

## The Role of Women in the Church in Africa

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### **Introduction**

What is Ministry, and can the African woman have a meaningful ministry in the church? Is ministry to be considered “a form of vocation coincident with ordination; or ... viewed as a more creative possibility when not entangled by the institutional demands of ordination?”<sup>1</sup> Whatever our understanding of the concept of ministry, the number of women desiring to serve in the church today is on the increase and many seems unwilling to walk only within the set established boundaries of the church. Many women are asking questions about the present style of theological education and the ministry that this sort of education prepares them for in the church.

There’s no doubt that this topic is a big one, hence the restriction to Africa (but I realize even then that Africa as a constituency is still a huge focus). When it comes to theological debates and discussions about the ministry of women in the church in Africa, what we hear is often the voice of the small minority that has had the privilege of western education; these have come to be the voice of the millions out there in the rural heart of Africa.

I have the privilege of being part of the faculty of an Evangelical Bible College in Africa, training pastors for Evangelical churches. Although the College is an interdenominational one, many within the church and college community could not understand why I as a woman was allowed to teach in the College. These soon made it clear that it was unacceptable and if they had a choice, they would have asked me to join the Women’s department of the church to help teach the women. Was the problem doctrinal or that the culture has been bridged? Perhaps it was a bit of both? But why was it alright that I could teach the women, teach in the Sunday School or even speak at meetings in and outside of the church but not preach on a Sunday or teach at the Bible College?

I believe there are others out there with perhaps more pertinent questions than I had years ago (and still have) ...

- \* Is the Gospel really ‘good news’ for the African woman?
- \* Is there discrimination within the church when it comes to women being involved in ministry?
- \* Who decides how a Christian is to use his/her gifts within the church?

The aim of this paper **is not to ‘ruffle the feathers’** or make a case for feminist theology, No, far from it, the goal is to draw our attention to some of the questions out there, and through this awareness stimulate thinking and initiate further discussion. How can women in Africa engage in meaningful ministry, and how can the African woman be part

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<sup>1</sup> Ziegler, J. H., (Ed)., “Women in Theological Education: An Issue Reexamined” in *Theological Education*, XI:2, Winter 1975, p.65.

of the mission of the church to fulfil the Great Commission?

In 1992, UNICEF reporting on the plight of women and children in the developing world observe ...

The developing world's women bear the care for its children, fetch and carry its fuel and water, cook its meals and shop for its needs, wash its clothes and clean its homes, and look after its old and ill. It is less widely known that women also grow and market most of the developing world's food, earn an increasing proportion of its income, and work, on average, twice as many hours a day as men.<sup>2</sup>

The perception of the Christian woman in the church must be more than described above. There's no doubt that within the mission given to the church, the African woman has a role to play, the question is how?

### **Biblical and Theological Basis for Women in Ministry**

The place to start is the Scriptures, to see whether we can establish a basis for women in ministry within the Church. What was the role of women in the Old and New Testament times and is there a model to follow for today?

#### **I Status of Women in the Old Testament**

In discussions on the role of women in the church, reference is often made to the creation account in Genesis. There are two creation accounts. First like man, woman was created in the **image of God** (Gen.1.26f), “‘man’ was ‘male’ and ‘female’; not ‘male’ as against ‘female’. Male and female in their God-given dignity and worth and in their essential humanity”<sup>3</sup> are equal beneficiaries of the divine image. In Gen.2, woman was made from man while Adam was made from dust. That woman was taken from man implies the concept of “subordination and submission even though equality and mutuality are also maintained because of being created in the image of God.”<sup>4</sup> The Old Testament seems to “distinguish between public and private spheres of life in looking at the relations between equality and mutuality, on the one hand and subordination and submission on the other hand”<sup>5</sup> [Abraham and Sarah (Gen.18.9; 21.12; Ps.45.13)].

In Israel, the status of a woman was directly related to her family; hence the unmarried woman was under the authority and protection of her father, but this “was a relationship of kinship and love, not ownership.”<sup>6</sup> Her status was higher than that of a slave but much lower than that of her brothers. A married woman on the other hand is subordinate to her husband and her role is “essentially that of a mother and homemaker, with her praise coming derivatively through the wisdom, influence and exploits of her husband and sons”<sup>7</sup> as we see in the woman of Proverbs 31. By the third century, Judaism had widened the traditional distinction between men and women. Women were seen as

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<sup>2</sup> Senavoe, J., “Ministry of Women in the Church: An Understanding of Some Prohibitions” in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, Vol.17:2, 1998, p.128.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Longenecker, R. N., “Authority, Hierarchy and Leadership Patterns in the bible” in Mickelsen, A., (Ed), Women Authority and the Bible: An Evangelical Breakthrough on the Biblical Debate, Basingstoke, Marshall and Pickering, 1986, p.67.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.68

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

largely responsible for God's curse on humanity following the Fall. In the synagogue, women were separated from men, and in the homes, fathers instructed the children in the Torah and led family worship.

## **II Status of Women in the New Testament**

What we have in the NT about the status of women is not only diverse and complex, but in some cases perhaps contradictory. There are some statements and actions that seem to promote equality and mutuality between the sexes while others lean towards subordination and submission of women to men. The distinction between the private and public spheres of life in the NT is blurred unlike what we have in the OT. In the NT, we see that not only is the male and female equal in creation, they are also equal in salvation.

**The attitude of Jesus towards women** was different from that of his contemporaries. He treated women not with the gender discrimination of his day but as persons. Jesus welcomed and taught women unlike the Rabbis who doubted the ability of women to learn the Torah. Many women supported his ministry with their resources (Lk. 8.2f; Mk.15.41). He ministered love and healing to women also as we see in the healing of Peter's mother in-law (Mk.1.29ff), raised Jairus' daughter from the dead (Mk.9.18f, 23-26), etc. "Jesus imparted to women a new dignity and role. In so doing, he set a pattern for all his followers."<sup>8</sup> He sent the women away as resurrection witnesses to the disciples contrary to cultural barriers that make the witness of women unreliable.

Most of the explicit references that we have to the status of women in the NT are in **Paul's letters** (except 1Pet.3.1 – 6). The various arguments for and against the role of women in ministry are largely based on Paul's writing and the way people have come to interpret these. Largely, the arguments border on **hermeneutics and culture**. So how are we to interpret and reconcile these texts for our situation? Marshall suggests some thoughts that we should keep in mind as we consider some of these texts.<sup>9</sup>

- we must understand that, some parts of the texts are historical (i.e. they describe what happened in the Early Church), while other parts are doctrinal (in that they lay down principles to follow). The question is can we deduce principles from the historical examples in the NT?
- how are we to apply NT teachings (given in specific circumstances and within a particular cultural setting) to the church situation today? Is there an underlying principle behind the expression seen in the text?
- we must also remember that the practice of the early Christians varied in different churches and at different times.

## **III Status of Women in the Early Church**

The picture of women in the early church is basically what we have in the writings of the Apostles and the Early Church Fathers.

**At Pentecost**, when the Holy Spirit came, all were filled with the Spirit (Acts 2.4, 17f)

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<sup>8</sup> Longenecker, R. N., "Authority, Hierarchy and Leadership Patterns in the bible" in Mickelsen, A., (Ed), Women Authority and the Bible: An Evangelical Breakthrough on the Biblical Debate, Basingstoke, Marshall and Pickering, 1986, p.72.

<sup>9</sup> Marshall, I. H., "The Role of Women in the Church" in Lees, S., (Ed)., The Role of Women, Leicester, IVP, 1984, pp. 177f.

and spiritual gifts were given irrespective of gender (1Cor.12.11). **NT evidence** suggests women had same roles as men in the Church. **Paul and Acts** seem to show that “the difference of gender did not necessarily lead to difference of roles in the early church.”<sup>10</sup> Like men, women made valuable contributions to the growth of the church using their gifts. They were empowered by the Holy Spirit for service.

- Phillip’s four daughters were prophetesses (Acts 21.9).
- women were teachers – Priscilla and Junia. (1Cor.11.5).
- Priscilla with her husband Aquilla were co-workers with Paul (Acts 18.24ff).
- Euodia and Syntche were leaders in the Philippian church, they too worked with Paul (Phil.4.2f).

**During the period of the Apostolic Fathers**, there is no account of women exercising charismatic ministry. It would seem the important work of women during this period “was in the home, and concerned proper training of their children.”<sup>11</sup> The **Didache** has records of deacons and bishops as men, but no account of women in ministry. The only reference we have about women is **Clement of Rome’s** writing around AD 96 to Christians in Corinth, and this only about household matters and their character. It is also significant that none of Ignatius’ seven letters written on his way to martyrdom encouraging the church mentioned anything on women in ministry within the church.

#### **IV Contemporary Situation**

The roles of men and women in societies all over the world are changing because of the global socio-cultural, economic, and political changes taking place and the issue of gender is not left out. In the light of this, many believe there’s the need for a “fresh biblical and theological reflection on gender ... in this situation in order for the church not to lose capable, gifted and motivated women (or men) and so that it can best fulfil its task as the light of the world today rather than come to be judged as irrelevant or outmoded.”<sup>12</sup>

I have the privilege of three church backgrounds and in all of them, women in meaningful ministry within the church range from none to very minimal. I want to focus on the one I am particularly involved in at the moment (because I have spent more time there since my little theological exposure). The life of the church revolves around its departments, and the Women’s Fellowship Department is an important one. The department runs under the leadership of one of the older matured women, who until recently was without any theological training. When more women began to seek theological training with church approval, they automatically came under this department on graduation. But there is a limit to the number of trained women that can serve under this department not least because of who will pay their little salaries. Once a year, the church designates a Sunday as the Women’s Fellowship Sunday. On that Sunday throughout the denomination, the pulpit is given to the women to lead, preach and share their vision. That’s about all that

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<sup>10</sup> Gundry-Volf, J., et.al., “Recognizing God’s Purpose for Gender Distinctives in Marriage and Family Life, Church and Society” in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol.21:1, Jan. 1997, p. 44

<sup>11</sup> Ryrie, C.C. *The Role of Women in the Church*, Chicago, Moody Press, 1970, p.100.

<sup>12</sup> Gundry-Volf, J., et.al., “Recognizing God’s Purpose for Gender Distinctives in Marriage and Family Life, Church and Society” in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol.21:1, Jan. 1997, p. 34.

the trained (and untrained) women of the church get to do in terms of ministry and the use of their gifts. Why is the Sunday School and the Women's department, the only place a woman can minister? I believe the women can do more. This church is one of the stakeholders of the College where I am teaching.

Is the situation with regards to the role for women in our churches in Africa in anyway linked to or influenced by the training provided for church leaders in the Theological Institutions? Theological Education, and the church in Africa would appear to male-dominated institutions and women who find themselves in the systems have to justify their presence if they want to be more than 'passive' members. Why does the woman in the church need more than a membership card some would quiz? But if theology is about relating the faith to who and where we are in life, then the woman needs more than a membership card in the church. Some are of the opinion that because "theology has largely been determined by and written from male experience"<sup>13</sup>, the realities, experiences and understandings characteristic of women are often not taken into consideration in theological education.

Is the traditional theological education therefore incomplete as it does not wholly represent God's nature? The Theological Education on offer must help the church in Africa so in turn it can help women realize their potential as God intends, otherwise the Gospel will be incomplete for the woman.

The Women's Centre for Theologizing in the USA believes that not only has "the church fail to encourage women to become the full persons they can be in witness and in true service in action"<sup>14</sup>, Theological Education is also not addressing ways by which it can adequately equip women to be a functional part of the Church and yet the number of women entering into Theological Education (and Seminaries) continues to rise in the last 30 years. The question is – for what are these women being trained? Placement on completion of their training is an issue. Many go out with missionary organizations into the mission field, a few perhaps are able to join the leadership in the church, but this is more of the picture in the West. It is a different picture in Africa. If I had gone on my own to the same Bible College that I am now offering to teach even if for nothing, they are unlikely to be enthusiastic at my offer. Today I am there with my husband, perhaps my acceptance is really on his ticket and I often wonder whether its not more of 'two for the price of one'!

But the map of the over one hundred years of missionary effort in Africa would not be the same if women missionaries did not respond to God's call to Africa to labour and to die in the course of making disciples. The women came, preached, taught, planted and helped nurtured the churches we see today, many at the cost of their lives. "If a Seminary trains a substantial number of women, who in turn become resources which the church chooses to waste, then the time and effort of seminary faculty is being wasted

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<sup>13</sup> Clewell, S. R., et.al., "Women Theologizing: Naming and Claiming our Style" in Ziegler, J. H., (Ed.), in *Theological Education*, XI:2, Winter 1975, p.75.

<sup>14</sup> Clewell, S. R., et.al., "Women Theologizing: Naming and Claiming our Style" in Ziegler, J. H., (Ed.), in *Theological Education*, XI:2, Winter 1975, pp. 77 - 80.

proportionately including its financial resources.”<sup>15</sup> Should Theological Colleges be “pressing the church to recognize the contributions of these women (trained) and to make them an integral part”<sup>16</sup> of its ministry team! The church wants to be seen to be progressive, so women are reluctantly encouraged to train, but only in ‘specialised ministries’ like Christian Education, Children’s Ministry, Women’s Development etc. Ellison hopes women are not being admitted simply to fill up the seminaries!

Perhaps at this point we should look at some of the passages in Scripture that is often used for and against women in ministry.

## V Biblical Passages used against Women in Ministry

1. “... It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” **Genesis 2.18** – Some see this verse as opposing women in ministry. A woman is a ‘**helpmate**’ and no more, and as a helper she cannot be in ministry or leadership. The term helper has come to mean something ‘lower’, Adam was created first, only later was woman created to meet a need. But to think the creation of woman was an after thought “impugns God omniscience as if woman’s creation was an emergency measure to solve a problem which was not foreseen by God.”<sup>17</sup> Our understanding of the word ‘helper’ must not be coloured by our “cultural ‘hearing aids’ where the concept is usually associated with words like subordinate, apprentice, servant, inferior, and second class.”<sup>18</sup> The Hebrew word used to describe woman here has the force of “equal and adequate to.” In creation, man and woman were made distinct but without differentiation as both were made in the image of God to complement each other.

2. **Vows – Num. 30.1 – 16** – The unmarried woman was under the authority and protection of her father, while for the married, of her husband. The father/husband can nullify vows made by their daughter/wife if they disagree. There are some who use this as a basis for disallowing women in ministry in the church. Perhaps, this is not a principle to follow as the practice is not renewed in the NT.

3. **Eph. 5.22ff** is another passage used to support the argument that women should not be in ministry. The issue here is about **authority and submission**. With the Fall came the corruption of God’s ideal relationship between Adam and Eve, and between God and mankind. Those who reject these verses as untenable for disallowing women in ministry argue that it is not subordination that is referred to here but Christ like submission. The authority of men over women is as it relates to husband/wife relationship. “A husband has authority of headship over his own wife, not over all women... and this headship is a headship of love.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ellison, F. H., “A Modest Proposal” in Ziegler, J. H., (Ed.), in *Theological Education*, XI:2, Winter 1975, p.107.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>17</sup> Senavoe, J., “Ministry of Women in the Church: An Understanding of Some Prohibitions” in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, Vol.17:2, 1998, pp.132.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp.132f.

#### 4. Christ's relationship with the church –

A) **1Cor.11. 2 - 16.** "... the head of every man is Christ and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God ..." vv.3ff. This passage is sometimes used to define a hierarchy that means men are over women and so cannot be instructed by a woman.

Paul was instructing about appropriate worship because of some of the excesses of women in the church who were using their new found freedom to flout certain cultural conventions and in the process were causing offence for the Gospel. Some of their behaviour was reminiscent of pagan worship. Longenecker believes it's because women were already taking part in public worship at Corinth (with Paul's approval) that the problem of **how** they are involved now was reported to Paul for further instruction. "It was not a question of women praying or prophesying in the congregation, but rather the manner in which they did so."<sup>20</sup> Paul admonished that on the basis of creation, there should be subordination of women in worship, but on the basis of redemption there is equality. Hierarchical distinctions did not necessarily lead to functional distinctions as elsewhere Paul talks about all being ministers of the new covenant (2Cor.3.6; 5.19f).

B) **1Cor. 14.33ff.** "... as in all congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission ... for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church." This is a clear indication against women participating in leadership in the church. But these verses are part of a wider section. Paul was concerned with the way spiritual gifts were being misused instead of for the edification of the Church. For each of the disorders, "Paul had an injunction to silence ... and each of them is conditional, not absolute."<sup>21</sup> That all women are banned from ministering in the church because of the disruptive behaviour of wives in the Corinthian church seems an unlikely understanding, given that elsewhere, Paul admonished women for exercising their spiritual gifts (Phoebe, Priscilla, Euodia and Syntyche whom he described as fellow workers - Rom.16.1ff; Phil.4.2f). Snodgrass views 1Cor.14.33b – 36; 1Tim.2.11 – 15 "as statements necessitated by specific problems in Corinth and Ephesus respectively."<sup>22</sup>

#### 5. The Pastoral Epistles – 1Tim.2.9 – 15; Tit.2.3ff

"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. ..." While this is the clearest text against the participation of women in preaching, teaching or exercising authority in the church, we must also remember that this is part of a bigger motif (vv.9 - 15) which focuses on "what is appropriate behaviour for women and for domestic life."<sup>23</sup> Paul's concern here is for the reputation of the church within the wider society, a concern that is

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<sup>20</sup> Longenecker, R. N., "Authority, Hierarchy and Leadership Patterns in the bible" in Mickelsen, A., (Ed), Women Authority and the Bible: An Evangelical Breakthrough on the Biblical Debate, Basingstoke, Marshall and Pickering, 1986, p.72.

<sup>21</sup> Senavoe, J., "Ministry of Women in the Church: An Understanding of Some Prohibitions" in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, Vol.17:2, 1998, pp.135.

<sup>22</sup> Snodgrass, K. R., in Mickelsen, A., (Ed), Women Authority and the Bible: An Evangelical Breakthrough on the Biblical Debate, Basingstoke, Marshall and Pickering, 1986, p.180.

<sup>23</sup> Scholer, D. M., "1Timothy 2.9 – 15 and the Place of Women in the Church's Ministry" in Mickelsen, A., (Ed), Women Authority and the Bible: An Evangelical Breakthrough on the Biblical Debate, Basingstoke, Marshall and Pickering, 1986, p.197.

seen across the whole Pastoral Epistles (1Tim.3.7; 6.1; Tit.2.5, 8). 1Timothy was written to combat heresy in the church at Ephesus. Paul was addressing women who having been swayed by false teachings “are abusing the normal opportunities women had within the church to teach and exercise authority.”<sup>24</sup> Verses 11f should not be divorced from its immediate context of vv 9 – 15 nor from its wider context of 1 & 2 Timothy and all within the overall Pauline writings regarding the participation of women in ministry. Oden sees Paul as concerned with the virtue of quietness. Women are to learn with an **attitude** of an inner tranquillity that is honouring to God. “It is not that women in general cannot teach but that a woman cannot teach in such a way as to usurp authority over teachers already duly designated.”<sup>25</sup> Many of the NT writers “take Christian views and practice on gender to be informed by culture as well as by the gospel, for Christians cannot live their lives as if they were not woven into the fabric of the world around them which partly defines who they are.”<sup>26</sup> For Kroegen, the issue for Paul was more of the message being taught rather than the actual teaching process. From these discussions, we can see that NT teaching on gender distinctive is complex.

Christian freedom comes to expression within the particular socio-cultural contexts where Christians live, and thus it manifests itself to different degrees and in different ways, depending on how ‘hospitable’ those contexts are for such freedom. Further, when the gospel intersects with a culture it also transforms that culture and introduces new ways of thinking and practicing gender difference.<sup>27</sup>

## VI Biblical Passages used to support Women in Ministry

1. “... neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” **Gal.3.28**. Many in arguing for the role of women in the church focus on this verse believing it answers all the critics. But perhaps it does not answer all the questions, however together with other parallel writings of Paul (Rms.10.12f; 1Cor.7.17 – 27; 11.11f; 12.13; Col.3.9 - 11) Snodgrass believes the verse is more than salvation. Christ through his death has established something new “for each category, and each statement reacts against the old valuations. Gentiles, slaves and women are granted access and standing in Christ on the same footing and with the same valuation, privileges and responsibilities as Jewish and free men.”<sup>28</sup> Paul’s declaration has social implications in his day and for the early church. Ten times in 1Cor.7, he balances what he said about men with the same for women. “The wife’s body does not belong to her alone ... , in the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone ...” v.4. This was a revolutionary statement in the context of the culture of the day when it was absolute authority for men.

2. “From him the whole body, joined and held together ... as each part does its work.”

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>25</sup> Oden, T. C., “On Women and Men Working Together in the Church Who will Lead Us? Surely the One Whom the Spirit Gifts” in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol.26:2, April 2002, p.125.

<sup>26</sup> Gundry-Volf, J., et.al., “Recognizing God’s Purpose for Gender Distinctives in Marriage and Family Life, Church and Society” in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol.21:1, Jan. 1997, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.48

<sup>28</sup> Snodgrass, K. R., in Mickelsen, A., (Ed), Women Authority and the Bible: An Evangelical Breakthrough on the Biblical Debate, Basingstoke, Marshall and Pickering, 1986, p.178.



**Eph. 4. 16.** Each member of the Body of Christ is directly related to Christ, the Head. No one receives spiritual nourishment from Christ via another. cf. Jn.15.5ff. Each believer has confidence to enter into the presence of God through Christ, not through another, be it father or husband.

**3. The outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh** and the distribution of spiritual gifts without regard to gender at **Pentecost** and in the Early Church supports the new equality and reciprocity that Jesus ushered in for the community of believers. “Equality of status thus expresses itself in equality of function.”<sup>29</sup> Everyone is called and enabled to serve “not on the basis of race, age, gender, tribe, nationality or social standing. God does not discriminate in giving gifts to his people nor in empowering any of his children for effective service.”<sup>30</sup> Both the Old and the New Testament did not limit women to duties of family and household, men and women were given gifts to fulfil God’s purpose e.g. Othniel, Deborah, Huldah, Priscilla, Philip’s four daughters, the Samaritan woman (Num.11.29; 2Kgs.22.14; 1Cor.12.28; Eph.4.11) etc. Paul’s first convert in Europe was a woman – Lydia (Acts 16.9 - 15).

**4. In the Early Church**, we have evidence of women ministering in ‘house churches’ and working alongside the apostles. In Romans 16, Paul mentioned **10 women** co-labourers - Phoebe, Priscilla, Lydia etc. Nympha had a church in her home (Col.4.15) and so did Apphia and her husband (Phlm.2). Priscilla and Aquilla had believers meeting in their house, they also taught Apollos (Acts 18.2,18,24 – 28; Rms.16.1ff; 1Cor.16.19; 2Tim.4.10).

### **5. Examples of Women of Faith**

Kanagaraj describes **Mary the mother of Jesus** as “a paradigm for faith and faithfulness.”<sup>31</sup> At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, she demonstrated faith in him as the Son of God, Jesus was not just her son. Mary was an ideal disciple and a model leader. **The woman of Samaria**, “a theologian and missionary” opened up her people to the ministry of Jesus. The disciples, characteristic of the custom were surprised that Jesus was not only discussing with a woman, but a Samaritan woman. What Jesus saw in her was the corrupt ‘image of God’ that needs salvation. By her testimony, she brought others to faith in Christ even before the disciples were out on their missionary journey. **Mary and Martha**, were a ‘paradigm of service’ showed what is needed in the church today, “the paradigm for ideal discipleship and effective leadership in the church because they exhibited the qualities of devotion, sacrifice, submission, service, faith, boldness and of apostolic witness.”<sup>32</sup>

### **So why are trained African women not integrated into ministry in the church?**

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<sup>29</sup> Gundry-Volf, J., et.al., “Recognizing God’s Purpose for Gender Distinctives in Marriage and Family Life, Church and Society” in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol.21:1, Jan. 1997, p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> Senavoe, J., “Ministry of Women in the Church: An Understanding of Some Prohibitions” in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, Vol.17:2, 1998, pp.135.

<sup>31</sup> Kanagaraj, J.J., “The Profiles of Women in John: House-Bound or Christ-Bound?” in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol27:1, January 2003, p.28.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40.

Perhaps the truth of the matter is, generally men do not believe women have the essence of what it takes for ministry. But the issue should not be which gender serves, but who is gifted for a particular service. Sharing in leadership builds the church when “giftedness is the decisive factor rather than simply gender as such.”<sup>33</sup> All must be willing to work together in humility and mutual respect with the aim of building up the church. The problem today in Africa is that many women because of what they have experienced and see in their societies lack confidence and would rather remain in the background with their gifts than come forward to serve in the church. Many within the church influenced by the patriarchal societal assumptions “that women can better build up homes than the church”<sup>34</sup> are still uncomfortable with the idea that the church will be better for it if women are allowed meaningful ministry within it.

The women who encountered Jesus were bound to him rather than to their culture. Liberated from their male-dominated culture, they became model leaders in their community as they served empowered by Jesus through the Holy Spirit. The debate on the issue of the role of women in the church is largely influenced by **hermeneutics and culture**. When we come to the issue of biblical language, we must remember that man can only speak about God using “symbols, analogies and metaphors. All our language about God is relative, human and analogical. Biblical truths about God’s nature are unchanging; the symbols may change.”<sup>35</sup> The ministry of women within the church in Africa should not be the feminist approach of aggressiveness with women wanting what they consider is their right within the church; the issue is how the woman in Africa can best fulfil her role in the church as a useful member of the Body of Christ. While the church should not merely follow secular culture or the patterns dictated by society, it should however not lag behind where a society is moving positively in the right direction. Gundry-Volf and her team cautioned that “Christian understanding should not be driven by western patterns, not by those of radical feminists, for example, but by glad exploration of biblical teaching and illuminated application of it.”<sup>36</sup>

Is there a possible scenario in Africa where if the gifting is there, we can set aside personal preferences and culture for the sake of the Kingdom or these factors are priority for us? Kisau talking about the ‘African Heart’ refers to four layers<sup>37</sup> which unless we understand well, we are unlikely to meaningfully communicate the gospel to the real person.

- There is the conditioned layer where we have the African cultural values. This layer which has to do with how we perceive things is an important component

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<sup>33</sup> Oden, T. C., “On Women and Men Working Together in the Church Who will Lead Us? Surely the One Whom the Spirit Gifts” in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol.26:2, April 2002, p.123.

<sup>34</sup> Kanagaraj, J.J., “The Profiles of Women in John: House-Bound or Christ-Bound?” in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol.27:1, January 2003, p.27.

<sup>35</sup> Senavoe, J., “Ministry of Women in the Church: An Understanding of Some Prohibitions” in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, Vol.17:2, 1998, pp.131

<sup>36</sup> Gundry-Volf, J., et.al., “Recognizing God’s Purpose for Gender Distinctives in Marriage and Family Life, Church and Society” in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol.21:1, Jan. 1997, p. 34.

<sup>37</sup> Kisau, P., “The Key to the African Heart: Rethinking Missionary Strategy” in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, Vol.17:2, 1998, p.87

of person-hood and even when we become Christians; things here still influence our being.

- The religious layer reflects our spirituality and is closely related to the conditioned layer. For the African, nearly everything is done in a religious way, “from birth to death, an African life is celebrated in a religious way. Religion is part of African life. That is, it is almost impossible to separate one from the other.”<sup>38</sup>
- The accommodating layer accommodates things that are foreign to the other familiar two layers above. When an African is confronted with new ideas, he wrestle with it and tries to change it, if he cannot, he accepts it if he must, but this does not mean that the existing value system is replaced, rather “room is created for the new concept so that accommodation occurs.”<sup>39</sup> This happens all the time for the African given the harsh realities of his society.
- and the decision making layer takes the final decision for action informed by the three other layers. In an effort no to offend any of the layers, the decision tries to accommodate all the layers, in the end “what is said may not be what is done”<sup>40</sup> as in the case of the two brothers in the parable of Jesus in Matthew 21.28 – 31.

The question is has the message of the Gospel penetrated through all the layers of the African heart? The interplay between the four layers is not that straightforward. Often there is conflict in the mind of the person as he seeks to make decisions which must lead to an action. The cultural layer influenced greatly by community values and expectations is perhaps the most important factor to consider when it comes to decision making. “The community is a most important aspect for the African person, hence what others in the community think contributes immensely to the decision making layer.”<sup>41</sup> It is interesting that Kisau, an experienced African pastor and theological educator should refer to himself as “one who has been struggling with life in Christ, since the Christian life brings with it new demands for the already burdened heart.”<sup>42</sup> If the struggle within the heart of the African Christian has so much to do with culture, perhaps the issue of women in ministry is also largely coloured with the cultural glass through which the African woman is always perceived.

The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus ordained her first woman pastor in May, 2000. For Bekure B. Daba, this was 20 years after her graduation from the denominational Theological Seminary. She had served in various capacities before then. Today, the over 4-million-member church has six women among its 1,287 pastors, who serve in more than 5,500 congregations. “The challenges for women are many and factual, Daba says, but she is optimistic that Ethiopian Lutherans will have more women pastors and synod presidents in the future.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.88

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.90

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.lutheranworld.org/News/LWI/EN/1690.EN.html>, Nov. 2005.

In conclusion, instead of the general practice where our thoughts and decisions are guided by what our culture and society at large think and accept, perhaps the Bible should be our primary source. How did Jesus respond to situations like that when he was here?

As Christians, we are to express in our lives, in our churches and in society the fullness of God's revelation as expressed in Christ Jesus and not just to revert to OT patterns or first-century practices. That includes a fuller and more significant application of the gospel principles to the question of the status of women.<sup>44</sup>

I tend to agree with Johnson that we cannot on the basis of passages like 1 Corinthians "deny women full participation in any form of ministry that does not create a demonstrable social offence to their husbands or an impediment to the societies' acceptance of the Christian gospel."<sup>45</sup> If God has poured out his Spirit on all flesh, then "it will not do for us to erect a modern day 'court of the women' for our churches"<sup>46</sup>, not even our own interpretations and preferences which often come clothed in our cultures.

There are some in the church who are so concerned with the issue of women in ministry that attention has almost shifted from what should be the central focus of the church – the proclamation of the Gospel. Snodgrass warns against this trend, urging Christians to remember that

the right of women to minister is not the Gospel. The Kerygma must always center on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and freedom found in Christ. I am convinced that if that message is given its proper focus it will lead to the ministry of women as it did in the New Testament, but we cannot afford to substitute our issues for the saving gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>47</sup>

Paul appeals to principles when discussing the place of women in his writings. While women should not feel inferior in the church because before God they are equal to men, nonetheless, this equality does not dissolve the distinction between the sexes. "Just as the church has moved beyond the NT toleration of slavery to recognition that Christian principles forbid slavery, so too we with a good conscience accept a larger place for women in the ministry of the church than was possible in first-century society."<sup>48</sup>

There is a need for the church to respond to questions being raised by women in the church rather than ignoring them because they are considered irrelevant. Some believe that the church's passive response or lack of response "has contributed to and

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<sup>44</sup> Longenecker, R. N., "Authority, Hierarchy and Leadership Patterns in the bible" in Mickelsen, A., (Ed), Women Authority and the Bible: An Evangelical Breakthrough on the Biblical Debate, Basingstoke, Marshall and Pickering, 1986,p.85.

<sup>45</sup> Mickelsen, A., (Ed), Women Authority and the Bible: An Evangelical Breakthrough on the Biblical Debate, Basingstoke, Marshall and Pickering, 1986,p.72.

<sup>46</sup>Snodgrass, K. R., in Mickelsen, A., (Ed), Women Authority and the Bible: An Evangelical Breakthrough on the Biblical Debate, Basingstoke, Marshall and Pickering, 1986, p.181.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.168.

<sup>48</sup> Marshall, I. H., "The Role of Women in the Church" in Lees, S., (Ed), The Role of Women, Leceister, IVP, 1984, pp 195f.

exacerbated radical feminism.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, women groups raising questions and criticism of the church with regards to the role of women in the church must define them in terms of the Gospel.

### **Questions for Further Discussion**

1. Is one called because one is suitable to a traditional image created by the church?
2. If there is no discrimination in the distribution of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, why should there be discrimination in the ministry of the church?
3. Where should the change of attitude towards women in ministry begin, Church or Theological Training?
4. If the case is that church ministry needs women, then how is the Theological Education program to be modified to make it more relevant to women?
5. Are women being admitted into Theological Education simply to fill up the Colleges?
6. Are there obstacles that negates the full participation of women in ministry within the church, and if there are, what attempts are being made to remove them?

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<sup>49</sup> Gundry-Volf, J., et.al., “Recognizing God’s Purpose for Gender Distinctives in Marriage and Family Life, Church and Society” in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol.21:1, Jan. 1997, p. 35.