. Many books on spiritual gifts are available for study. Do not overlook secular sources for learning how to express spiritual gifts with greater effectiveness.

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