

Gender and Religion: The Changing Status of Women Within Religious Context

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Abstract

In the early days, positions and duties of women were limited to domestic affairs, child bearing and rearing, taking care of the family and surprisingly, women were not allowed to wear the same clothing, in quality, as men. The story is the same in religious set up, but in recent time, the roles and statuses of women have changed, even in the leadership roles within the religious institution. This paper is basically about the changing roles, responsibilities and dignity of women within the context of Christian religion. The paper discusses how it was, how it is now and why the changes. It also examines roles, statuses and dignity of women since the inception of Christianity and the leadership roles of women within religion.

Keywords

Religion, Women, Christianity, Church, Status

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1. Introduction

In the early period, the position and duties of a woman were limited to domestic affairs, child bearing and rearing. Domestic chores and care of the family compound were the major business of the woman who only served as a wife and mother, with perhaps no economic contributions to the family. The man was the major bread winner, the provider and the protector of the family; women were not even allowed to wear the same clothing in quality as men (Ojo, 2009).

The story is the same in the religious circle. In the Old Testament, women were not allowed any responsibility in worship in the family religious setting. Even where women were active they were to be silent (Fiddes, 1990) This was because of the patriarchal domination of the Jewish culture which placed women not next to man but inferior to man. Apparently, the theory, idea and theology about the limitation of women in the early times have been attributed to male dominated culture of the Jews as mentioned above and such passages include Gen.2:7, Ex.21:7, Ex.23:17. During the

building of the second Temple, women were highly restricted, not to appear in court as witnesses. For Akintunde (2010), the writings of the early church fathers contributed to the limited position of women. It was from the patriarchal culture that Christianity emerged; a society that places men in position of authority in marriage, society and government. The teaching of Jesus to his disciples to address God as Father in prayer confirms the patriarchal nature of the early Christian era. Therefore, since Christianity developed as a sect of Judaism in the 1st century and since man cannot be totally separated from his culture, the patriarchal idea has, therefore, become part of today's christianity. (Aina, 1998). The writings of the early church fathers reveal much about the status of women in the Christian time, these fathers read selected Biblical passages to nail women as inferior to man, prominent among their claims is the role of Eve in the fall and her being created out of Adam (James, 1999).

Subsequent writers and scholars of the 13th century were influenced by the works of the early fathers. Saint Augustine was not in support of the ordination of women in the church

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because he sees them as less spiritual being, meaning that women are to be excluded from priesthood. Therefore, they cannot exercise the functions of leadership involved in the work of a priest. Luther the founder of Protestantism submits on the status of women that the whole female body was created for the purpose of nurturing children, stressing that women were to be silent, obedient and to perform household task. The purpose of women's education was the development of an accepted concept of marriage and training in domestic skills. The only notable change, according to Gilbert (2006), was that women were encouraged to study the Bible in vernacular language so as to be a biblical influence on the husband and the children. Majority of protestant Churches upheld the traditional position of woman inferiority and restricted preaching and ruling roles within the Church to men until the 20th century. From the above it is clear that subordination of women has a long history due to the aforementioned factors, and these have really affected the status of women in their participation and contribution in theological matters and in the ministry of the Church. But one fact remains that they were active in the days of Jesus and the time of Paul (MaChaffie, 2006)

2. Women in the Days of Jesus

Unlike in the Old Testament Era, Women were given much recognition in the few years of Jesus, The New Testament refers to a number of women in the inner circle of Jesus to indicate Jesus' recognition of women status in the Church, the community and the need to maintain that, though these women who worked with Jesus had assumed no leadership role but they were so recognized unlike in the Old Testament time when women were seen but not to be heard (Christopher, 2006).

To Blainey (2001), women seem to be more influential during Jesus time, his kindness towards them was always met with serious oppositions by those who vehemently upheld the traditions of the Fathers, The most striking thing about the role of women in the life and teaching of Jesus is the simple fact that they were there, though the gospel texts contain no special sayings repudiating the view of the day about women. Their uniform testimony to the presence of women among the followers of Jesus and to his serious teaching of them constitute a break with tradition which has been described as being without precedent in contemporary Judaism. While some argued that in changing the status of women, Jesus was equating women with men, especially in domestic affairs. But Hurley, as cited by Blainey (2011) opines that Jesus did not look at women in terms of gender but that he considered them in terms of their relationship to God.

Evans (1983) discussing on the changing status in the days of

Jesus, believes that the numerous healings of women attested to Jesus' care and concern for women, though such are briefly recorded. Examples are, healing of Peter's mother-in-law, concern for the widow of Nain, healing of a woman who was bent for eighteen years, etc. Jesus, unlike the men of his time and culture, taught that women were equal to men in the sight of God, that love, grace and forgiveness are opened to women and that women would be participants in the kingdom of God; these were revolutionary ideas and many of his disciples were shocked (Evans, 1983).

The change in the status of women in the days of Jesus did not necessarily give them notable leadership roles, instead Jesus seemed to redefined it that though one may not be in a pronounced leadership position the worth, dignity and love accord her show how she is perceived in the community and thus this perception is based on her ability and not just gender.

3. Women in the Time of Paul

Paul is considered a controversial figure in the issue of women, their roles and their status in the church, as a result of some of his writings which gave clues to what the status of women was in his days: that of subordination within patriarchal setup (Ojo, 2009). Oduyoye (1976) believed that Paul was writing about women from different perspective. However, a critical study of Paul's writing and the historical background suggest that Paul might not necessarily have limited the status of women to that of submission; it could be that Paul wrote because of the situation at that time, and having in mind the culture and tradition of that time. At a later time while it seemed that Paul was trying to recognize few women, he commended with great affection Phoebe, (Rom.6:11) Priscillia, Junia and Nereus' sister (Rom.16:3, 7, 15), Paul called Euodia and Syntyche his fellow workers. All these go to show that the status of women changed slightly before the death of Paul from absolute silence to active roles in the church. Though not pronounced, these women actually ministered in supporting the roles of the Church much as the men did during the time of Jesus (Grudem, 2004).

4. Women in the Contemporary Church

In recent time, the roles and status of women have changed gradually from subordinates to main leadership roles; the advent of Pentecostalism has been identified as a major factor. They believed that only men are eligible to the gifts of God including church leadership, but later situation started changing and roles are given to women. For example we have women superintendents in the foursquare Church and women educators in Pentecostal Colleges and Seminaries

(Blumhofer, 1985).

The status of women is changing because women are now enrolling in Bible colleges. According to 1993 statistics, 45% of women enrolled for seminary degree in the USA; an indication that women are now very conscious of leadership roles in the Church (Wetmore, 1993). Robeck (1988) concludes that this will give women great confidence in their calls through proper understanding as well as preparing them on how to encounter what comes their ways. Female theologians are also trying their best to give a very good interpretation to issues that concerns women.

Despite the positive changes, there are still conflicting issues as they have much at stake in maintaining these roles, as few husbands do not support this. A well known woman in Pentecostal history named Aimee McPherson who was widowed once and divorced twice was not really accepted because divorcing twice was seen as scandalous. But this did not affect the ministry as she did not take her personal problems with her to the pulpit, she was an exceptional woman supporting the course of Pentecostalism, with the gift of healing that overcame whatever misgivings her congregation may have had about her personal life (Walsh, n. d). This point to the fact that scandal or misunderstanding can be overcome if the person involved remains steadfast particularly in the Church community.

The recent vote of the Church of England against the ordination of women bishops and against the ordination of women into priesthood by the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion is an evidence of some of the challenges facing the status of women in the contemporary church. Olademo (n. d) attributed these challenges to the issues of ethnicity, culture and other social issues. Nevertheless, she posited that leadership roles for women in the church have been on a steady improvement. Among Africa Independent Churches, female leaders often have influence; are able leaders with prophetic gifts that have left good marks in the African context. Among such are Dr (Mrs) Babayemi of Jerusalem Church of the Lord Ado-Ekiti, Marie Lalom of Ivory Coast, Chanza Mai of Zimbabwe, Ma Nku of South Africa, Maria Aoko of Kenya, Alica Lakwena of Uganda etc..

One other factor that gave positive changes to women in religion is the feminist movement. This movement is wrestling with male counterparts in order to give a very sounding interpretation to issues that concern women. It is seen in different literatures, especially the Bible, Sotunsa (2008), sees Christian feminism as that which recognizes the strength of women, her ability and an endowment to perform based on the abilities, the will to do and not on gender. This movement has therefore created awareness among female Christians on the need for self recognition, actualization and

development of God's given talents in their lives.

Re-interpretation of Biblical passages that deal with women, her status and roles has also contributed to the change in the status of women within religious circle.

5. Conclusion

It is not an overstatement to assert that from the beginning, the status of women in the Christian religion has never been stable, but changing as time, education and situation dictate; gradually changing from male dominated, super slaves, less active in the house of God to Sunday school teacher, to lay readers, to church wardens, to deaconess and to Church founders. Women are now major contributors to the growth of the Church. Despite the socio, economic and cultural factor militating against the actual positive and progressive recognition of the strength and ability of the women, it is still evident that women have and will continue to do well in religious circle and expansion of Christian religion.

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