

The academic journal of CBE International

Priscilla Papers

Vol 39, No 3 | Summer 2025



Sexism and Racism

- 2 Racism and Sexism: The Groans of a New Creation
Mimi Haddad
- 9 Women, Leadership, and Ordination in the Anglican Church in Nigeria: Debating 1 Corinthians 14:26–40
Mercy Uwaezuoke Chukwuedo
- 17 Separate but Equal: The Great Lie Behind Jim Crow and Progressive Complementarianism
Greta L. Bennett and AJ Fletcher
- 21 War on Women: Roman Misogyny for Military Aim
Heather Preston
- 25 Book Review: Breaking the Silence on Women Leaders in the Early Church: A Review of *Excavating Women: The Archaeology of Leaders in Early Christianity*
Mimi Haddad

Priscilla and Aquila instructed Apollos more perfectly in the way of the Lord. (Acts 18:26)

Racism and Sexism: The Groans of a New Creation

Mimi Haddad

A lecture presented at “Time to Wake Up: Racism in the World Church,” a conference hosted by the George W. Truett Theological Seminary, February 2024.

Dear friends and colleagues at Baylor University and Truett Seminary: Thank you for these crucial and distinguished conversations on racism. It is truly an honor and pleasure to learn from you and to contribute some of my own experiences and observations as together we groan in eager expectation as Christ is formed in our lives, churches, and communities.

Lord, please give us guidance, attentiveness, and your Spirit’s power that we might be fully birthed—a new creation in Christ, our hope now and always. Amen.

If you are like me, your fingers tremble each day as you click to read world news, anxious about the atrocities documented since the day before. How many more children, elderly, and defenseless have been maimed, exploited, or killed as we slept comfortably, well-fed and in our warm, safe beds? Why have humanitarian aid, medical attention, protection, and justice been denied to certain groups while their perpetrators are not brought to trial in courts worldwide? Why are we silent as minors are unjustly imprisoned—in violation of international law—for their minor offenses? Where is the support from those with power and from countries with influence and resources to make a difference? Where is the church—we who claim to have the mind and power of Christ? Do we draw close to victims in prayer, lament, and action on their behalf? These are questions laid at our feet *today*, as the church in the West.

As the daughter of immigrants from an ancient branch of Christians arising from the mountains between Lebanon and Syria, I often gain

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wisdom and strength from our history, from our ancient Christian practices, traditions, and teachings. Though these may seem antiquated, foreign, or feeble, do not underestimate the impact they had in upending one of the cruelest forces in human history—The Roman Empire.¹ Rome, you ask?

Christians and Rome

If you are unacquainted with Tom Holland’s bestselling book, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, I highly recommend it to you.² A leading historian of antiquity, Holland describes, in excruciating detail, the manifold ways Rome exerted world domination through a ruthless brutality few dared to oppose. Rome’s capacity for exploitation, impunity, torture, and enslavement of entire people groups is legend. Resistance, of course, was useless, and anyone who tried became a deterring example to others. Rome was swift to torture and crucify opposition, large and small. Even more, Roman cities glorified torture and death as entertainment. Those who refused to offer public sacrifices to Roman gods became sacrifices themselves. Rome’s many victims were demeaned as ontological inferiors, “slaves and females” considered beings without souls, and were routinely denied protection. Those deemed useless to Rome were tossed over its city walls and, defenseless, became prey to wild animals. Infant girls were often left to die on city walls. You need a strong stomach to finish Holland’s book. *The fact that we find the history of Rome’s dominion horrifying is precisely and entirely Holland’s point!*

The idea that torture, domination, and exploitation prove disturbing to us today demonstrates the radical impact Christians had on Roman culture. The Christian ethic that forgiving one’s enemies, caring for the frail and defenseless, and valuing all humans as created in God’s

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Priscilla Papers (issn 0898–753x) is published quarterly by CBE International, 122 W Franklin Avenue, Suite 610, Minneapolis, MN 55404–2426 | cbeinternational.org | 612–872–6898 © CBE International, 2024.

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image was the unimaginable cultural transformation Christians forged with their lives. Holland goes on to show that, while many dismiss Christianity as arcane and even an obstacle in achieving justice today, they critique the church's failures through Christian values that are so much a part of our ethos that they are blind to its influence. Opposition to injustice, cruelty, sexism, and racism as evil, and demanding adjudication by legal systems—imperfect as they are—as pathways to justice for victims and perpetrators alike, through due process have deep Christian roots.

For Holland, the belief that all humans are made in the image of a loving, just, personal—even proximal—God who at the height of Rome's cruelty took on human flesh in Mary's womb, who lived, suffered, and died unjustly that we might find forgiveness and life abundant through the Spirit, is uniquely and entirely Christian. Supremely, in the example of Christ and his followers, we are left with accounts of the birthing of a new creation with its groanings inward and outward—the remaking of humanity and communities in the image of Christ.

Those of you searching for a research topic might consider analyzing the groanings of Christ's disciples and those Paul worked beside as their moral compass shifts. It is intriguing to observe their surprise, disgust, and offense as outliers and untouchables, those exploited because of gender or ethnicity, become the beloved of Christ. The groaning of insiders marks the birthing of God's new creation as cultural values and power shift in seismic ways, not only during the early centuries but also throughout history. As evil reaches new heights—here supremely we recognize our need for the Spirit's power to rebirth humanity once again.

fasting . . . and opportunities to lament the longstanding sins of patriarchy, the two-headed monster of racism and sexism.

Racism and Sexism: The Two-headed Monster of Patriarchy

The brutality of patriarchy is a double-edged sword for women marginalized by ethnicity and race. As journalist Adele Stan has written, "It's difficult to imagine a system more patriarchal than the one on which the U.S. economy was founded . . . slavery. Plantation owners raped the women they enslaved, then enslaved any children resulting from those assaults. . . . This is our legacy, the part we don't talk about. It courses silently through the veins of the body politic."³ Patriarchy's logic breeds male dominance and grows in brutality against women marginalized by race, tribe, and ethnicity. Seeking ultimate dominance, patriarchy's toxic ideas and deadly consequences share a common root—the dehumanizing of women based on their flesh—their gender and race—an evil that too often positions females at the margin. Indeed, this is a crisis we continue to face.

#MeToo and #ChurchToo

We have Tarana Burke from New York City to thank for launching the #MeToo Movement in 2006. An activist and community organizer, Burke's goal is the empowerment of Black girls and women to confront their abusers and defend themselves. Burke has devoted her life to addressing the systemic abuses that women of color face.

This graph shows a thirty-three percent increase in the number of homicides for Black women from 2019–2020.

Black women and girls had the second highest homicide rate increase from 2019 to 2020



*Guardian graphic. Source: CDC. Note: White, Black, American Indian/Alaska native, and Asian/Pacific Islander categories are all non-Hispanic. Homicides include all ages, and legal intervention killings.

Intriguingly, Scripture uses feminine metaphors to describe God's character, particularly the remaking of humanity in the image of Christ! Just as women groan in labor, so too the Spirit's work within us. Scripture's birthing images depict, through women's experiences, the power of God's Spirit bringing forth our "newness of life." Of course, the birthing process is always fraught with danger, mess, blood, fear, and hours and hours of pain. While not all women give birth, all people have been birthed, and sisters, mothers, aunts, and friends describe the massive effort of body, spirit, and mind that robs women of comfort and sleep as the newborn tears through their bodies, taking on a life they had part in creating. That is why the birthing metaphors so perfectly describe our journey as Christians—as we are remade through much groaning as the Spirit separates us from our dependency on lesser gods in taking on life abundant in Christ. The painful groanings of our rebirth are supported through spiritual disciplines of confession, communion, prayer,

While Burke, Stan, and others rightly recognize the horrors women have encountered in a country that has socialized and normalized patriarchy and racism through more than 245 years of U.S. slavery, followed by the brutal practices of segregation—as it continues in many forms today worldwide. Yet we find comfort, wisdom, and power knowing that Jesus challenged the two heads of patriarchy—sexism and racism—centuries ago.

The Samaritan Woman (John 4)

Is it not significant that Jesus, early in his public ministry, reveals himself as Messiah to a woman considered an outsider to Israel? Seeking her out is a frontal challenge to Greek, Roman, and Jewish assumptions that gender, class, and ethnicity determine value, belonging, and vocation. Waiting for her in the heat of the day, when the disenfranchised fetch water, Jesus speaks with a woman from a hated tribe and holds the longest conversation recorded in

Scripture. As a Jew asking a Samaritan for a drink, Christ exposes her tribe's marginalization. Asking for her husband, Jesus reveals her exploitation by numerous men. As with God and Hagar, Jesus is the God who sees (Gen 16:13). He is a personal, loving God who is closer to her than she is to herself. Jesus declares to her that he knows and cares about her story intimately. Christ's welcome to her "amazes" (*thaumazō*, "marvel, amaze," John 4:27) the disciples, and thus begins the inward groanings of a new creation.

The disciples' response exposes their deeply held bias of tribal and male superiority. Yet, their surprise by Christ's intentional welcome of the Samaritan woman is also an encounter that shifts their moral compass as she too joins his beloved community, a member of Christ's new creation people. Even more, by disclosing himself as Messiah, Jesus enlists her as an evangelist to a hated people, knowing that she would do what any Jew or Samaritan might in response to his personal, loving revelation. She dashes, leaving her jar to tell her community she has met a man who sees, who knows all about her. He must be the Messiah! She becomes the first evangelist, proclaiming the good news that, lowly, outcast, and hated as she is, Jesus sees, knows, and laments her injustices. Jesus is proximal to her social location, and he enters in and heals her and her community. Several verses later we learn that many Samaritans come to faith because of her encounter with Christ. A despised woman brings the good news of her people's inclusion. Her groanings have been heard.

Her faith is miraculous and stands in stark contrast to the disciples.

The Syrophoenician Woman (Matthew 15 and Mark 7)

Like the Samaritan woman, Jesus travels outside Jewish territory, this time to Phoenicia, a country we call Lebanon today. Here Jesus encounters the Syrophoenician woman. Considered an unclean Gentile, the Jews viewed her people as "dogs"—as undeserving of God's gifts.⁴ Astonishing, then, that Jesus—a Jewish rabbi—approached her. But in response to his initiative, the disciples try to shoo her away (Matt 15:23)⁵—a groaning to be sure. Yet she is determined and begs Jesus to deliver her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus tells this suffering woman that he has come to feed Israel's children first, not the "dogs," meaning non-Jews. Testing her faith, as Jesus tested the disciples a few passages earlier before feeding the 5,000, Jesus raises the bar with her. In what some consider a cruel conversation, Jesus states the disciples' assumption: that he should feed first Israel's children. And who would expect faith in a woman from "the dogs?" That is Christ's point! To our amazement, her faith is strong, even stronger than the disciples. She leaps over the bar and says, "even the dogs eat the crumbs under the table!" Her faith is miraculous and stands in stark contrast to the disciples who had no idea how Jesus will feed the multitude with a few fish and loaves (a chapter earlier, in Mark 6:35–36). But not this woman from the "dogs"; she knows that a few crumbs are enough to heal her daughter. She too is God's beloved "child," and Jesus heals her daughter. Her response makes clear that the bread of heaven, Christ's body, is food for all, perhaps especially for the "dogs"—those who are hated and excluded. This woman stands as an example that women and outcasts have greater faith than the privileged, the people of Israel, and even the twelve men representing Israel's twelve tribes. The birth pangs and groanings of a new creation continue.

A Bleeding Woman Healed (Matthew 9, Mark 5, Luke 8)

Defying the logic of patriarchy that demeans female bodies and defiles men who touch them, Jesus agrees to heal the daughter of a synagogue leader who asks him, "Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live" (Mark 5:23 NIV). As Jesus and the disciples follow him through a crowded street, an unseen woman touches Jesus first. Ravaged by vaginal bleeding, depleted financially and isolated from human belonging and touch, she approaches Jesus from behind, like an untouchable. In desperation she reaches out, unseen, and her fingers brush the edge of his robe. It was her last effort for healing. And immediately, she no longer feels blood flowing between her legs! She is healed! As the blood stopped so does Jesus—proximity! He turns and asks, "Who touched my clothes?" And the disciples groan in confusion. Is it not obvious! "We are in a massive crowd. Many have touched you, Jesus." But her touch moves her out of the invisible margins and into the gaze of "the God who sees"—and also into the sight of the disciples and the crowd. What God sees, they too must see. Now front and center, she falls trembling at his feet and receives Christ's welcome as family. He says "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering" (Mark 5:34). With these words Jesus repositions a woman who has suffered twelve years, moving her from the shadowy margins as an untouchable into the welcoming sunlight of Christ's beloved community. Two daughters were healed by touch that day, but the one without privilege came first—a key moment in rebirthing women as human. Yet, there is more groaning that awaits the disciples as still another woman touches Jesus.

A Woman Anoints Jesus (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 7, John 12)

In all four Gospels we find a story of a woman who anoints Jesus. Using a costly oil, she pours her expensive treasure on Jesus, an extravagant service that enrages onlookers. They believe the oil should have been sold to feed the poor. What the woman understands, but they do not, is that her anointing prepared Christ for his greatest work of all, a death on a Roman cross. "She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial" (Mark 14:8). So, like the priests in the OT, this woman anoints a king of Israel—the greatest king in all of history, for a death that constitutes the crowning achievement of all kings. While Peter could not accept Christ's death on a cross (Matt 16:22; Mark 8:32), this woman does. Hers is the greatest priestly anointing in history—the responsibility of a woman.

These Gospel stories consistently demonstrate Jesus's faithfulness to Israel, inviting them first to the marriage feast of the lamb—an invitation they do not always value or accept. In contrast, we find women marginalized by gender, ethnicity, and illness who by their courage, faith, and leadership put themselves on the guest list, insisting that they too be included, healed, fed, and empowered to serve. While Jesus welcomes their faith and initiative even as it exceeds that of the Twelve, we watch the disciples groan as untouchables become a new creation and join God's beloved people. And the groaning continues in the ministry of Paul—who was himself an elite leader among the Jews.

Paul and Peter

A leader with enormous privilege both by birth and achievement, Paul's encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road alters the sense of privilege he held for his ethnicity, heritage, and achievements, counting them as rubbish and exchanging them for a new status, that of a slave (Acts 9:1–19; 22:6–21; 26:12–18). Paul had not participated

in Pentecost—the birth of the church—with the Holy Spirit filling “Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs” (Acts 2:9–11 NIV). It is a giant inclusion of ethnicities, ages, and both women and men, events that were “amazing” and “perplexing.” Onlookers believe they are drunk! Peter, having done much groaning, explains to his fellow Jews that what they are witnessing is the fulfillment of the prophet Joel’s prophecy, that young and old, male and female of many ethnic and racial groups are uniting as a new creation community through the Holy Spirit.

Galatians 3:28, a Rebirth

Like Jesus, Paul also serves beside women, ethnic minorities, and slaves—his coworkers in the gospel. Hence, Andronicus and Junia are prominent among the apostles (Rom 16:7). In fact, the majority of leaders Paul mentions in Rom 16 are women, slaves, or “dogs”—non-Jews. Reframing authority and power in terms of belonging, kinship, and love, Paul returns to Philemon his slave Onesimus—whom Paul calls his beloved son—someone of instrumental use to Paul during his imprisonment. Even more, he identifies Onesimus as a brother, an equal in Christ, and asks Philemon to forgive his debt which Paul will repay, confident that Philemon will do even more. Love wins out and Onesimus is freed, for history teaches that Onesimus becomes Bishop of Ephesus—a city once famous for its worship of Artemis but now under Onesimus’s giftings and leadership, the city becomes a thriving center of Christian faith.⁶

This story and others demonstrate the centrality of Gal 3:28, considered Paul’s heartbeat—a summary of his theology and practice.⁷ The passage states, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ” (NIV). For Paul, Christ inaugurates a new creation ethic so that the value and privilege of Jewish, freed males is now the that of the “dogs”—the non-Jews, the slaves, and last of all, women. It is fascinating that Gal 3:28 is incorporated into early Christian liturgies⁸ and carved on baptismal fonts that are shaped like wombs, making Paul’s point! Dead in sin, we enter our baptismal waters united to Christ in his death on our behalf.⁹ We then rise in newness of life with Christ victorious over sin.¹⁰ Clothed in Christ, we are remade in his image, no longer valued and privileged by earthly standards but through our newness of life in the Spirit. It is our second birth that forms our true and lasting identity, purpose, and destiny. Stunningly, leading anthropologists consider this passage the most feminist of the texts we have from antiquity.¹¹ What is more, Paul lives this new creation ethic beside outliers and outsiders rendered so by their race, gender, and class.

Old Testament Women

Through these stories and others, Scripture shows how women demeaned by gender and race are called and used by God. Outsiders like Ruth the Moabite and Rahab the Amorite become insiders, and both are cited in Christ’s lineage. Confronting patriarchy’s dominance (Gen 3:16), made brutal through tribal and ethnic disparities, Jesus makes clear what patriarchy’s dominance obscures. Women and especially those degraded by race are equally created in God’s image (Gen 1:26–29), renewed in Christ (2 Cor 5:17), and empowered by the Spirit (Acts 2:16–18) for service to the church (Rom 12:6–8; 1 Cor 12:7–11; Eph 4:11–13) whom Paul calls his ministry coworkers.¹² Women too are equally recreated in the image of Christ as leaders in the church (2 Cor 3:18). This is

the work of Christ who absorbed, in his own flesh, sin’s ultimate dominance on Calvary.

Early Evangelicalism

As the early Christians lived in contradiction to Rome by forgiving their enemies, by rescuing and caring for girl babies and those deemed useless to Rome, they built hospitals, schools, and communities with vocations devoted to their care. The wealthy and educated lived and worked in proximity to those on the margins, breaking down barriers of class, gender, and race. Limping its way through history, groaning while being redeemed and while awaiting their full restoration, I am reminded of the writings of Lilius Trotter (1853–1928), a missionary to Algiers who herself encountered much groaning beside the women and children there. I love her faith as she celebrated the fruit of our groanings. She wrote: “Take the very hardest thing in your life—the place of difficulty, outward or inward, and expect God to triumph gloriously in that very spot. Just there He can bring your soul into blossom.”¹³

The wisdom of her faith is worth considering today. Lilius was steeped in the crucicentrism of early evangelicals.¹⁴ As historian David Bebbington observed, they were the most cross-centered generation of Christians in history.¹⁵ They preached and wrote extensively on Gal 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ. . . .”

The early evangelicals identified themselves as part of the mystical body of Christ. “The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20b NIV). Why was this passage so precious to them? Like the early Christians, they faced an increasingly cruel and abusive world, one in which certain Christians were deeply complicit. With the expansion of slavery and the trafficking of girls and women from Africa and Asia into the United States, prominent leaders also deceived and exploited poor rural families, convincing them to send their daughters to earn money in urban communities. The truth was, they were sold to brothels and chained to beds in the iron mines of Michigan, in over 500 lumber camps of Wisconsin, and in brothels in Denver. But their traffickers underestimated the power of Christ in the early evangelical women, who were proximal to the suffering of girls and women and were sometimes themselves both victim and rescuer, like Harriet Tubman (1822–1913). She and others rose victorious in Christ and, through the Spirit’s power, led others to freedom from within brothels and slave communities.

Most horrific in these circumstances were the Christians who either turned a blind eye or who were part of the trafficking network, including judges and legislators. The exploitation of girls and women too often went unopposed because slaves and women were viewed as inferior to men, largely through a misinterpretation of Scripture. Deemed lesser, slaves and women were treated as less. But the Spirit ignited revivals in slave communities and beyond, filling people with spiritual power and centering the cross in ways that broke down prejudice and exploitation.

The Welsh revivalist, Jessie Penn-Lewis (1861–1927), is one example. She wrote: “Christ upon the Cross of Calvary broke down the middle wall of partition. . . . He died that in Him there might be a new creation. . . . All divisions caused by sin cease in Him.”¹⁶

Paul’s context when writing Gal 2 concerned the groaning of Jewish believers over serving beside the “dogs,” the uncircumcised Gentiles, which resulted in significant conflicts and divisions in the Galatian church. Thus, Paul points to the cross—where all Christians

are reborn in Christ's image—a new being or ontology that reframes their old identity shaped by race, gender, and class. As Gordon Fee taught, soteriology, the work of Christ, becomes ecclesiology, the work of the church.¹⁷ The cross does not eliminate ethnic, racial, or gender distinctions because these bring a strength and vitality needed in the church, as seen in ministry of Jesus and Paul. Women, slaves, and non-Jews infused a needed capacity that the church might not have known otherwise. The same was true among the early evangelicals as God raised up leaders outside the dominant class in opposing slavery and women's subjugation. It was their belief that Calvary renewed human identity and purpose in Christ's image, extending new voices, hands, and minds to advance the gospel and social justice. Here are a few examples.

Sojourner Truth (c. 1797–1883) was one of the most gifted speakers of her day. Revered by Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Abraham Lincoln, Truth was deeply admired for her piercing logic as she challenged racial and gender prejudice. At the 1852 suffrage meeting in Ohio, Truth said that denying women the right to vote or preach because Christ was male ignored the fact (articulated by fourth-century theologians¹⁸) that it was Christ's humanity, not his maleness or his ethnicity, that made him the perfect atonement for all people.

Consider also the missionary doctor, Katharine Bushnell, MD (1856–1946). After working as a physician in China, Bushnell returned home to lead the U.S. Women's Christian Temperance Union's anti-trafficking work.¹⁹ After decades of exposing sex-slavery that all-too-often exploited women of color in the United States and abroad, Bushnell believed God was calling her to expose the root cause—racist and sexist assumptions based on a misreading of Scripture. Working to dismantle the two headed monster of patriarchy, Bushnell wrote:

So long as [Christians] imagine that a system of caste is taught in the Word of God, and that [men] belong to the upper caste while women are of the lower caste; and just so long as [we] believe that mere FLESH—fate—determines the caste to which one belongs; and just so long as [we] believe . . . the “he will rule over you” [Genesis 3:16 is prescriptive] . . . [then] the destruction of young women into a prostitute class will continue.²⁰

Brilliant thinkers, Sojourner Truth, and Katharine Bushnell confronted the theological patriarchy that exploited girls and women at ethnic and socio-economic margins.

Are we, as Christians, once again complicit in advancing shallow theology that values and prioritizes one group over another, resulting in a seismic slaughter of humanity?

Today

Today we face again a deeply flawed theological proposition that fuels horrific suffering in the Middle East—one I alluded to at the beginning of this discussion. Are we, as Christians, once again complicit in advancing shallow theology that values and prioritizes one group over another, resulting in a seismic slaughter of humanity? Why have so many ignored atrocities suffered by the people of the Middle East, one that has been ongoing for many decades? Do we justify it biblically, asserting divine sanction—the greatest authority one can evoke? Who suffers the most? It is always women and children!

According to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, in times of war, conflict, and displacement the vast portion of those who suffer are girls and women.²¹ We need a theological declaration of human rights that critiques distorted theological assumptions that foster abuse especially of those at the margins. Acknowledging we worship a God who sees, a personal, loving, and just God, flawed end-time theologies that undermine human flourishing must be critiqued historically, biblically, theologically, and socially. How can we walk in newness of life while fostering injustice and abuse among the very people our Lord welcomed as the beloved, even if it causes much groaning among us today. Let us remember that their inclusion disrupted prejudice among the disciples who groaned as the “dogs” were given bread they believed was intended first for the Israel's children. A voice from this region can give us much hope.

I would love to introduce you to Dr. Charles Malik (1906–1987), a Lebanese theologian and diplomat who, beside Eleanor Roosevelt, drafted the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Dr. Malik famously said, “The fastest way to change society is to mobilize the women of the world.”²² A member of my grandmother's Orthodox church in Ras Beirut, Dr. Malik was known to weep every time the name of Jesus was mentioned. A highly respected Christian diplomat, theologian, and leader, Malik was awarded fifty honorary doctorates. Invited to speak at the 1980 launch of the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center, the committee that issued his invitation likely regretted it once Dr. Malik finished his speech. Why? Though the occasion was celebratory, even triumphalist, Malik exposed the unwarranted confidence that had beguiled evangelicals and fundamentalists alike, who in his view had lost, rightly so, their moral and intellectual influence in the academy and broader culture. And, he said, it would take decades to recover the respect Christians had once enjoyed in the public square. There was groaning to be sure! His lecture was published in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*.²³

Malik's admonition moved a young scholar that day, Dr. Mark Noll, seated in the front row, to dash home to research and write a significant assessment of critical thinking among evangelicals titled, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.²⁴ Noll's book was followed by Ron Sider's, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why are Christians Living Like the Rest of the World*.²⁵ Like Noll, Sider also traced failed theological and historical reflection with its tragic impact on social justice—a failure further critiqued by Kristin Kobes du Mez in *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*.²⁶ Kobes du Mez's book was followed by Beth Allison Barr's, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*.²⁷ Clearly, other books will follow, to examine the groaning needed today in remaking the church in the image of Christ.

In each generation, the Spirit continues to lay at the feet of Christians significant opportunities to confront injustice, to groan in becoming holy, to lament abuse and prejudice, and to pray for wisdom in seeking redemptive ways to upend inequities and impunity. May we always address these biblically and theologically, with Scripture in one hand and world news in the other as our commitment to remain proximal with those who suffer as Christ once did.

Conclusion

While this may sound idealistic, even abstract given human enslavement, genocide, and exploitation today, especially as Christian leaders abuse and exploit women in churches with impunity, as #MeToo and #ChurchToo survivors note. Yet while we stare in the face of history (slavery in the United States, Apartheid in South Africa, the Third Reich in Germany, and more), lament

plays a critical role. Lament not only acknowledges our complicity and brokenness as sinful humanity. Lament also reveals our need for Christ's saving grace and the Spirit's power for healing and reconciliation. Even more, lament prioritizes empathy that helps remove obstacles to true and abiding reconciliation by resisting quick fixes to deep wounds too often rationalized or ignored. Lament helps open necessary space to sit with our complicity and pain, to wait on God's transforming power, and to seek wisdom of leaders at the margins who know best the logic of patriarchy and thus more viable, lasting solutions. Without collective lament we speak "peace when there is none" (Jer 6:14). Lament reserves a place for the groanings of Christ's new creation to be heard, not only in our present circumstances but as we are also inspired by previous generations who have groaned so faithfully and courageously. As the letter to the Hebrews states, let us consider: "the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (13:7 NIV).

Notes

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Women, Leadership, and Ordination in the Anglican Church in Nigeria: Debating 1 Corinthians 14:26–40

Mercy Uwaezuoke Chukwuedo

There are various views concerning Paul's writings on women. He is seen both as a misogynist and a philogynist. When we look at Pauline texts on women, we are left with the notion that Paul was not against women leadership because he walked closely with some women. However, we can still not help but wonder if at some point his Jewish patriarchal culture may have affected him. Paul encouraged women to use their spiritual gifts for the edification of the Church. Pauline texts abound that describe women as active participants in ministry such as Rom 16:1–16, 1 Cor 11:4–16 and at the same time texts that advocate the silence of women such as 1 Tim 2:11 and 1 Cor 14:33–35. It is needful to enquire, does 1 Cor 14:26–40 require for complete silence of women? This text is used to subordinate women in some parts of Africa, including in the Anglican Communion. Various perspectives exist on how the text is being interpreted and applied. However, this paper seeks to exegete the text and find out Paul's intention behind this text in writing to the Corinthian Church.

This paper is focused on the Anglican Communion especially the Church of Nigeria because the Anglican Communion is divided on the debate on women ordination based on scriptural texts, tradition and reason. The Anglican Communion is a religious body of national, independent and autonomous Churches throughout the world that adhere to the teachings of Anglicanism that evolved from the Church of England. In the Anglican Communion, a province is comprised of dioceses being headed by an Archbishop. It can be described as the smallest complete unit of the Anglican Church because it exists under a college of Bishops, each of whom with his clergy and laity is autonomous within a diocese. Many provinces ordain women to the three holy orders, viz; deacon, priest, and bishop. In some dioceses and provinces, women are ordained as deacons and priests and not as Bishops. Individual dioceses within provinces are left to decide into which order—the diaconate (deacons), the presbytery (presbyters or priests), or the episcopacy (bishops)—women in the pastorate should be ordained.¹

In the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), women's ordination is yet to be accepted, except as deacons with limited responsibility. Ordination is the rite by which the Church sets apart ministers, people whom it believes are qualified for the ministry of the word and sacrament.² Sacraments are only administered by those who are ordained. Ordination is made through discernment by the Church that one is called. God's call and training for the ministry are prerequisites for ordination. In the course of my doctoral research on "The Place of Women in the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion)"³ from 2014–2017, I conducted oral interviews to discover opinions of people concerning the ordination of women in the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion). I interviewed fifteen women and fifteen men. Only two persons supported the ordination of women. One is a priest and a lecturer, the other is a Lay Reader⁴ and also a University lecturer. None of the women I interviewed support women ordination. This is a clear indication that ordination of women in the Church of Nigeria is not in the church's agenda now.⁵ I discovered from my interactions with most of my respondents that the Bible and culture are tools used to exclude women from ordination. Most of my respondents are of the opinion that it is neither culturally nor biblically acceptable for a woman to lead men.⁶ 1 Cor 14:33–34 is one of such texts quoted to defend the exclusion of women from ordination.

Research Tools

Different approaches have been used in studying matters relating to women such as different feminism theories, egalitarian and complementarianism theories. Complementarianism and egalitarianism theories are examined in this paper to interpret the views surrounding women's ordination. They give an understanding of different ways by which scholars and Christians generally view ordination of women. To have a better understanding of ordination and women leadership in Nigeria, the study also brings to light the place of women in spiritual leadership among the Igbo of Nigeria, such as female gods (goddesses) and priests (priestesses).

Complementarianism—a euphemism for what is actually *hierarchicalism*—affirms that women are allowed to teach other women and children. Some complementarians (but not all) further affirm that women can engage in certain forms of public ministry, such as teaching and evangelizing unbelievers in a public setting. However, women may talk with Christian men about the Bible and Christian doctrine only in a private context (see Acts 18:26).⁷ Within complementarianism, women are frequently considered to be less rational, more gullible, and more susceptible to temptation, and thus are restricted not only from leadership in Church, but from any position of authority over any men in any sphere.⁸ Contrary to these views, Christian egalitarianism considers that men and women are equally created in God's image, equally responsible for sin, equally redeemed by Christ, and equally gifted by God's Spirit for service to be key biblical principles.⁹ Egalitarians do not believe that "gender differences have been abolished" but only that, building equally on the Creation narratives in Genesis and on NT passages such as Gal 3:28, "being male or female does not bring any disadvantage."¹⁰

Liberation theologians claim that the truth of the Bible is manifested in its liberating potential and that this truth is to be enacted by Christians through political and social praxis (action). The end goal of liberation theology is the realization of full economic and social equality and participation of all peoples in a utopian, harmonic and peaceful society.¹¹ Liberation theology focuses on the biblical message of God's mission to set humans free from bondage. In the light of oppression experienced by women and third world people, it seeks to communicate the good news of liberation. Liberation theology also includes the call for the emancipation of women in all spheres of life, including Church leadership.

Paul's intent in writing 1 Cor 14:26–40 is uncovered through exegesis. Scholars have noted that the worldview of Africans plays a major role in the understanding of the scripture. Religion is practiced within a culture. This shows that both religion and culture go hand in glove. Because we recognize that Africans had a religion before the inception of Christianity, I will also examine Igbo Traditional Religious belief and practice regarding female priests in order to draw an analogy and correlations between ordination of women in Christianity and Igbo Traditional Religion.

Women's Ordination Debate

Churches in Africa are divided on the debate of ordination of women. The issue of women's ordination has posed a problem in different denominations because of divergent interpretations of biblical texts.¹² Women are ordained in some of the African Indigenous Churches and Pentecostal Churches. Women are not restricted from ordination in the Methodist Church in Nigeria. A good number of women serve as deacons or priests and occupy other leadership positions. In the Church, every human person should be seen as an instrument for the accomplishment of the divine will no matter the gender.¹³ This is the essence of the human creation. Much has been written on matters relating to gender inequality, social injustice, and marginalization of women in Church leadership.

The Anglican Communion is divided into forty-two different autonomous provinces. Globally, as of January 2021, seven Anglican provinces (approximately 3% of global Anglicanism) ordained only men to all three of the orders, two ordained both men and women as deacons, sixteen ordained both men and women as deacons and presbyters but not as bishops, and twenty-two (approximately two thirds of global Anglicanism) ordain both men and women into all three of the orders.¹⁴ African provinces of the Anglican Communion which currently permit consecration of women as bishops include the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, the Episcopal Church of South Sudan, the Anglican Church of Angola and Mozambique, and the Anglican Church of Kenya.¹⁵ As of November 2023, all Anglican provinces in Africa ordained women as deacons, and "many of Anglicanism's most theologically conservative provinces now ordain women to the priesthood, including Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan, Rwanda, Tanzania," and the "Province of West Africa" (covering Cameroon, Cape Verde, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Senegal, and Sierra Leone).

Although an increasing number of women have been ordained in a number of Churches in various countries in the Western world and in Southern Africa, the case of the Church of Nigeria is still a subject under debate. The (Anglican) Church of Nigeria *does* ordain women as deacons, but reserves service in the diaconate and episcopacy to men.¹⁶ The restriction of women from ordination in the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) is premised on: Scripture, Church Tradition and Reason. On Church tradition, the ordination of women is seen as a deliberate violation of the tradition of the Church. Paul's teaching forbids women from exercising authority over men, it is argued, and that women should be subordinate in things pertaining to liturgical teachings and expression of doctrine.

In 1992, a bishop from the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), the Right Rev Herbert Haruna, ordained three women as deacons—Mrs. Beatrice Aciwunaya, Mrs. Hannah Bello and Mrs. Abigail Akinwade. The Right Rev. Joseph Abiodun Adetiloye, second Primate of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) reacted sharply, deeming the ordinations as irregular and nullifying them. Bishop Haruna faced disciplinary action and was retired compulsorily.¹⁷ In 2003, female graduates from Immanuel College of Theology wrote to the Provincial standing committee of the Church of Nigeria challenging the refusal to ordain women "whether the unjust state of affairs in which women are denied ordination, simply because they are women, should be allowed to continue." They presented the criteria for ordination that the Church should consider: faith in the Triune God, confession of personal salvation, moral probity and integrity, maintenance of a stable Christian home, active membership of the Church, adequate theological training and evidence of God's

Two main opposing sides in the women ordination debate are complementarianism (i.e., hierarchicalism) and egalitarianism.

call.¹⁸ In 2010, Archbishop Nicholas Dikeriehi Orogodo Okoh, fourth Primate of the Church of Nigeria, "endorsed the ordination of women as deacons" but strictly limited their ecclesial service as deacons to "specific purposes like hospital work and school services."¹⁹ The Church in Africa has frequently been characterized as "a church of women,"²⁰ because women not only provide the majority of church members but also do the most of the work. In the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), today women serve as "wardens, evangelists, lay readers, choir directors . . . among other leadership roles."²¹ Yet the Church of Nigeria has not as yet reconsidered its stand on the ordination of women.

The Female Ordination Debate: Theories and Theological Reflections

Different theories have been adopted in the study of women especially on the debate of female leadership. Two main opposing sides in the women ordination debate are complementarianism (i.e., hierarchicalism) and egalitarianism. Each presents arguments from theology, religion, sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, and anthropology to elucidate their propositions.²²

Complementarianism and Women's Ordination Debate

Complementarians are opposed to the notion of ordination of women.²³ Some Protestant Churches such as the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) and others object to the ordination of women on the grounds of biblical exegesis, Church tradition, culture, and/or reason. Complementarians use Scripture to exclude women from ordination and occupying some leadership positions in the Church. Complementarian theory holds that male and female were created by God as equal in dignity, value, essence, and human nature, but also distinct in role whereby the male was given leadership responsibility of loving authority over the female, and the female was to offer willing, glad-hearted, and submissive assistance to the man. Gen 1:26–27 makes clear that male and female are equally created as God's image, and are, by God's design, equally and fully human. But, as Gen 2 bears out, their humanity would find expression differently in a relationship of complementarity, with female functioning in a submissive role under the leadership and authority of the male.²⁴

The Roman Catholic Church and Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) are still not considering the ordination of women into priesthood.²⁵ On grounds of Church tradition, the contemporary Church cannot, it is argued, ordain women because there is a universal tradition against it. The argument from tradition is primarily a Catholic argument. They link ordination to a sacramental understanding of orders and sacraments that is connected to a particular understanding of apostolic succession. Contemporary ordinations are valid only if they can be traced through an unbroken chain all the way to the time of the apostles. Hence, an unbroken tradition is necessarily important because if someone is ordained invalidly, the chain of apostolic tradition is broken.²⁶

The Catholic objections of the ordination of women is because to them "only a male priest can represent Christ in the celebration of

the Eucharist. Specifically, presiding at the Eucharist, the priest acts 'in the person of Christ.' Since Jesus is male, only a male can play this representation role."²⁷ It is frequently argued that there is a strong connection between ordination of women and affirmation of male-male and female-female sexual practice. It is believed that one leads to the other and the Church should be cautious, never to give room to such. This "slippery slope" argument, however, has little logical cogency and less evidence. As noted above, many of the Anglican Communion's most theologically conservative and evangelical provinces are Africa provinces which ordain women as presbyters.

The Seventh Day Adventists (SDAs) have "debated the issue of the ordination of women to the gospel ministry for over a hundred years." In time past, "the decision has not been in favor of women ordination." Throughout most of the 1990s, leadership of the SDA was of the opinion that there is no "clear biblical basis" for the "support of the ordination of women."²⁸ They asserted that:

- The Bible is the standard for the practice of Christian faith both in the past, present and will continue to be our guide.
- There is a clear indication in both OT and NT that no women were ordained.
- Christ's model in the choosing the apostles provides the fundamental framework for ministry and its practice in the Christian Church within multicultural context of the expanding Church without introducing women's ordination. This serves as a good example to the present day Church.²⁹

SDA leadership recommended that since there is no biblical support for the ordination of women pastors, then the ordination of women elders should also not be considered. That implies that as from the action date, women shall no longer serve as elders. This position is held by many churches which are opposed to women's ordination. In recent times, the Seventh Day Adventists have given room for the ministry of women, including within leadership positions. Several women have been ordained in the SDA since 2012 after the Columbia Union Conference approved the ordination of women.³⁰ The Anglican Communion, on the other hand, is still divided on this. However, all hope is not lost. The Methodist Church in Nigeria has given women acceptance in all spheres of Church leadership. The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) may give consideration to the ordination of women in the near future.

Egalitarianism and Women's Ordination Debate

In practice, the hierarchical practice described above positions women as inherently inferior to men, contrary to scriptural teaching. Within Christianity, egalitarianism is a position based on the theological view that not only are all people equal before God in their personhood but there is no gender based limitations of what functions or roles each can fulfill in the home, the Church, and society. Most egalitarians affirm ordination of women.³¹ There is no valid biblical, theological, or traditional endorsement of the position to exclude women from the Gospel Ministry as ordained ministers.³²

The Methodist Church and Baptist Church in Nigeria uphold this theory as women are not excluded from priestly office and ordination. They argue that God calls people to leadership roles in the Church without regard to class, gender or race and all have equal responsibility to use their gifts to obey their calling. It is very astounding the giant strides and achievements that have been recorded over the years by women in the Church and secular world. In the NT, not only were women the recipients of Jesus' ministry (Matt 15:21–28; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 7:36–50; 13:10–17; John 4:7–30),

but they also served Him and the disciples (Mark 15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3). Some have argued that the ordination of women is not rooted in the Scripture since Jesus did not call any female among the twelve apostles. He did not ordain any man either if we are to judge based on today's understanding of ordination.

From the various definitions of ordination, one could see that those who are called by God into the pastoral ministry have the right to be ordained. Women who have the personal knowledge and evidence of the call of God on their lives have the right to become ordained after passing through the Church's discernment and ordination process. Ordination should be open to all regardless of gender as can be seen from Gal 3:28.

Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14:26–40

It is important at this point to uncover the reasons behind Paul's injunction to the women of Corinth to be silent. Seeing that the understanding of this passage has posed a problem to some Christians and scholars, it is necessary to investigate the meaning and message of 1 Cor 14:26–40 to the present Church. Is this text meant to subordinate women universally or was Paul trying to correct an error in the Corinthian assembly?

This text introduces something that not only seems unlike Paul elsewhere but also seems to contradict what he assumed in 11:4–5—that women prayed and prophesied in the assembly. Paul may have been influenced at one point or another as a Jew born into a patriarchal society. But 1 Cor 14 basically deals with confusion within the Corinthian assemblies. This confusion arose from chaotic exercise of the gift of tongues and prophecy. Paul offered guidelines for order in the worship meeting. 1 Cor 14:26–36 lists three groups of people who are disturbing the worship. These are as follows:

1. The prophets;
 2. The speakers-in-tongues;
 3. Married women who have Christian husbands in the Church
- These are told: don't ask questions during the worship; don't chat during worship; ask your husbands questions at home and be silent in the church.

The bone of contention is found in verse 34. An English word-for-word gloss of the Greek text gives:

the women in the churches let them be silent: not indeed it is allowed to them to speak, but to be in submission, as also the law says.

Commenting on contemporary interpreters of 1 Cor 14:34–35 (both complementarian and egalitarian), Anna Sui Hluan has demonstrated that "it is clear that their presuppositions have influenced their interpretations." She then argues that it is necessary for all of us to allow "the gospel to challenge one's presuppositions" and that interpreters of Scripture "must allow the gospel to challenge those influences that shape our understanding of Scripture."³³ The modern cultural readings which see in this text a biblical basis for woman's inferiority fit well with the prevailing culture. In patriarchal cultures, women are not seen as men's equal. The common belief in such cultures is that men are the peak of humanity, while women fall short. Today, those statements seem distasteful. This puts today's readers in a radically different place for interpreting passages like 1 Cor 14:34–35. There are many ways to read 1 Cor 14:26–40. However, the Church should not use any text of Scripture either to affirm or negate a position on any matter, unless it explicitly speaks to the proposed position. Implicit passages and those that do not clearly

silence women should not be used to formulate doctrines. There are various arguments and interpretations on 1 Cor 14. Some of these arguments are really subordinating to women in the ministry of the Church. Other arguments speak a refreshing word of good news to women. This section examines these various interpretations.

1. Scribal Insertion

In Gal 3:28, we see the yearning of Paul for all to be free from slavery and sexism. Paul cannot call for the liberation of all in that text and suddenly shift to enslaving and subordinating women in 1 Cor 14:34–35. Because this passage, taken at face value, seems to contradict so much of Paul's thought elsewhere in his corpus, a number of scholars have argued this passage was inserted by another writer later than Paul, possibly to conform to more conservative norms, such as might be expected in a Jewish synagogue. They also observe that in some manuscripts, verses 34–35 appear after verse 40. As a matter of fact, if verses 33b–36 are omitted (and even more so if 33b–38 are omitted), the thought moves smoothly from verse 33a to the conclusion in verses 39–40.³⁴

2. Correction of Disorderliness

It is not unreasonable to think that this passage was written to combat some kind of disorder or a particular type of speaking; if original to Paul, this could refer to a local Corinthian problem in the first century or if a later insertion could be in response to a disturbance such as Montanism, in which women had a prominent role. However, a major objection to this assumption is that the troublesome passage occurs in all the manuscripts, even in those where it is displaced; and in the more reliable manuscripts, the order is what we have in the text above. Moreover, the passage is unlike that in 1 Tim 2:11–15, which seemingly forbids women to teach in the Church.³⁵ It is more likely that Paul himself wrote or dictated this passage, perhaps after receiving a report of the disorderly and chaotic situation in Corinth. When we reconcile his statement that women should keep silent in the churches, for they are not allowed to speak, with 1 Cor 11:4–5, where they pray and prophesy, we understand it better. Thus, he must be referring to speaking other than praying or prophesying. It is needful to ask: what kind of speaking would that be? The sequence about asking in their meeting gives a hint—several people speaking at once, speaking words that no one could understand.³⁶

3. Addressing Insubordination

Why did Paul write to the Corinthians that women should keep silent in the Churches when he had just informed them that women prayed and prophesied in public (11:5)? What did he mean when he used the word “to speak” (*laléō*)? What relationship is there between the word “to speak” and the enquiries which they were to direct to their husbands at home? The verb *sigáō* (“to keep silence” or “to be silent”) was not only meant for the women but was also used with reference to tongue speakers and others in exercising their spiritual gifts. Paul's usage of *laléō*, usually glossed simply as “speak” in contemporary English, in context would mean disruptive chattering to the original readers (or listeners, as most of the recipients would have experienced Paul's letters by listening to them being read aloud). This approach is also given by Hurley, who suggests that since Paul commanded the prophets to evaluate their messages to make sure no false doctrine was present, and since women were among the prophets, then a problem of subordination to men arose.³⁷ Witt explains that women are the third group of people whom Paul told to keep silent within the short space between 14:28 and 14:34.³⁸ Paul makes use of the same word he used on tongue speakers as he does about women.³⁹

4. Inappropriate Evaluation of Prophetic Utterance

Seemingly after the prophets spoke; other prophets would judge the utterance. If this position is correct, then women were disallowed this opportunity, for this would put them over the male prophets. One might counter that this would be in contradiction to 1 Cor 11:2–16, where Paul allowed women to pray and prophesy as long as their heads were covered. But in that passage the women were speaking divine utterances, whereas in 14:33b–36 they were not. Hurley opines that those who spoke under divine control were not expressing their own authority and so were not in violation of the Law. So then any public speaking other than a divine utterance would be in violation of Paul's prohibition in 1 Cor 14:33b–36.⁴⁰ From the various interpretations and arguments on the Pauline injunction to the Church and women, one could say that Paul never intended to silence women but to caution those who were disorderly in the Church.

5. Quotation-Refutation Device

Alternatively, perhaps Paul is quoting and correcting a Corinthian approach to women. It is well-established that Paul at times will quote something his interlocutors have previously written and then give a refutation of their claim. In at least five other passages of 1 Cor (6:12–13; 7:1–2; 8:1, 8; 10:23), “Paul quotes a position from the Corinthians' letter with which he disagrees and then refutes it.”⁴¹ Peppiatt and MacGregor have independently argued that verses 14:33b–35 represent the incorrect position of the Corinthians and verses 36–38 are Paul's rebuke of their error.⁴² If, as they have argued, this is another example of Paul correcting the faulty views of the recipients of his letter, then this

reveals a great sense of harmony and coherence in this section, as well as demonstrating how it fits in with the letter as a whole. Not only does it rescue Paul from either gross misogyny or just strange and contradictory thinking, but it also gives us the key to understanding how 1 Corinthians 11–14 is entirely consistent with Paul's theology, with his views on the mutuality of relations between men and women expressed elsewhere, with his concern to look after the poor and the marginalized, and with his desire that all should be down decently and in order, which for Paul means with due consideration and care for the entire congregation.⁴³

These texts give us a clue that Paul was
only trying to correct anomalies in the
Corinthian Church.

6. New Interpretations

In recent times, no longer does everything revolve around men. Coinciding with this shift, new interpretations of 1 Cor 14:26–40 have emerged. The best interpretations should make sense to both current readers and provide insight into how the original audience would have understood it. It is possible that Paul was addressing a specific local issue or applying a timeless principle to a local context in his writing to the Corinthians. Since many specific details about the Church in Corinth are no longer known, it is important to consider how Paul's original audience would have perceived his message, even if it seems confusing to later readers. Perhaps the words silencing women were not originally part of the letter.⁴⁴ Alternatively, as noted above, the Corinthians were silencing women

and Paul was correcting that practice. Again, either of these makes Paul's actual letter intelligible to the Corinthians, and the cultural bias against women explains why a scribe felt the need to add words commanding their silence or why it was forgotten that Paul was arguing against the silencing of women.

Hence, proper exegesis and liberation theology play significant roles in the text to liberate the Church from misinterpretation of Bible text and re-interpreting to reflect God's plan of liberating humanity. "Theology of liberation attempts to reflect on the experience and meaning of faith based on the commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society."⁴⁵ 1 Cor 14:26–40 is centred on orderliness. Paul enjoins the Corinthian Church to be orderly in the use of spiritual gifts. The gifts of the Spirit are not meant for public show but to edify the body of Christ. Based on this, he set out rules that should govern worshippers when they gather for worship which this study paraphrased thus:

Paul expected those exercising their spiritual gifts to be orderly.
Do not all speak at once.
Utterances should be one at a time.
As one speaks, the other should keep silent.
One should interpret.
If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet.
Two or three prophets should speak, and let others judge.
If anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent.
The gifts of the Spirit are not for show off or personal aggrandizement but for the edification of the Church.

1 Cor 14:26–40 speaks volumes about Paul's intention for women when compared to other texts such as: Gal 3:28 which says there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ. Rom 16:1–15 gives a list of women whom Paul commended and referred to as co-workers. In 1 Cor 11:2–16, Paul advised the women to cover their head when praying or prophesying. These texts give us a clue that Paul was only trying to correct anomalies in the Corinthian Church. Examining the entire corpus of Paul's writings reveals that "Paul was a proponent of women in ministries, spreading the good news of equality throughout the Empire. He modelled and supported equitable practices. He led the way for establishing a new kind of community where all were empowered to lead in God's Church."⁴⁶

Background and Review of 1 Corinthians 14:26–40

A brief background of Corinth helps us to understand Paul and the Church in Corinth better. Contrarily to popular opinion, Paul's adherence to gender equity aligns with the gospel of freedom that he championed and preached. The apostle is seen by many feminists as one who hates women, or at least as one who accepts their supposed inferiority. Others have perceived him to have affirmed women. The geography of Corinth offers some insight.

The city of Corinth was located on a narrow strip of land, called an isthmus. This isthmus connected Peloponnesus with Greece. Corinth was about 40 miles (64 kilometers) west of Athens; it was the capital of the province of Achaia with a population of 500,000. In the first century, Corinth was the crossroads of the commercial world. It had two seaports, one on each side of the narrow isthmus. Frequently, instead of sailing all the way around the landmass, ships would have their cargo carried overland from the Aegean Sea to the Gulf of Corinth.⁴⁷ The importance of Corinth as a city was its geography. It was situated between the harbours of Lechaion on the North and Cenchreae on the South-East. The location provided Corinth with a busy emporium. Corinth had numerous temples, shrines and theatres.⁴⁸

Because of the commercial aspect of the city, Corinth had a lot of money and low morals. The city was known for its sensual pleasure. Even to the pagan world, Corinth was known for its moral corruption, so much so that in classical Greek *korinthiázō* (literally, "to behave like a Corinthian") came to represent gross immorality and drunken debauchery; in the middle voice (*korinthiázomai*) the verb meant "to visit prostitutes."⁴⁹ On the highest hill of the city stood the temple of the Greek goddess Aphrodite. A thousand sacred prostitutes worked from this temple satisfying the sensual needs of the devotees. This background reveals why the Corinthian Church was faced with a lot of issues bordering on moral values to battle with which also informed the purpose of the letters the apostle Paul wrote to them. The inhabitants of Corinth with their Corinthian lifestyle came into the Church and were displaying their permissive lifestyles.

Paul addresses the problem of disorderliness in the worship assembly by saying in verse 35, "If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home" (NIV). This implies that the problem in Corinth is concerning the asking of questions with a desire to learn something says Blomberg. The word translated as "inquire" in this verse (in the NIV) is *manthánō*, which is usually translated as *learn*. Blomberg suggests that "perhaps the largely uneducated women of that day" who had a legitimate desire to *learn* "were interrupting proceedings with irrelevant questions that would be better dealt with in their homes."⁵⁰ Similarly Belleville states that "their fault was not in the asking per se but in the inappropriate setting for their questions."⁵¹ Keener advocates this as the primary problem—the women were speaking up, asking questions to learn what was going on during the prophecies or the Scripture exposition in church. They were also interrupting the Scripture exposition with questions. This would have caused an affront to more conservative men or visitors to the church, and it would have also caused a disturbance to the service due to the nature of the questions.⁵² The major concern of Paul was to discourage both men and women from using their freedom in Christ as a license to behave indecently in the Church. This is the reason he rebuked the women who probably were calling out their questions across the Christian assembly.

Female Leadership Debate: Goddesses and Priestesses in Igbo Traditional Religion

It is relevant to state that in the traditional African society, women are not expected to play the roles of men. Generally, there are societal expectations associated with being male or female. Women are expected, traditionally in the African society to handle household chores and care giving. Based on this, one would have assumed that women cannot fit into the position of becoming priests. Women play the role of priestess in some parts of Africa, including in my Igbo tribe. The Igbo are found in the southeastern part of Nigeria.⁵³ In the Igbo context, priestesses are authorized to perform sacred religious rites, especially as a mediatory agent between humans and deities. They also have the authority or power to administer religious rites; in particular, rites of sacrifice to, and propitiation of, a deity or deities. Their office or position is the priesthood, a term which also may apply to such persons collectively.⁵⁴ Historically, women served in these capacities as diviner, healer and priestess comfortably in the precolonial era before the inception of Christianity. However, these practices were challenged by the Church and seen as paganism, thereby producing a negative stereotype.

The goddesses are believed to exert great influence in the affairs of human beings.

In African societies, deities, the most powerful of whom is the Great Creator God, serve as the true political heads or spiritual monarchs of their communities. Next in rank to God are the lesser gods and goddesses. Personifications of natural phenomena, the most influential are gendered females, deities in charge of the waters and the land. These deities are the moral judges of conduct and wield power indiscriminately. I center the leadership of (fe)male gendered spiritual forces such as goddesses, oracles, female medicines, and their human helpers (e.g., priestesses, diviners, spirit mediums, and prophetesses)—the real rulers of African kingdoms, paramounds, towns, and communities.⁵⁵

In Igbo culture, women play a vital role in religious worship but are traditionally not permitted to enter the shrine. However, they can serve as priestesses for minor deities, such as the Ogbanje priestess, who represents the *chi* or personal spirit for women.

On 15 August 2023, in the Awgu Local Government Area of Enugu State, I was privileged to meet a beautiful woman who serves as *Eze-nwanyi* (“Priestess” or “Queen mother”). She was not ashamed to identify herself as such, not minding how society and Christians look at the vocation. By Christians and Muslims, those who occupy the position of *Eze-nwanyi* are seen as idol worshippers and pagans. She bragged about her position as a worshipper and servant of the water goddess. According to her, she was chosen by the water goddess *mamiwater* (“water spirit”) to serve. In my interaction with her, she disclosed to me that she is serving god through the smaller deities he created. Those who have ailments, hard luck, and different challenges come to her to consult spirits and get quick answers to their problems. Not only do the spirits tell her the cause of the problems of her clients, she says, but they also give her a solution to the problem.

This is taken as confirmation of Achebe’s assertion that spirit mediums are believed to be embodiments of the spirits or the ancestors. It is a form of possession in which a person serves as an intermediary between the gods and the society.⁵⁶ This affirms that women occupy high ranking leadership positions even concerning spiritual matters. According to Achebe, “spirit medium societies provide women with the most direct avenues for active participation in politics and religious life. Spirit mediums can achieve measures of power that place them above men and mortals.”⁵⁷

We have complementarian (i.e., hierarchical) views among Igbo regarding the roles of priestesses in Igboland. Of this complementarian view, Udechukwu cites an informant who asserted that

a woman cannot handle or be the chief priestess of a family or village deity. It is said in Igbo “Agwụ anaghi ama nwaanyi” (a woman cannot be a deity) which means that an oracle cannot suggest a woman as a legitimate person to handle “Isi Agwu” (the head deity). A woman cannot lead public worship in the presence of men. The “Isi Mmoo” (the spirit head) is meant for a man.⁵⁸

When we compare the views concerning women as ministers in Christianity and women occupying spiritual positions in Igboland, we can see a correlation. Women occupy the position of *Eze-nwanyi* (“priestess”), which is a spiritual leadership position. They are recognized in most Igbo communities. There are still pockets of resistance against women taking up leadership positions in Igbo Traditional Religion and in the Church. Women are restricted from being in charge of the *ofo* (“staff”) which stands for peace and justice. They cannot be in charge of the *obi* (“a space at the entrance of a compound where guests are welcomed”).⁵⁹

Significantly, the existence of goddesses and priestesses show that women are recognized in Igbo Traditional Religion. This could be a potential correlation with current-day policies and practices supporting gender balance, and Christian ethical standards. More teachings and enlightenment ought to be carried out because my observation as a leader in the Church shows that women are more in number in the Church and contribute more in the development of the Church and so their ordination and full participation in leadership should be encouraged.

Conclusion

Women are enjoined in 1 Cor 14:26–40 to be orderly in the Church and not participate in a way that leads to confusion and disruption. Exegesis of the text shows that it is not a blanket ban on their active participation in the worship assembly. Women’s contributions to Church growth and development in different denominations through the women’s ministry is an affirmation that the ordination of women will bring about more records of progress. Paul’s injunction to women in 1 Cor 14:26–40 should not be used to silence women since Paul had earlier said women prayed and prophesied in 1 Cor 11. It is clear looking at the pericope that the church in 1 Cor 14 was disorderly. Paul cautioned both men and women to exercise their spiritual gifts in such a way that promotes decorum. Liberation theology is a call to all despite gender, ethnicity, or nationality to serve God with an open mind and use the gifts bestowed by God to serve the people. God has liberated all through the death and resurrection of his son Jesus.

Paul was addressing a specific situation rather than making a general prohibition on women speaking in the Church. He intended to prohibit disruptive and disrespectful questions and comments that were observed in Corinthian meetings. These particular practices were coming from the women. Just as Paul 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 anything, they can ask questions somewhere else. Only one person should speak at a time. Everyone else, whether male or female should be quiet for it is disgraceful for people in the audience to be talking while another is speaking to the group. Taking stance with the egalitarians, women can serve in all forms of Church leadership. As Cynthia Long Westfall has demonstrated,

women should interpret and apply instructions to all believers with the same hermeneutics as men. The passages about determining the function of each believer in the church and the call to ministry are general instructions for all believers. The priesthood of the believer applies to all believers, so that the function, race, social status, physical condition, and gender of priests in the Old Testament are not requirements or prerequisites for any ministry in the Christian community. The Holy Spirit determines who gets what gift; a theological system that filters and restricts the gifts for a given group compromises the authority of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰

Men and women are to diligently and whole heartedly develop their spiritual gifts for the edification of the Church and societal development.

Recommendations

As Paul advised, there should be orderliness in the Church. The local assembly should not be chaotic in the exercise of spiritual gifts. Women called to serve or allowed to serve should bring out their best and make an impact. The Church and society need more women to contribute to societal development and building of lives.

Ordination of women will enhance Church growth and enable women clergy to lead change in the society. It will also allow female voices to be heard concerning the challenges women face in different cultures.

Women are resilient and highly productive in any project they undertake. Therefore, the ordination of women is crucial in the Church based on the significant contributions they have made as educators, caregivers, counselors, prayer leaders, and more. This indicates that when given the opportunity, they can achieve even more.

Providing women with opportunities in leadership would offer additional personnel, especially in areas experiencing a shortage of ministers. In some parts of the country where there are few or no men in the Church, women can take on leadership roles. Therefore, there should be more openness to having women serve as pastors.

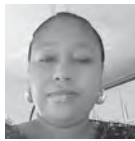
Editor's Note: This article was first published in the journal African Christian Theology (vol. 1, no. 2 [2024] 291–317, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69683/vjnhnm770>). It is reprinted here with minimal editing, and with kind permission from the author, Mercy Uwaezuoke Chukwuedo, and from the journal's publisher, Joshua R. Barron.

Notes

1. Esther Mombo, "The Ordination of Women in Africa: A Historical Perspective," ch. 9 in *Women and Ordination in the Christian Churches: International Perspectives*, ed. Ian Jones, Janet Wootton, and Kirsty Thorpe (T&T Clark, 2008) 124.
2. A. C. Krass, *Applied Theology 1: "Go and Make Disciples,"* TEF Study Guide 9 (SPCK, 1974) 3.
3. Mercy U. Chukwuedo, "The Place of Women in the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion): Perspectives from 1 Corinthians 14:26–40" (PhD diss., Nnamdi Azikiwe University, 2018) <https://phd-dissertations.unizik.edu.ng/onepaper.php?p=459>.
4. A Lay Reader in the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) is a lay person licensed to preach, read Bible lessons, and conduct some religious services, but not licensed to celebrate the Eucharist. He or she is authorized by the bishop to lead certain services of worship. Lay Readers are formerly trained and admitted to the office but not ordained as priests. Within the Akoko Anglican Diocese of the Church of Nigeria, "most of the churches have only women lay readers." Sade Oluwakemi Ayeni, "Women in the Nigerian Church: A Study of the Akoko Anglican Diocese," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 92/3 (2023) 443.
5. Mercy U. Chukwuedo, *African Women in Ministry, the Nigerian Experience: Perspectives from 1 Corinthians 14:26–40* (Rabboni, 2019) 96–106; Timothy Agbo, *Women Ordination in Nigeria: An Ecclesiological Analysis* (Snaap, 2003) 54–77.
6. Chukwuedo, *African Women in Ministry*, 108–11.
7. William G. Witt, *Icons of Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Theology for Women's Ordination* (Baylor University Press, 2020) 12.
8. Witt, *Icons of Christ*, 146.
9. Bob Edwards, *Let My People Go: A Call to End the Oppression of Women in the Church* (Createspace, 2011) 21.
10. Samuel Oluwatosin Okanlawon, "Galatians 3:28: A Vision for Partnership," in *Co-Workers and Co-Leaders: Women and Men Partnering for God's Work*, ed. Amanda Jackson and Peirong Lin, WEA Global Issues Series (Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2021) 39. Okanlawon continues to note that "Paul's declaration that there is 'neither male and female' stands in marked contrast to commonly accepted patterns of privilege and prejudice in the ancient world. Women were considered inferior within both Jewish and Greek culture. . . . Hence, Paul is emphasizing in Galatians 3:26–28 that men and women enjoy a new, equal and exalted status before God," 40.
11. Mary A. Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church* (Crossway, 1992) 53.
12. E.g., see Frank B. Chirwa, *Mission in Progress: The Developing Role of Women in the Church: an SDA Perspective from Malawi* (Mzuni, 2020); Nancy Carol James, *The Developing Schism within the Episcopal Church: 1960–2010: Social Justice, Ordination of Women Charismatics, Homosexuality, Extra-territorial Bishops; etc.* (Edwin Mellen, 2010); Hilfah F. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds., *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition* (Abingdon, 1982).
13. Anuli B. Okoli and Lawrence Okwuosa, "The Role of Christianity in Gender Issues and Development in Nigeria," *HTS* 76/4 (2020) 8, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.6007>.
14. Benjamin Knoll, "Women's Ordination in the Anglican Communion: The Importance of Religious, Economic, and Political Contexts," *Religion in Public* (25 Jan 2021).
15. See Fredrick Nzwili, "Africa's Six Anglican Women Bishops Meet and Issue Call to Combat Africa's 'Triple Threat,'" *Religion News Service* (19 Jan 2024).
16. Kirk Petersen, "Province of Central Africa Approves Ordination of Women," *The Living Church* (7 Nov 2023).
17. Agbo, *Women Ordination in Nigeria*, 47.
18. Agbo, *Women Ordination in Nigeria*, 57.
19. Odogwu Emeka Odogwu, "Anglican Archbishop Okays Women's Ordination to the Diaconate," *Daily Champion* (Lagos newspaper) (8 June 2010), reprint: *World-Wide Religious News*, <https://wwrn.org/articles/33610/>.
20. E.g., see Dorothy L. Hodgson, *The Church of Women: Gendered Encounters Between Maasai and Missionaries* (Indiana University Press, 2005).
21. Ayeni, "Women in the Nigerian Church," 428.
22. Daniel Dei and Robert Osei-Bonsu, "The Female Ordination Debate: Theological Reflections," *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry* 11/1 (2015) 31, <https://dx.doi.org/10.21806/aamm.2015.11.02>.
23. In the debate of women's ordination and women in leadership, the leading voices among complementarians are all white men from the United States. E.g., see Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Multnomah, 2004); James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Zondervan, 1981); George W. Knight III, *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Baker, 1977). Evangelical theologian and biblical scholar Kevin Giles, an Anglican minister in Australia, has cogently demonstrated that Grudem's book, which is representative of complementarian thought, is full of "erroneous arguments" and fails to engage with the evidence produced by long list of biblical scholars such as Gordon Fee, Philip Payne, and Eldon Jay Epp. Giles further notes that Grudem (falsely) accuses a long list of "some of the most respected and godly evangelical leaders in the world" of denying the authority of Scripture when they are only denying the supposed authority of human interpreters of Scripture who share Grudem's complementarian commitment. Giles, "Book Review: Wayne Grudem's *Evangelical Feminism*" (31 July 2008), <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/book-review-wayne-grudem-evangelical-feminism/>.
24. Chukwuedo, *African Women in Ministry*, 14–15.
25. See Agbo, *Women Ordination in Nigeria*; Chukwuedo, *African Women in Ministry*, 14–15; Anthony B. C. Chiegboka, *Women Status and Dignity in the Society and the Church: A Perspective from Galatians 3:26–29* (Pearl Functions Limited, 1997) 112ff.; Sara Butler, "Women's Ordination: Is it Still an Issue?," Arch Diocese of New York (7 March 2007) (as of 20 Aug 2023, this paper was still available at the Arch Diocese's website at www.archny.org/seminary/st-josephs-seminary-dunwoodie/administration/sister-sara-butler/, but that link is now defunct).
26. Witt, *Icons of Christ*, 20.
27. Witt, *Icons of Christ*, 203.
28. "The Summary of SID BRC Position on the Ordination of Women," Seventh Day Adventist Church, Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, <https://adventistarchives.org/brc-southern-africa-indian-ocean-division-presentation.pdf>.
29. George W. Reid, "The Ordination of Women: A Review of the Principal Arguments for and against the Ordination of Women to the Gospel Ministry," Seventh Day Adventist Church, Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research (Jan 1985) 20–24, <https://adventistarchives.org/the-ordination-of-women-a-review-of-the-principal-arguments.pdf>. The SDA has made some adjustments to their stance on the ordination of women. The policies of the General Conference from 1990 and onwards allowed for ordination of women as church elders, employment of women as associates in pastoral care (if they were ordained as local elders), and also commissioning of women in pastoral types of ministry. In recent times, the SDA generally is not opposed to women's ordination. The General Conference has given room for the ordination of women as they affirm being part of the global Church and needing to listen to and be in harmony with the decision of the Church at large.
30. Alberto R. Timm, "Seventh Day Adventists on Women's

Ordination: A Brief Historical Overview,” Seventh Day Adventist Church, Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research (Jan 2014) 30, <https://adventistarchives.org/seventh-day-adventists-on-womens-ordination-a-brief-historical-overview.pdf>.

31. Notable egalitarian biblical scholars include Linda Belleville, Michael Bird, F. F. Bruce, Gordon D. Fee, Craig S. Keener, Howard I. Marshall, Scot McKnight, Leon Morris, Carroll D. Osburn, Ben Witherington III, and N. T. Wright. John Stott was broadly egalitarian and encouraged women to serve in ministry positions, but opposed women serving in certain ministry leadership positions in some contexts.
32. Dei and Osei-Bonsu, “The Female Ordination Debate,” 31.
33. Anna Sui Hluan, “*Silence* in Translation: 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 in Myanmar and the Development of a Critical Contextual Hermeneutic” (Langham Monographs, 2022) 203, 204, 318.
34. George T. Montague, *First Corinthians*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Baker Academic, 2011) 255–56; Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters* (Zondervan Academic, 2009) 217–67; Payne, “Vaticanus Distigme-obelos Symbols Marking Added Text, Including 1 Corinthians 14.34–5,” *NTS* 63/4 (2017) 604–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688517000121>. Kirk R. MacGregor specifically refutes Payne in “1 Corinthians 14:33b–38 as a Pauline Quotation-Refutation Device,” *Priscilla Papers* 32/1 (2018) 23–28; see also Payne’s response to MacGregor, “Is 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 a Marginal Comment or a Quotation? A Response to Kirk MacGregor,” *Priscilla Papers* 33/2 (2019) 24–30; Jerome Murphy-O’Connor offers an excellent review of the issues, “Interpolations in 1 Corinthians,” *CBQ* 48/1 (1986) 90–92.
35. A discussion of 1 Tim 2:11–15 is beyond the scope of this article, but I say “*seemingly* forbids” because the clarity of most English translations is misleading. E.g., see Linda L. Belleville, “Exegetical Fallacies in Interpreting 1 Timothy 2:11–15: Evaluating the Text with Contextual, Lexical, Grammatical, and Cultural Information,” *Priscilla Papers* 17/3 (2003) 3–11; Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority: 1 Timothy 2:11–15,” ch. 11 in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural & Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall, with Christa L. McKirland, 3rd ed. (IVP Academic, 2021); Jamin Hübner, “Revisiting the Clarity of Scripture in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *JETS* 59/1 (2016) 99–117; Craig S. Keener, “Interpreting 1 Timothy 2:8–15,” *Priscilla Papers* 12/3 (1998) 11–13; Cynthia Long Westfall, “The Meaning of ἀνθρώπων in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *JGRChJ* 10 (2014) 138–73.
36. Montague, *First Corinthians*, 255–56.
37. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspectives*, 112–13.
38. Witt, *Icons of Christ*, 149–50.
39. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspectives*, 201.
40. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspectives*, 127–28.
41. MacGregor, “1 Corinthians 14:33b–38,” 25.
42. MacGregor, “1 Corinthians 14:33b–38,” Peppiatt, *Women and Worship at Corinth: Paul’s Rhetorical Arguments in 1 Corinthians* (Cascade, 2015). Peppiatt argues throughout the book that “Paul was using a strategy throughout 1 Corinthians 11–14 where he cites his opponents views from their letter . . . in order to refute them” and does so “more than had previously been acknowledged,” 4.
43. Peppiatt, *Women and Worship at Corinth*, 135.
44. Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Hendrickson, 1992) 74.
45. Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—A Theology* (Westminster, 1974) 20.
46. Grace May, “Appreciating How the Apostle Paul Champions Women and Men in Church Leadership,” ch. 7 in *The Quest for Gender Equity in Leadership: Biblical Teachings on Gender Equity and Illustrations of Transformation in Africa*, ed. Keumju Jewel Hyun and Diphus C. Chemorion, House of Prisca & Aquila Series (Wipf & Stock, 2016) 94.
47. Danny McCain, *Notes on New Testament Introduction* (Africa Christian Textbooks, 2005) 217.
48. Matthew R. Malcolm, *The World of 1 Corinthians: An Annotated, Visual and Literary Source-Commentary* (Paternoster, 2012) xix.
49. BrillDAG, s.v. κορινθιάζω.
50. Craig L. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 1994) 280.
51. Linda L. Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions* (Baker, 1999) 161.
52. Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives*, 71–72.
53. The Igbo speaking people share the same belief system no matter their location. The Igbo believe strongly in the Supreme Being—*Chi Ukwu* or *Chukwu*, both of which can be translated as “God Almighty.” *Chi Ukwu* is also called *Chineke* (the Creator). John Mbiti reports that Chukwu (though he gives the spelling *Chuku*) “is derived from words (*Chi* and *uku*) that mean ‘the Great Spirit’” and that “the Igbo believe God to be ‘the Great First Cause,’ who continues to create more people and without whom they cannot be formed (born).” Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Acton, 2012) 50, 57. Many Igbo are Christians, but before the introduction of Christianity, they practiced *Odinala* (Igbo Traditional Religion).
54. Gladys I. Udechukwu, “Position of Women in Igbo Traditional Religion,” *Journal of Linguistics, Language and Culture* 4 (2017) 86–101.
55. Nwando Achebe, *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa*, Ohio Short Histories of Africa (Ohio University Press, 2020).
56. Achebe, *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa*, 35.
57. Achebe, *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa*, 36.
58. Udechukwu, “Position of Women,” 89, citing p. 20 of an interview with U. Ikeokwu.
59. The *obi* is a connection point in every Igbo home.
60. Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle’s Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Baker Academic, 2016) 242.



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Separate but Equal: The Great Lie behind Jim Crow and Progressive Complementarianism

Greta L. Bennett and AJ Fletcher

Women's roles and responsibilities have been debated for centuries. Today, this debate has two distinct sides within evangelicalism: egalitarianism and complementarianism. Though, in theory, such debates should be about both women and men, they tend to focus explicitly on limiting women. The question is often framed, "though men and women are equal, are their roles limited, separate, and thus complementary?" The truth, however, is that only women's status is being questioned, for men's roles—even if separate—are not limited. It is significant and telling that men are the defining subject and women's positions are presented as contingent upon relationships with men.

Certain evangelical scholars and church leaders try to walk the tightrope between these two sets of ideas yet remain predominantly in the complementarian mindset. We have dubbed such views "progressive complementarianism" in this article. The progressive complementarian stance seems innocuous but is, in fact, an antithesis of either egalitarian or complementarian scriptural interpretation. In progressive complementarian churches, women may be given a title such as "director" while their male counterparts are "pastors." They may also be expected to perform a job similar to their male counterparts but with no title at all. While these examples may, at first, seem like steps in the right direction, they unveil flawed logic that Christians on either side of the egalitarian/complementarian divide cannot defend biblically.

A Jim Crow Analysis

There are connections between such regulations of women and the Jim Crow idea of separate-but-equal. The separate-but-equal policy in the United States created rules to control the Black community, much like progressive complementarianism focuses on controlling women within the church. Both seek a middle way while still limiting those, and only those, whom they claim to free. NT scholar Love Sechrest speaks of "regimes of control" as part of her explanation of mass imprisonment as a tool of "the New Jim Crow." She extends this to the "metaphorical prisons" experienced primarily by women and girls of color.¹ We believe this terminology also describes the treatment of women who are confined in "metaphorical prisons" by "regimes" of progressive complementarianism.

Jim Crow was an 1828 minstrel character created by Thomas D. Rice, a White actor who performed with hands and face painted black (and often with red protruding lips), depicting stereotypes of Black culture. This character became a demeaning African American stereotype. The term "Jim Crow" became synonymous with federal and state-sanctioned segregation laws in the United States, especially the southern states, much like the term "apartheid" with state-sanctioned segregation in South Africa. A key feature of Jim Crow policies was restricting use of public facilities and services by African Americans. These laws created separate facilities for Whites and Blacks, institutionalizing limitations on African American economic, educational, political, and social outcomes.²

Thus, Jim Crowism provided the foundation for the concept of separate-but-equal with its institution of racially separate public facilities. Restrictions on residential zoning, educational access, and

religious institutions further marginalized the African American community by ensuring limited financial gains and limited educational access and achievements. This era ranged from 1877 to the mid-1960s until it was dismantled by the 1964 Civil Rights Act.³

This article explores parallels between certain biblical texts, concentrating on the OT, that were used to subjugate the Black community and how certain verses are similarly used to subordinate women within the church. Ultimately, this type of separation always restricts one group (e.g., Blacks, women) while the other group has no such restrictions (e.g., Whites, men). No matter the intentions or justifications of this type of separation, the group already viewed as socially superior will continue to enjoy an elevated status. Therefore, in progressive complementarian church environments, women will always be seen as inferior to men. Such values that "allow" women certain leadership positions (such as deacon or committee chair) and public ministries (such as worship leader or children's pastor) may appear infinitely preferable to positions that fully restrict women. In fact, however, they create situations where women are always separate but never equal.

Does the Bible Consider Women Separate but Equal?

Many of the issues that arise in the progressive complementarian mindset come from a misinterpretation of 1 Tim 2:12: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (NRSVue).⁴ A telling observation is that progressive complementarians seem to hold to the first part ("I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man") but not the second ("she is to keep silent"). While they do not enforce women's silence in churches, by allowing only limited speech they effectively bar women from having "authority over a man." Furthermore, there are several contextual factors at play regarding this verse. An example is Paul's instruction that men "pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument" (2:8 NRSVue), but progressive complementarians largely do not regulate men's prayers. One of many examples of the difficulties involved in translating this verse is the translation of *anēr* and *gunē*, terms for "man" and "woman" that can also be translated "husband" and "wife" depending on context. Consider, for example, the Common English Bible's wording of 1 Tim 2:12: "I don't allow a wife to teach or to control her husband. Instead, she should be a quiet listener." In short, any policy that excludes half the church from leadership based on one verse, even one passage, is an extreme restriction.⁵ Other NT texts, especially those that affirm women as leaders—such as Junia, Lydia, Phoebe, Priscilla—highlight the extreme nature of such policies.

Examples from the OT will show that the idea of women being regulated to certain work within the church is not in harmony with biblical standards. The best place to start is the beginning, with creation, since that story has also raised concerns about the status of Eve.

The first aspect of the creation account to address is the idea of Eve being Adam's "helper" (Gen 2:18–20). The Hebrew word is *ezer* ("helper") and is used more often in reference to God than to anyone else (Gen 49:25; Exod 18:4; Deut 33:7; Pss 20:3; 21:1–2; 115:9–11; 146:5, etc.).⁶ Translations of *ezer* that grasp the meaning of 2:18–20 include "partner" (CEV, NRSVue, etc.) and "companion" (*The Message*, NET,

etc.). While Gen 1 does present men and women as equal (1:26–27), Gen 2 does not present women as separate-but-equal.

Indeed, God creates both men and women equally in the image of God, and God gives them both dominion.⁷ Though distinct as man and woman, separate spheres of work or authority do not describe their relationship. Therefore, there is nothing intrinsic to the design of creation that subordinates women. Only after sin enters the story do we read that the husband will rule over the wife (Gen 3:16). It is sin that created inequality between the sexes, for originally God did not intend for one group to dominate another. Before sinning, Adam and Eve were entirely equal without distinction in rank. Humanity has cultivated male rule.⁸

There are also numerous OT examples of women leading and teaching men. Hagar names God (Gen 6:13), and the biblical author uses her words to teach men and women, ancient and modern, about God. Zelophehad's daughters bring a matter to Moses who then consults God about it (Num 27:1–11). God confirms that the daughters are correct and should be granted their request. God rewards these daughters for speaking up and questioning norms, and the biblical author considers their words instructive. Though such women lived in patriarchal cultures that regulated their separate spheres, God and Scripture highlight their equality.

Deborah goes with Barak into battle, and she has authority over him. Therefore, she has the lead role in the deliverance of Israel.⁹ This means that Deborah is a woman occupying a commanding space on and off the battlefield. As a judge and prophetess, Scripture showcases her leadership in social, political, and spiritual domains. As the story progresses, Jael does what the entire army of Israel cannot do when she invites Sisera, an enemy of Israel, into her home and then kills him with a tent peg. For this, she is highly praised in Scripture, even referred to as “most blessed of women” (Judg 5:24). These are only a few examples of the OT women who unashamedly taught and led men, who operated outside the established norms, and who questioned the patriarchal status quo. They were not chastised for their words and actions but are instead championed by the biblical authors and thus by God.

Does the Bible Separate Blacks?

The concept of separate-but-equal is ideologically rooted in White supremacy and historically linked to the transatlantic slave trade, in which slaveholders justified owning slaves by classifying them as subhuman. Riggins R. Earl Jr. notes that Whites “were of the persuasion that physical blackness was a definite sign that slaves were created inferior by God.”¹⁰ Whites considered themselves superior to their African slaves, so much so that they believed they had no soul, which was used to justify their inhuman treatment. However, as slaves began to accept Christianity, slaveholders continued to argue their superiority over their slaves with a divine sanction that allowed them to “save” the souls of their slaves. At the same time, their economic, political, and social salvation remained unchanged. Full equality was perceived as reserved for the eschaton, as seen in the statement made by the Society of the Advancement of Christianity in South Carolina: “No man or set of men in our day, unless they can produce a new revelation from Heaven, are entitled to pronounce slavery as wrong. Slavery as it exists at the present day is agreeable to the order of Divine providence.”¹¹

The ideology of White supremacy created a flawed hermeneutic justifying the subjugation of African slaves that continued to influence segregation policies after slaves were officially emancipated

Segregationists misinterpreted Gen 9, and it became a leitmotif of their ideology by assigning ethnicity to the three sons of Noah.

in 1863. Their status as such was realized in 1865,¹² resulting in segregationists adopting the same self-serving biblical hermeneutic that had been used to justify slavery, a new caste system to replace the old.¹³ This flawed hermeneutic centered on their belief that segregation had a divine origin, as had the subjugation of slaves; both were part of the design of creation. Therefore, segregation “benefited” Whites and Blacks because it was a part of the natural order, and it was justified by using the Bible inaccurately—claiming, for example, that bloodlines needed to be kept “pure” for each race.¹⁴ Their main scriptural foundations centered on the curse of Ham in Gen 9 and the Tower of Babel in Gen 11.

The “Curse of Ham”

Segregationists misinterpreted Gen 9, and it became a *leitmotif* of their ideology by assigning ethnicity to the three sons of Noah.¹⁵ They promoted a belief that Shem and Japheth were European whereas Ham was African.¹⁶ The biblical text describes the population of the world that developed through Noah's sons after the flood. However, the Bible gives no classification of ethnicity or race for Noah's sons. These three brothers, of course, were ethnically homogeneous. It is no surprise, therefore, that Genesis does not present them as progenitors of the three races. Furthermore, the geographical region into which Noah and his sons were born is Mesopotamia, which today overlaps the countries of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Noah and his descendants were people of color, but there is no indication of any of them being European or African in their ethnicity.

In Gen 9:20–27, because of Ham's disrespect for his father, Noah's son Canaan and Canaan's descendants were enslaved. Ham had four sons, but Canaan was the only son cursed. Therefore, if one ascribes to the segregation interpretation of the curse of Ham, in which all the descendants of Ham are African, then how does one differentiate which quarter of these descendants were of the lineage of Canaan?¹⁷ In addition, Gen 10 depicts the regional cultural ethnicities of the sons of Noah, none of which are European or African. Some claim that Cush, Ham's oldest son, was African, which, if accepted for the sake of argument, does not even remotely support the curse of Ham being linked with the enslavement of Africans. Sadly, the idea of the curse of Ham has been so prominent that it has influenced how some Christians understand contemporary African identity, even into the twenty-first century.

The Tower of Babel

Segregationists also argued that the Tower of Babel in Gen 11 shows God's disdain for integration, indicating that “the development of different languages was not merely natural or accidental, but served as a Divine purpose, in becoming one of the most effective means of preserving separate existence of the general racial groups.”¹⁸ However, the biblical text describes confusion of languages, not separation by race. The text indicates a separation by geographical proximity, which was permeable rather than unchangeable. The text certainly does not support the separation, certainly not the enslavement, of Blacks or any people group.

In the Bible, there is “no mention anywhere of racial segregation,” a truth that James Buswell argues the segregationist apologists were aware of.¹⁹ However, this knowledge did not deter them in the pursuit in maintaining pure bloodlines of races, insistent “that each of these three groups [descendants of Shem, Ham, Japheth] was to keep to its own tongue and family and nation.” Because of this view, they asked, “do we not face the fact that God drew the lines of segregation (or separation) according to His purpose?”²⁰ If what Buswell asserts is true, that segregationists understood they had no biblical foundation, it exposes the insidious need to maintain White superiority at all costs, even to manipulate Scripture to support their agenda. Acts 17:26 states that God “allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live” (NRSVue). Segregationists asserted that this verse promoted their agendas of geographical separation and opposition to mixed marriages, as seen in their misinterpretation of Scripture below:

Since Christ and the apostles taught the love of God for all [humankind], the oneness of believers in Christ, and demonstrated that the principles of Christian [personhood] and charity could be made operative in all relations of life, without demanding revolutionary changes in the natural or social order, there would appear to be no reason for concluding that segregation is in conflict with the spirit and teachings of Christ and the apostles and therefore un-Christian.²¹

Segregationists perceived any change to the status quo, or as they refer to it, the natural order, as a revolutionary change. The status quo served them as the dominant culture and race, and therefore, anything to disrupt this (e.g., desegregation) was seen as revolutionary and not needed.

Despite building their separatist agenda on sand, they were able to establish a mindset of racial superiority after slavery. The church embraced this worldview and promoted the separation of the races even in worship, as seen with the creation of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded by Richard Allen in 1794. Allen established this denomination after a physical altercation with White parishioners during altar prayer when Black parishioners had knelt in prayer beside them but were physically manhandled and made to get up and move to the balcony.²² Subsequently, Blacks of various denominations had to establish their own churches due to segregation.

Fortunately, segregation was dismantled, and desegregation arrived in 1954 with the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*, a unanimous U.S. Supreme Court decision by which segregation was deemed unconstitutional. The downfall of segregation was based, not on its lack of a biblical mandate, but on its inherent social inequality. With their underlying belief of superiority, most Whites did not embrace equality with or for Blacks, whether in their personhood or their institutions. Therefore, Black economic, political, and social power continued to be inferior to that of their White counterparts, creating a hypocritical dual citizenship of sorts with those who had and those who did not.

Michelle Alexander suggests that this is still ongoing today via the prison system. She believes that mass incarceration of Black Americans demonstrates a new Jim Crowism. She claims that they “repeatedly have been controlled through institutions such as slavery

and Jim Crow, which appear to die, but then are reborn in new form, tailored to the needs and constraints of the time.”²³ As mentioned in the introduction, we believe this institutional control is analogous to the “metaphorical prisons” of progressive complementarianism.

Progressive Complementarian Churches

Though not a one-to-one equivalent, especially in terms of the violence against Blacks perpetrated and tolerated during the Jim Crow era, the same idea found in the rebirth of Jim Crow holds true for progressive complementarianism. Such congregations and ministry organizations, to varying degrees, still refuse to give women the same titles, positions, pay, and authority as men but expect these women to do the same jobs. There is still a hierarchy, a caste system, that separates and limits certain members of the group.

Examples of this are found throughout the nation and the globe. Thousands of congregations identify men as pastors or ministers but women as directors or coordinators. One example with which we, the authors, are personally familiar, is a congregation with two primary male pastors, additional male staff pastors, and one female director for the women’s ministry. The complementarian theology highlighted within their leadership stance showcases their separatist mentality. Throughout the world, further examples of progressive complementarian theology are found. The Tri-City Church of British Columbia, Trinity International Church in Paris, and The Crowded House located in the United Kingdom are examples that underscore the global pervasiveness of this distorted theology. The latter’s website articulates both equality (“All men and women . . . have inherent and equal dignity and worth”) and separateness (“Healthy oversight . . . must be done by suitably gifted and qualified men”).²⁴

Names of these types of churches could fill multiple pages. Their leaders, who openly state that they restrict women, may believe they are more open-minded than their more conservative counterparts, but in actuality they merely utilize a different form of control. While women in such churches may experience a bit more freedom and enjoy the illusion of some types of authoritative positions, the unfortunate truth is that the men in charge still govern all the decisions. Often the claim is that women can have many roles in the church with the one restriction that they cannot be called pastors. Not only is this unsupported biblically, but these female “directors” often do the same job as the pastors, with the differences being authority, power, opportunities, and pay. The implication then becomes, at best, that one can loophole God’s mandates with simple nomenclature and, at worst, that women should be regulated to a lesser status for the same labor. This then prompts the question, can true equality exist within any form of forced separation, whether it is a separation of race or gender?

The Ideal

The ideal is a world with no caste system that keeps some repressed while elevating others. This is a world without Jim Crow in any form, and a world where women pursue the calling God has for them without restrictions. Therefore, there is no reason for progressive complementarians to limit how God uses women in ministry. They may claim equality, but much like the Jim Crow laws, such equality is a lie and the “insistence that ‘equal worth’ manifests in unequal roles”²⁵ lacks biblical precedent and is insulting to women.

One’s ministry should be dictated by God’s calling, not by gender. As NT scholar Ben Witherington notes, “ethnic, social, and sexual distinctions continue to exist in Christ, but they do not determine one’s soteriological, spiritual, or social standing in the body of Christ,

The ideal is a world with no caste system that keeps some repressed while elevating others.

nor do they determine the ministerial roles one can play in Christ. That is a matter of who is called and who is gifted by the Spirit to do certain tasks in the Church.”²⁶ Another Bible scholar, Craig Keener, has addressed the importance of calling when discerning his own beliefs about women in ministry, “I would have to be pretty sure of my position before I used it to judge another person’s call, because if I made her stumble, it was none other than God to whom I would have to answer.”²⁷ The ideal is that, just as in the Garden in Genesis, men and women experience true equality and men do not try to rule over women but instead coexist in harmony.

God’s calling is supreme over everything, including over ministry positions. Anything less “take[s] power away from women . . . teach[es] men that women rank lower than they do, [and] teach[es] women that their voices are worth less than the voice of men.”²⁸ Progressive complementarianism is in some ways more dangerous because it seems innocuous compared to outright complementarianism, just as Jim Crow appears preferable to slavery but falls woefully short of God’s ideal. The creation account presents the ideal because

there was mutuality, equality, and harmony between men and women. . . . The fall destroyed the mutuality and harmony between men and women, resulting in millennia of male domination in both the church and in marriage. In Christ, that consequence is undone, and the mutuality and harmony of marriage is potentially restored . . . if the church allows it.²⁹

Conclusion

Progressive complementarianism is not an acceptable solution. It may at first appear to be a middle ground to appease everyone, but it discreetly demeans women. To adapt a statement by Aida Besançon Spencer, a leading egalitarian scholar, progressive complementarians “are repelled by egalitarians yet not attracted to rigid hierarchists, so they settle for a moderate complementarian position.”³⁰ Jim Crow provided a “solution” to America’s racial problem by dividing people by race while demanding “equal” treatment. However, separate-but-equal proved an impossibility because Black Americans confined to “metaphorical prisons” could never live as equals.

Trying to return to a perceived design of creation that prioritizes certain individuals over others based on skin color or gender disrupts God’s intentions for humanity. As long as people in power maintain a status quo, there will be a caste system that devalues people made in the image of God. Christians should instead be striving to return to the ideal of the Garden, learning from the great women of faith as they do from men, and recognizing the value of women called by God. Instead, progressive complementarians want to maintain a church where women are still inferior to men and have restricted freedom under the pretense of “progressive equality”—a church that is still separate but not equal.

Notes

1. Love Lazarus Sechrest, *Race and Rhyme: Rereading the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 2022) 141–50.
2. Michael J. Klarman, Brown V. Board of Education and the Civil Rights Movement (Oxford University Press, 2007) 8–14.
3. Klarman, *Brown V. Board of Education*, 201–7.
4. The word translated “have authority” in the NRSVue is *authentēin*, a rare word which has a range of meaning including “to rule/reign; to control/dominate; to act independently; to be the originator of something; to murder.” See Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 2006) 220; Jamin Hübner, “Translating αὐθεντέω (*Authenteō*) in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *Priscilla Papers* 29/2 (Spring 2015) 16–26.
5. Complementarian scholar Thomas Schriener has stated of this passage: “Virtually every word in verses 11–12 is disputed”

(Schreiner, “An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9–15: A Dialogue with Scholarship,” in *Women in the Church*, ed. Andreas Köstenberger, Thomas Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin [Baker, 1995] 114). See also Jeffrey D. Miller, “Saved Through Childbearing? 1 Timothy 2:15 as a Hermeneutical Caveat,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 20/2 (Autumn 2017) 215–25.

6. Mary L. Conway, “Gender in Creation and Fall: Genesis 1–3,” ch. 2 in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa L. McKirland (IVP Academic, 2021).
7. Conway, “Gender in Creation.” Even the fact that God created Eve from Adam’s rib is sometimes used to force subordination upon women even though the Hebrew *tsela* (“rib”) also means “side,” implying equality rather than inferior status.
8. At some level this may have to do with men controlling the food supply once they had to work the land. See Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Brazos, 2021) 27.
9. J. Clinton McCann, *Judges* (John Knox, 2002) 52.
10. Riggins R. Earl, *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, And Community in the Slave Mind* (University of Tennessee Press, 2003) 13. See also Harry H. Singleton III, *Black Theology and Ideology: Deideological Dimensions in the Theology of James Cone* (Liturgical, 2002) 3.
11. James O. Buswell III, *Slavery, Segregation, and Scripture* (Eerdmans, 1964) 29.
12. Although the Emancipation Proclamation was issued Jan 1, 1863, it was not until June 19, 1865, that the news of the Emancipation Proclamation Act was received by slaves in Galveston, Texas. Juneteenth, celebrated on June 19, is now a U.S. federal holiday to commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation Act.
13. See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New Press, 2012) 20–21.
14. Buswell, *Slavery, Segregation, and Scripture*, 55.
15. Stephen Haynes, *Noah’s Curse* (Oxford University Press, 2002) 67.
16. Singleton, *Black Theology and Ideology*, 56.
17. Tony Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary* (Holman, 2019) 65.
18. Singleton, *Black Theology and Ideology*, 57.
19. Buswell, *Slavery, Segregation, and Scripture*, 57.
20. Kenneth Kinney, “The Segregation Issue,” *Baptist Bulletin* (Oct 1956) 8.
21. Buswell, *Slavery, Segregation, and Scripture*, 61.
22. Wayne E. Croft Sr., *A History of the Black Baptist Church: I Don’t Feel No Ways Tired* (Judson, 2020) 34–35.
23. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 20–21.
24. <https://thecrowdedhouse.org/what-we-believe>, <https://fiec.org.uk/who-we-are/beliefs/women-in-ministry>.
25. Barr, *Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 19.
26. Ben Witherington III, *What’s in the Word: Rethinking the Socio-Rhetorical Character of the New Testament* (Baylor University Press, 2009) 115.
27. Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Hendrickson, 1992) 3–4.
28. Barr, *Making of Biblical Womanhood*, 19.
29. Conway, “Gender in Creation.”
30. Aida Besançon Spencer, review of *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate*, by Michelle Lee-Barnewall (Baker Academic, 2016), in *Priscilla Papers* 30/3 (Summer 2016) 28.



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War on Women: Roman Misogyny for Military Aim

Heather Preston

The Greco-Roman world of the first few centuries AD was no place of equality for women. Just as the perspective on women affected daily life in general, it also affected Greco-Roman military ambitions in particular. As Bertrand Russell states, “The circumstances of men’s lives do much to determine their philosophy, but conversely their philosophy does much to determine their circumstances.”¹ Let us consider the circumstances of women in a society utterly controlled by men, for by examining their philosophy, the truth of Russell’s statement is evident.

This article will argue that by fostering a culture of vehement misogyny, Rome was able to further its military agenda. The example of Rome’s expansion into Africa will provide a clear illustration. The article will also show that the toxic environment through which many early church fathers were writing skewed biblical studies and thus promoted hostility toward women, veiling Rome’s inherent cultural chauvinism in Christian religion.

The importance of analyzing this history is two-fold: it allows us greater insight into the political endgame of the Roman Empire while also requiring us to more thoroughly examine our own Christian approach to justice. Clarity on the latter is essential for an ethical practice of Christianity or, as Traci West states, “in order to figure out how to make responsible contributions to the shared values of our pluralistic world.”²

Greco-Roman Mythology

One of the most effective tools for promoting culture in any time or place is story; mythologies served as a belief system in ancient cultures and were used powerfully in political situations.³ Rome was adept at this. Collective loyalty and thought were reinforced through carefully crafted characters and dilemmas, which were constructed to position an eager audience as both spectator and judge.

Versions of well-known legends come to mind, for the way female characters are presented represents cultural and political dichotomies. In the case of *Antigone*, for example, there is a wrestling with female agency. Sophocles’s version depicts Antigone as a woman of independent, albeit helpless, voice. Whereas Euripides, although granting her a public appearance, chooses to highlight her as cowardly and reclusive.⁴ In either depiction, the dramatic tension created is a direct result of the fact that the speaker is female.

For ancient Greco-Roman society, mythology was a vessel for securing and spreading misogyny. The term “Greco-Roman” is used intentionally here, for Rome largely adapted Greek mythology. As they did with any conquered civilization, Rome took the pieces of Greek culture they wanted—including their mythology—and made them Roman.⁵ Rome possessed Greek mythology and used it as a tool.

Although the Greeks celebrated and revered many goddesses, care was taken to ensure that the goddesses did not rule the gods. In fact, many of the goddesses were not even birthed of a female—the role of giving life in each instance was usurped by a male god.⁶ For example, the goddess Aphrodite was born of the castrated testicles of Kronos after his son threw them into the sea. Even Athena, the most powerful goddess in Greek mythology, was subjugated by Zeus when in a rage he swallowed her mother, Metas. As the one who essentially brought her into being, he declared her indebted to him for life. Even though he

killed her mother, her debt of servitude is one she took quite seriously. For example, in the *Eumenides* Athena sided with Orestes after he murdered his own mother.

Women, according to Greek mythology, are descendants of Pandora. They are termed “a beautiful evil” and by design are “unmanageable for men.”⁷ They are a kind of curse, and in Rome, women rarely were able to display agency unless by manipulation or coercion. With precious few exceptions, women were seen as either property or problem. As replete as their mythology is with instances of matricide and manipulation, so too is their history, once again proving that their circumstances align with their philosophy.⁸

Military Interests in Africa

Thus, the Greco-Roman world was fundamentally hostile toward women. Such a worldview could not accommodate a kingdom ruled by powerful women, which is where we see a particular clash with the matriarchal kingdoms of Africa. Although Rome had conquered Egypt and established a presence in ports such as Alexandria and Carthage, they had yet to make subject a rival African kingdom ruled by powerful queens. Of particular importance is the Nubian kingdom, whose territory was along the Nile in parts of modern-day southern Egypt and extending south to the region of Khartoum, Sudan.

The objection to these ruling females was not only gender-based, but also racially charged. In their exegetical attempts in the second through the fourth centuries AD, Hellenistic authors such as Irenaeus, Philo, and Origen drew inferences from race and skin color.⁹ As David Goldenberg states, “Origen’s exegesis, which, as we shall see, played a key role in the development of anti-Black racism, is based, at least partly, on a biblical text that is not found in the Hebrew.”¹⁰ Therefore, according to the philosophical worldview of Rome, not only was this region of the world ethnically inferior, but it was ruled by the inferior sex.

Origen (ca. AD 185 – ca. 253) drives this message home in his exegetical work on Song of Solomon. His allegorical interpretation of the bride, who calls herself “dark” (Song 1:5–6)¹¹ goes so far as to inhibit a historical reading of the text. Rather than viewing the bride as Solomon’s betrothed, Origen instead characterizes her blackness as a metaphor for sin and ugliness.¹² Origen’s voice nearly echoes the mythological Creon’s words to his son Haemon, declaring women “a misery in your bed,” going so far in his vitriol as to be averse to even marital intercourse.¹³ “Generally, the church fathers conceived of the female gender as the origin of sin, ‘lust,’ and rebellion. Women were frequently considered as a reminder of the shame of licentious lust. The church fathers thought that suppressing the thoughts, activities, and emotional expressions of the female gender was a divinely sanctioned undertaking.”¹⁴

We do not have the breadth in this article to examine the corresponding religious developments that enhanced the tension and fueled the power struggle between the two empires; suffice it to say that their philosophical worldviews ensured there could be no compromise. One world was ruled by celebrated matriarchs, the other subjugated even their female deities.

In their article concerning the political influence of myth, Małgorzata Budzowska and Jadwiga Czerwińska state, “art, especially performing art, is the dangerous weapon in the hands of politicians because it has

the power to change social thinking.”¹⁵ We cannot underestimate the power of social consciousness in determining moral rightness. When a Roman emperor would declare war, the traditional expression was “for the glory of Rome.” This expression is derived from the epic poem by Virgil, where Jupiter prophesies to Venus—once again solidifying the impact of popular culture and social understanding in driving behavior. In the same narrative, we see once again the connection between art and politics.

At the point in history we are considering, the Greco-Roman empire dominated much of the world known to them. As Virgil suggests was their right, they were well on their way to ruling “Earth’s people.”¹⁶ They had demonstrated their military prowess and controlled the majority of available trade routes. However, they were as of yet unsuccessful in controlling the Nubian kingdom where vast amounts of wealth and precious natural resources, including gold, abounded. This empire included portions of the modern countries of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan and controlled many industrious ports along the Nile River.¹⁷

Although the Romans had conquered Egypt and many northern ports of Africa, the intrigue of what lay south continued to grow through the acquisition not only of practical goods like leather and crops but also extended even to exotic animals. The historian Ptolemy documents the trade of a two-horned rhinoceros that so impressed Emperor Domitian that he minted coins bearing its image between AD 83–85.¹⁸ Even slaves from this region were considered a status symbol and preferred by the wealthy political elite of Rome.¹⁹

The ruling queens of Nubia, known as the Kandakē, were not only competent in governing, but they were also formidable warriors.²⁰ In fact, when the Kandakē Amanirenas defeated the Roman army in 21 BC, a rivalry emerged. This queen was infamously described by the Greek historian Strabo as “masculine” and having only one eye. This was undoubtedly a slight—his description intended to vulgarize a female ruler.

The Kandakē, however, represented more than a question of Rome’s military capability. Rome’s identity as a superpower was at stake; their philosophical worldview hinged on the superiority of men. These queens represented an alternative and opposing worldview, one that required redaction of this unique and powerful ruling authority from scores of histories. This was a kingdom whose Kandakē asked no permission and, in some cases, did not have a male counterpart with whom they ruled.²¹ Their strength and stability of leadership could only be a threat to the patriarchy of Rome. Indeed, their notoriety was so well established that when Luke introduces the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:27, rather than naming the man, Luke gives his position relative to “Queen Kandakē” (“Candace” in many English translations, “the Candace” in NRSVue). The Kandakē were so well-known that Luke uses them as a reference point for his audience.

Religious Veil

Christian authors emerging within the Greco-Roman world during this period are largely responsible for the foundation of Western Christianity. Caution must be taken for the way their inherent philosophical persuasions influenced their understanding of the biblical text. As David Wiesen writes, “The roots of the misogynous tradition can be found in Hesiod, who in his tale of Pandora sang of the evils brought forth upon the earth by the creation of woman.”²² The roots of misogyny ran deep in the Roman Empire and though a modern Christian may set aside the writings of Hesiod as secular and irrelevant, for the Greco-Roman world, philosophy was ingrained in everyday life. Its impact on these early writers cannot be overstated.

Furthermore, when evaluating early church doctrines, we would be remiss to ignore each author’s sociopolitical setting.

One prolific author is Jerome (ca. 345 – 420). Carrying a Greco-Roman literary tradition into his misogynistic renderings of biblical texts, Jerome in many ways synthesizes the sentiments of earlier writers—both secular and Christian. By examining the influences in his writing, we can deduce that aspects of his positioning result from social inculcation, further indicated by his repeated contradictions of his own antifeminist statements.²³ He can highly regard women in biblical history yet denigrate the entire gender in the same breath. In fact, his theological renderings of the female sex largely represent “stereotyped literary devices.”²⁴

Another fourth-century church father with similar views is Ambrosiaster (specific dates unknown). Widely read and studied, his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* goes so far as to claim that only men bear the image of God: “a man is formed in the image of God, and woman is not. But she is the image of God by virtue of the man”²⁵ Like the trope of a damsel in distress, the man may need a savior, but the woman needs a man. Ambrosiaster argues that the veil Paul refers to in 1 Cor 11 acts as a public mark of guilt, a Scarlett Letter to use a modern expression, signifying that the woman is responsible for bringing sin into the world.²⁶

Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD 150 – ca. 215) argues that “it belongs to the man to be virtuous, and to the woman to be licentious and unjust.”²⁷ Origen characterizes women as “unfaithful, weak, and lazy.”²⁸ Chrysostom (ca. AD 347 – 407) refers to women as the most harmful of all “savage beasts.”²⁹ Even those who would not concede the immoral nature of such commentary can readily see the empty stereotypes employed for eliciting religious principles such as restricting women from certain leadership positions. The manipulation of truth serves a political endgame, and as Hannelie Wood posits, “an insensitive and too early denunciation of the early church fathers as misogynists . . . is carried out without taking into consideration the church fathers’ social context and the opinions that formed their opinions on women.”³⁰

It is important to note that these assertions made by early Christian writers are not biblically founded. The equal importance of women in the church is made clear at Pentecost when Peter cites the prophet Joel: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams” (Acts 2:17 CEB). Scripture is replete with women in both leading and symbolically significant roles, such as Mary anointing Jesus before his ultimate sacrifice (John 12:3) or women as the first witnesses to and proclaimers of the resurrection. Unfortunately, however, such examples do not influence all early Christian authors. In an article analyzing the notorious Tertullian (ca. AD 155 – 220) and his reference to women as “the devil’s gateway,”³¹ Nonna Harrison writes, “Tertullian has become famous for his misogyny, but he was not representative of all early Christians.”³² Let us proceed with caution in our criticisms lest we miss the lesson in their errant work and too readily moralize through our own social lens.

As much as our moral codes may be offended by the rhetoric presented, the idea of woman being the repository of all evil and thus to be resisted was deeply entrenched in Greco-Roman society through philosophy. In his NT letter, James cautions about keeping religion pure and urges the church to guard against being “polluted” or “stained” by the world (James 1:27). A polluted framework distorted the insights of many early church writers. And it is with the ideology of women characterized as “weak,” “lazy,” and “savage beasts” that the Roman Empire butted against an empire of powerful and dignified queens.

Queens of Africa: A Formidable Conquest

Considering the appetite of Rome's ever-expanding empire, Africa would seem a logical progression. The Kandakē Amantitere's kingdom was so well established that it drew the attention of virtually every other explorer or political ruler. As early as the first century AD, Emperor Nero and Pliny the Elder are both said to have paid her visits.³³ However, their reports stand in contrast to the flattering depictions excavated in more recent centuries. Amantitere herself is specifically praised for her prowess in battle. In Meroitic art, she is depicted as striking down enemies of the kingdom.³⁴

Few kingdoms, and no other known matriarchs of the time, could boast of defeating enemies as formidable as Rome. The aforementioned Kandakē Amanirenas had even decapitated a statue of Augustus Caesar and buried its head at the foot of a local temple so that her people could physically trample their foe. A brazen and boastful display of power, this bronze head, known as the Meroe Head, was excavated in the early twentieth century and is now on display at the British Museum.

The power of these African queens is celebrated in the artwork of their kingdoms. Referring to sculptures of Kandakēs that date back centuries BC, Steffan Spencer comments: "These statues convey a royal air . . . rather than solely emphasizing their fertility."³⁵ In other words, these are not objectified women, such as ancient Greece was known for, but figures of power.³⁶ Whereas Greco-Roman artistic depictions of women typically focused on their sexual attributes, these African queens were showcased in strength and status. Their dignity was ensured through their strength of leadership.

It is important to note that what we understand regarding this world region is limited, largely because the Meroitic language in which it is recorded is mostly undeciphered. We rely on the records of conquering kingdoms, which are notoriously biased.

The Villainization of African Queens

Traditionally, it would have been absurd to suggest that women had influence in Roman military zones. Wives were seen as having no value to military operations and were viewed as an impediment.³⁷ Though more recent studies have begun to question this, proposing that soldiers could possibly have had families in base-style housing,³⁸ there is still no supporting evidence that Roman women participated in military service. Women were expected to be submissive in their roles, such as virgin or mother, and to foster allegiance to the empire. This hierarchy, or ideology of female placement in society, was of course not original to Rome, but Rome configured the ideology of the political exclusion of women.³⁹

It can hardly be controversial to state that Rome villainized African queens or viewed eastern influences with contempt. This goes back hundreds of years BC, and in the late first century BC is expressed in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Though unnamed in the epic poem, our villain is none other than Cleopatra, who is described as a plotting schemer, "Resolved on death,"⁴⁰ and fully intent on overthrowing the Roman Empire. Later, the author recounts tales of eastern women corrupting patriarchal order by turning Roman women into traitors in a frenzied burning of ships.⁴¹ As historian Hans Volkmann points out, "Octavian's propaganda brought Cleopatra into the foreground and made her the real adversary."⁴² Volkmann shows how Anthony is depicted in political narratives as the quintessential victim of the evil African queen.

By villainizing women in positions of authority and, in particular, the Kandakē, Rome proclaimed itself the hero in its quest for world

domination. Even though these African queens had been victorious over Rome in the past, they were depicted as inferior and simultaneously as the aggressor. They were the villain, Rome the Savior.

Rome's failed attempts to dominate Africa south of Egypt did not diminish their will to dominate. Toward the end of the second century AD, it had become clear that Rome's power in Egypt was unstable at best and in order to press further into Africa, reforms were necessary to ensure allegiance to Rome over previously established Egyptian culture. It was necessary to more clearly delineate between who belonged to Rome and those who were still loyal to traditional African culture.⁴³ This movement was carefully accompanied by additional villainization and a fostering of mistrust with women—especially foreign women.

Ultimately, Rome failed in its attempted conquest. Scholars are divided as to what ultimately ended the Kandakē.⁴⁴ Curiously, the kingdom declined and was subsequently conquered by Ezana, king of Aksum (overlapping present-day Ethiopia) in the fourth century AD.⁴⁵ It is worth noting, however, that the Nobatian empire would take over much of this region in the fifth century AD, led by King Silko who professed Christianity.⁴⁶ Christianity would boast a thousand-year history in the region and notably fight off Arab Muslim invaders until eventually succumbing in the sixteenth century.

What lives on, however, is Greco-Roman philosophy. As Loren Cunningham and David Hamilton write, "The deadly virus of Greek thinking would spread and infect religious teaching throughout Western civilization."⁴⁷ In many ways, this philosophical school of thought is still controlling the circumstances of women today. The lesson in the resistance of these African queens is perhaps not purely militant strength, but also social consciousness. It forces us to reexamine our own social scripts and to ask who is controlling the narrative.

As Nijay Gupta points out when referring to the apostles' structuring of the church, "they appeared to have borrowed social systems from already existing organizations and systems in their world."⁴⁸ A seemingly sensible approach, in the hands of the politically astute it is one that ultimately demands reciprocity. In the case of Rome, the glory of an empire became synonymous with the glory of heavenly favor. This is a dangerous misappropriation we see modeled by nationalist political groups today and one that Augustine (AD 354 – 430) cautioned against on numerous occasions, declaring that as Christians our ultimate allegiance must always be to a heavenly city and authority.⁴⁹ The Scriptures make clear that our ultimate battle is not with flesh and blood—the power and authority given us as the church is not one of world domination, but rather over the unseen realm.

Notes

1. C. E. M. Joad, "Bertrand Russell's 'History of Western Philosophy,'" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 47 (1946) 85–104.
2. Traci C. West, *Disruptive Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Westminster John Knox, 2006) xiv.
3. Małgorzata Budzowska and Jadwiga Czerwińska, "The Political Involvement of Myth in its Stage Adaptations," *Collectanea Philologica* 19 (2016) 63–75.
4. Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "Another Antigone: The Emergence of the Female Political Actor in Euripides' 'Phoenician Women,'" *Political Theory* 33/4 (2005) 472–94.
5. Gregory Aldete, "The Roman Empire," *The Great Courses* (The Teaching Company, Jan 11, 2019). Even the gods of conquered civilizations were not off-limits, as Rome frequently added to their pantheon from the Persians, the Medians, and the Egyptians. Certain rulers were great admirers of Greek mythology and culture. Flaminius, in the third century BC, is a notable instance of a Roman consul who had no intention of eradicating Greek culture but rather possessing it. See also Ben

- Kane, "Rome vs Greece: A Little-known Clash of Empires; The Fate of Greek City States which had Aided the Roman Invasion Was Most Ironic," *The Irish Times* (July 11, 2018).
6. John Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan, *Women in the Ancient World: The Arethusa Papers*, SUNY Series in Classical Studies (SUNY Press, 1984).
 7. Kathryn McClymond, "Complex Goddesses: Athena, Aphrodite, Hera," *The Great Courses; Great Mythologies of the World*.
 8. Elizabeth Kolbert, "Such a Stoic," *The New Yorker* (Jan 26, 2015).
 9. Jillian Stinchcomb, "Race, Racism, and the Hebrew Bible: The Case of the Queen of Sheba," *Religions* 12/10 (2021) 795. The symbolism of light vs. dark—holy vs. evil—is misappropriated when applied to skin color. Consider the Greek practice of sacrificing white animals to heavenly gods and black to animals of the underworld. See Aldete, "The Roman Empire."
 10. David Goldenberg, "Racism, Color Symbolism and Color Prejudice," in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, ed. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac, and Joseph Ziegler (Cambridge University Press, 2009) 97. Origen drew inferences from the "curse of Ham" which led to an ideology of superior and inferior races (*First Principles* 2.9.5). This ideology was also based on geographic philosophical thought—that those who live in particularly hot, dry climates such as southern Africa were driven there because they are particularly sinful. See Matthijs den Dulk, "Origen of Alexandria and the History of Racism as a Theological Problem," *JTS* 71/1 (Apr 2020) 164–95.
 11. "Dark am I, and lovely, daughters of Jerusalem—like the black tents of the Kedar nomads, like the curtains of Solomon's palace. 6 Don't stare at me because I'm darkened by the sun's gaze" (Song 1:5–6a CEB).
 12. Rowan A Greer, *Origen* (Paulist, 1979).
 13. Mark S. M. Scott, "Shades of Grace: Origen and Gregory of Nyssa's Soteriological Exegesis of the 'Black and Beautiful' Bride in Song of Songs 1:5," *HTR* 99/1 (2006) 65–83.
 14. Clifford Owusu-Gyamfi and Daniel Dei, "Tertullian's Moral Theology on Women and the Accusation of Misogyny," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43/1 (Apr 22, 2022) 4, make a strong case for Tertullian being misunderstood and advocate for a more specific definition of misogyny. The authors also point to relevant imagery and social practices that Tertullian is advising against that are specific to women. See also Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for Heaven: Catholic Church and Sexuality* (Doubleday, 1990) 185; Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel* (Brazos, 2021).
 15. Budzowska and Czerwińska, "The Political Involvement of Myth in its Stage Adaptations," 63–75.
 16. Virgil, *Aeneid* 1151–52, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (Vintage Classics, 1990) 190.
 17. Mahmoud Suliman Bashir and Geoff Emberling, "Trade in Ancient Nubia: Routes, Goods, and Structures," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Nubia*, ed. Geoff Emberling and Bruce Beyer Williams (Oxford University Press, 2021) ad loc.
 18. Arienne King, "The Roman Empire in West Africa," *World History Encyclopedia*.
 19. William Blair, *An Inquiry into the State of Slavery amongst the Romans* (James Clarke & Co., 1833).
 20. See Heather Preston, "The Kandake: A Missing History," *Priscilla Papers* 37/4 (Autumn 2023) 16–19.
 21. Ahmed M. Ali Hakem, "The Matriarchs of Meroe: A Powerful Line of Queens Who Ruled the Kushite Empire," *The UNESCO Courier* 32/8 (1979) 58.
 22. David S. Wiesen, "Women and Marriage," in *St. Jerome as a Satirist: A Study in Christian Latin Thought and Letters* (Cornell University Press, 1964) 113–65.
 23. Wiesen, "Women and Marriage," 117.
 24. Wiesen, "Women and Marriage," 148.
 25. Gerald Lewis Bray, *Commentaries on Romans and 1–2 Corinthians: Ambrosiaster* (IVP Academic, 2009), *Comm. I Cor.*, 11:5–7. 2: "vir enim ad imaginem dei factus est, non mulier. haec est autem imago dei in viro, quia unus deus unum fecit hominem, ut sicut ab uno deo sunt omnia, ita essent et ab uno homine omnes homines, ut unus dei invisibilis unus homo visibilis imaginem haberet in terris, ut unus deus in uno homine videretur auctoritatem unius principii conservare ad confusionem diaboli." See also Sophie Lunn-Rockcliffe, *Ambrosiaster's Political Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2007).
 26. Theodore S. De Bruyn, David G. Hunter, and Stephen A. Cooper, *Ambrosiaster's Commentary on the Pauline Epistles: Romans* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2017) cxxiv–cxxv.
 27. Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* (Aeterna, 2016).
 28. Hannelie Wood, "Feminists and Their Perspectives on the Church Fathers' Beliefs regarding Women: An Inquiry," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38 (2017) 5.
 29. Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church's Response*, 2nd ed. (Fortress, 2012) 72.
 30. Cooper-White, *Cry of Tamar*, 2.
 31. ANF 4:24.
 32. Nonna Verna Harrison, "Eve, the Mother of God and Other Women," *The Ecumenical Review* 60/1 (Jan 2008) 71–81.
 33. Randi Haaland, "The Meroitic Empire: Trade and Cultural Influences in an Indian Ocean Context," *The African Archaeological Review* 31/4 (2014) 654.
 34. Hakem, "The Matriarchs of Meroe," 59. Whereas historians and writers from Rome impugned the queens or made subtle jabs to diminish them, the relics, sculptures, and other deciphered work we have recalling their reign is quite the contrary. These queens are lauded and revered by their subjects.
 35. Steffan A. Spencer, "Matrifocal Retentions in Ethiopian Orthodox Traditions: The Madonna as Ark and Queen Makeda as Prefiguration of Mary; with Egyptian Queen Tiye & Pharaoh Hatshepsut as Reference," *African Identities* (2021) 12. Spencer provides many notable examples of sculptures depicting dignified female rulers, now featured in museums worldwide, including the National Museum of Ethiopia and the Neues Museum in Berlin, Germany. The statues themselves date as far back as 1470 BC.
 36. Consider Athena, who is said to have "popped out" of Zeus' mind. Literally a figment of his imagination. Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (Grand Central, 1942) 24–25.
 37. Herodian, *Histories*, transl. C. R. Whittaker, LCL (1969).
 38. Penelope M. Allison, "Mapping for Gender: Interpreting Artefact Distribution Inside 1st- and 2nd-Century A.D. Forts in Roman Germany," *Archaeological Dialogues* 13/1 (2006) 1–20.
 39. Tatiana Tsakiropoulou-Summers and Katerina Kitsē-Mytakou, eds., *Women and the Ideology of Political Exclusion: From Classical Antiquity to the Modern Era* (Routledge, 2019). This book makes a compelling case regarding Greek historians who documented the surrounding cultures. Though detailed and thorough, they were hardly unbiased, which gives us greater insight into their philosophical worldview.
 40. Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book IV, Line 784 (Random House, 1983) 116.
 41. Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book IV, Lines 1034–35, 153.
 42. Hans Volkmann, *Cleopatra: A Study in Politics and Propaganda* (Sagamore, 1958) 158.
 43. Alan K. Bowmen, "Roman and Byzantine Egypt (30 BCE– 642 CE)," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2020).
 44. Joshua Rapp Learn, "The Rise, Fall and Underestimated Rule of Kush," *Discover Magazine* (June 17, 2022).
 45. George Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia: Warfare, Commerce, and Political Fictions in Ancient Northeast Africa* (Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, 2013). For an assessment of the authenticity of Ezana's conversion as well as the origins of Ethiopian Christianity, see Rugare Rukuni, "Negus Ezana: Revisiting the Christianisation of Aksum," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42/1 (Feb 3, 2021).
 46. Vince Bantu, "Early African Christianity: Nubia," *The Jude 3 Project* (Sept 29, 2016).
 47. Loren Cunningham and David Joel Hamilton, with Janice Rogers, *Why Not Women: A Fresh Look at Scripture on Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership* (YWAM, 2000) 107.
 48. Nijay K. Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* (IVP Academic, 2023) 75.
 49. E. M. Atkins and R. J. Dodaro, eds., *Augustine: Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), letters 90, 91, 103, 104.



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Breaking the Silence on Women Leaders in the Early Church

A Review of *Excavating Women: The Archaeology of Leaders in Early Christianity*

By Carina Oliveira Prestes (Fortress, 2025)

Reviewed by Mimi Haddad

Exquisitely researched and thoroughly reasoned, *Excavating Women: The Archaeology of Leaders in Early Christianity* traces archaeological markers used to honor women leaders in pre- and early Christian centuries. From Greek and Roman temples to tombs, churches, and catacombs, archaeologist and professor Dr. Carina Prestes excavates women's leadership at odds with literary texts of their day. As her analysis unfolds, we learn how one generation spoke to another in the language of archaeology, repeating and repurposing leadership markers in clothing, objects left in tombs, mosaics, and inscriptions that, once seen, are impossible to ignore. *Excavating Women* includes numerous images to illustrate her conclusions. As ancient stones cry out, *Excavating Women* is a book whose time has come!

The author begins by describing her methodology and the scope of her work in ch. 1, which is both a compelling epistemological strategy and one she has pioneered.¹ Chapter 2 examines lesser-known markers of women leaders prior to Christianity. Once documented, these markers are carefully traced in both the burial and mosaic remains, illustrating women serving as deacons, priests, bishops, and elders in chs. 3 and 4. Piecing the evidence together, ch. 5 considers the history of women leaders from antiquity through the early church and into late antiquity—a legacy that confronts errors and biases in literary accounts of women leaders from these very centuries.

A New Methodology Yields New Evidence

Each chapter stress-tests Prestes's methodology to yield impressive results. In the first chapter, titled "Introduction: Context, Scope, Method," Prestes begins by noting the paucity of historical research on women—a bias that is all too common. Because of this, she has developed a process that assesses the archaeological artifacts depicting women's lives and leadership alongside the relevant texts in same the timeframe. She writes:

there is currently no publication that documents the chronological development of women's participation in Christian communities based on a broad analysis of evidence from different artifact classes including a wide variety of artistic media. (4–5)

In ch. 1, Prestes recognizes two leading scholars—Dorothy Irvin and Christine Schenk—both of whom are archaeological experts on women leaders in the early church. And both are, therefore, well-known to CBE.² As archaeologists, they consider perspectives and options apart from theological and historical texts and their assumptions (7). Archaeologists therefore have the freedom to ask not, should women be ordained, but "what was the role of women in Early Christianity?" (7). What does "a broad analysis of material evidence in its context suggest?" (7). Through a multi-disciplinary analysis coupled with new "methodologies and approaches" (9), a more accurate understanding of early church women surfaces. Significantly, Prestes demonstrates the capacity of archaeology to minimize the risk of bias from "a single media to illuminate as many aspects as possible" (9). This becomes the scope and method guiding the discussions that follow.

Titled "Women Before Christianity: An Unexpected Strength," ch. 2 considers prominent examples of women's overlapping leadership in cultic and civic spheres, specifically those of priestesses and patrons respectively. Prestes clarifies how culture rewarded women's status

and influence with financial, legal, and social benefits, and significantly through public recognition in the form of statues, inscriptions, and artwork. Here, Prestes guides readers in learning the language of archaeology to identify women priestesses as frontal facing and with hands "lifted in prayer suggesting piety" (18). Pre-Christian symbols of leadership also include the wreath, "laurel branch, libation bowl (or jugs) . . . vestments, jewelry, a fancy headband or crown, and a draped mantle under the right arm" (18). Christians later adopted these symbols to identify women leaders in early churches even as Greek and Roman culture had held different expectations for women's public behavior in pre-Christian centuries.

Prestes shows that, whereas Greek women were honored for their cultic and civic leadership, Roman women were expected to be modest, "quiet, subordinate to men, passive members of society . . . they were not allowed to speak in public" (20). However, in times of war and political instability, the archaeological remains indicate that women entered public life. They ran shops; they spoke for civic leaders and served as city patrons (21ff.). Rome also had its women priests—the Vestal Virgins who wielded remarkable power (23). Even beyond the imperial city, women were priestesses (called *Sacerdos*) in cities such as Pompeii. As the Emperor Cult spread, Prestes shows how the material remains of women priestesses, patrons, and benefactors served the expanding empire. Again, Prestes examines the remains of these women as they were honored with statues at the front of temples, and with "inscriptions in prominent places in the city . . . the forum and the city gates" (29). And women priestesses wore crowns—a symbol that marked their leadership in the centuries that followed (35).

Brilliantly, ch. 2 shows how women leading "house churches" merged both "public and private spheres" (45). This not only honored cultural expectations for women alongside their lived experiences, whether Greek or Roman, but also how women "evangelized within their social network" (50) to the point that they outnumbered men in these communities. By the second century, "60 percent of the members of Christian communities . . . were women" (50). Further, women with raised hands (*orant*) comprised 70 percent of Roman catacombs portraits compared to 10 percent of men, with couples comprising 20 percent (51). Women's influence is equally evident in prominent pagan cults in "major cities like Ephesus (Artemis), Corinth (Aphrodite) and Athens (Athena)" (51). Large communities not only worshipped a female deity, the goddess and priestess "dominated the religious life of the city" (51). As women thronged to religious leadership, the emperor Augustus (63 BC–AD 14) issued laws curtailing women's behavior (54). Prestes points out that, "when Paul advises women to be silent" (55), it is not because culture required their silence. On the contrary! The archaeological evidence shows women leaders were far from silent when in cultic and civic spaces. For this reason, Prestes suggests something else was behind Paul's silencing of women, given how the archaeological evidence is often at odds with literary sources.

Titled "Women and the Evidence of Early Christian Burials: An Unexpected Bishop," the third chapter demonstrates how early Christians harnessed pagan and Jewish symbols of leadership to depict women leaders serving churches. Prestes also explored personal items found in a tomb located close to an altar where church leaders were honored. This tomb contained gold earrings, a gold diadem, and a silver

medallion that belonged to an influential, wealthy woman in Sicily (64). According to Prestes, since the Greeks were influential in Sicily, and as they also accepted priestesses, the leadership of women from Greek temples spilled over to Christian churches, as the tomb contents suggest. Further, as church hierarchy strengthened, so did the limits on women church leaders. By the fourth century, the Council of Laodicea prohibited women presbyters and forbade women from approaching the altar, thus confirming the existence of both practices (76)! Prestes explains how prohibitions parallel the archaeological evidence from inscriptions that honor women “leading religious communities” along with their “Christian clerical titles” (77). One example is the woman Kale—a presbyter, and a “woman without reproach”—a phrase used for leaders holding religious office. Equally, Prestes shows that women leaders were also honored by symbols (wreaths and crowns) with inscriptions marking them as presbyters, prophets, and apostles.

Turning to the catacombs, Prestes unearths a trove of early Christian art to examine symbols marking women in ecclesial offices, “realities not always expressed in the written record” (84). Given that the catacombs are a funeral record of an important person’s life, Prestes observes that the “Christian catacombs not only contain a disproportionately greater number of images of dead women in comparison to men” (85), but also that the many “women portrayed in these frescoes seem to suggest the strong engagement, presence, and agency of women in the Christian communities” (85). Two prominent women featured in the San Gennaro catacombs in Naples are Bitalia and Cerula. Both are frontal facing “with open arms and raised in a prayer-like orans position” (87), with what is likely the Gospels opened above their heads—indicating their literacy and also their ordination as priests, deacons, or bishops. Symbols like the alpha and omega further suggest that both women were either deacons or bishops. Intriguingly, the “bishop Severian of Gabala (380–425) wrote that the gospel book should be held over the ordination candidate in order that the Holy Spirit’s tongues of fire would descend, as in the upper room at Pentecost, and ordain the new bishop” (90). As Prestes makes clear, when mosaics, tombs, frescos, and inscriptions are analyzed, the combined evidence reveals that ordained women led churches at high offices, even as their leadership was prohibited by the writings of male clerics at the time.

Titled “Women and the Christian Mosaics of Late Antiquity: An Unexpected Counterpart,” ch. 4 examines women portrayed in the mosaics in early Christian worship. Attentive to the number of women and their location within the ceremonial context, Prestes reveals a consistent pattern of women leading church worship as elders. A well-preserved example is the mosaic of empress Theodora (490/500–548) and her emperor husband Justinian I (482–565) are prominently featured in San Vitale, a church in Ravenna, Italy. Both spouses are frontal facing and close to the altar—in the apse—where clergy served communion. On one side of the apse, Theodora holds the chalice for wine, while on the other side, Justinian holds the bowl for bread. According to Prestes, the apse was a holy space most often reserved for the clergy. Therefore, the portrayal of Justinian and Theodora suggests that both men and women served the communion. Attentive to the biblical references, Prestes observes how the mosaic of this church depicts the vision of the throne of God registered in Rev 4 and 5—some of the elements include the four living creatures (Rev 4:7), the scroll with seven seals (Rev 5:1), and the Lamb (Rev 5:6). Hence, the processions led by Theodora and Justinian are depicting female and male elders. The theme of the coronation of Christ (Rev 4 and 5) also appears in another building in Ravenna, San Apollinare Nuovo. It depicts elders casting their crowns before the throne. These mosaics also imply that both men and women were “perceived as part of the twenty-four elders (*presbyteroi*) of Revelation—leaders of the community bringing their crowns before the one sitting on the throne”

(126). A church in Croatia also depicts this scene, emphasizing the significance of this passage for that community.

Prestes concludes ch. 4 by examining women’s clothing in a mosaic panel retelling Mary’s visit with Elizabeth. In this image, both women are located in the apse, and each wears a long white scarf under her cloak with the Greek cross that scholars use to identify a bishop (137–38).

Mounting further evidence, Prestes considers two churches in Rome named after women and both are also featured in the apse—the church of Santa Pudenziana and Santa Praxedis. Prestes notes that Santa Pudenziana was located “on top of a second-century house” believed to be a house church with the “earliest surviving apse with mosaics in Rome” (138). Citing other mosaics that portray women “performing all ministerial activities that men performed” (143), a tipping point of women leading as elders and bishops is reached. This chapter alone is worth the price of the book!

The last chapter, titled “An Unexpected History,” evaluates Greco-Roman archaeological remains through the sixth century. Here, Prestes rehearses significant patterns. First, the literary accounts diverge from the archaeological evidence. Second, whereas women leaders are either prohibited or under-represented in written texts, the archaeological remains tell their story as elders, deacons, and bishops. Third, “literary accounts” favor “the ideologies of the author or of the patron” (147) contra the actual work and lived experiences of women. While the bias of the written texts is rehearsed, strengthened, and passed on as historical fact across the centuries, archaeologists like Prestes have a powerful tool and a unique opportunity to challenge longstanding bias by excavating women’s leadership through the language of archaeology. Chapter 5 is a delightful review of these material remains that free women’s leadership from bias by those who have controlled the past to control the future.³ Supremely, *Excavating Women* tells the story of women’s authentic leadership from pre-Christian to early and Christian times, bringing light and life on every page.

The book’s strengths are manifold, including the author’s innovative methodologies tracing markers of women’s leadership in pre-Christian centuries through the early church period. Prestes’s thesis is both original and supported by substantial evidence and is accessible to a wide range of readers. Places for improvement might include clarifying whether “casting crowns before the throne” is cited in Rev 5 (ch. 4). Another weakness easily addressed includes providing in the footnotes helpful information (e.g., author, publisher, year) when citing resources by Dorothy Irvin and Christine Schenk. Mostly focused on Italy, Prestes’s thesis might be strengthened by examining the art remains in Greece, Turkey, and elsewhere. Despite these minor weaknesses, all in all, *Excavating Women* is a pioneering achievement that demonstrates the power of archaeology to accurately recover the history of early Christian women. Because of this, CBE will co-host a twelve-day tour of Italy (Fall 2026) exploring the sites mentioned in this book, with Dr. Carina Prestes as our guide. We hope you will join us!

Notes

1. Compare the publications of Ally Kateusz, including “Women Leaders at the Table in Early Churches,” *Priscilla Papers* 34/2 (Spring 2020) 14–22.
2. See Jamie Manson on Dorothy Irvin, <https://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/women-priests-demonstrate-profound-faithfulness-god>. Christine Schenk’s book, *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity* (Fortress, 2017), won the Catholic Press Association’s first-place award in the history category. See also <https://cbeinternational.org/resource/bitalia-ancient-woman-priest/> and <https://cbeinternational.org/resource/religion-women-and-children-christian-womans/>.
3. “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” is a quotation from George Orwell’s 1949 novel, *1984*.

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CBE International (CBE) is a nonprofit organization of Christian men and women who believe that the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of men and women of all ethnic groups, all economic classes, and all age groups, based on the teachings of Scriptures as Galatians 3:28.

Priscilla Papers is the academic voice of CBE International, providing peer reviewed, interdisciplinary, scholarship on topics related to a biblical view of women and men in the home, church, and world. "...when Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately," (Acts 18:26b, NRSV).

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CBE exists to promote the biblical message that God calls women and men of all cultures, races, and classes to share authority equally in service and leadership in the home, church, and world. CBE's mission is to eliminate the power imbalance between men and women resulting from theological patriarchy.

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- We *believe* in one God, creator and sustainer of the universe, eternally existing as three persons equal in power and glory.
- We *believe* in the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus Christ.
- We *believe* that eternal salvation and restored relationships are only possible through faith in Jesus Christ who died for us, rose from the dead, and is coming again. This salvation is offered to all people.
- We *believe* the Holy Spirit equips us for service and sanctifies us from sin.
- We *believe* the Bible is the inspired word of God, is reliable, and is the final authority for faith and practice.
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- We *believe* that women and men are equally responsible for and distorted by sin, resulting in shattered relationships with God, self, and others.
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- We *resolve* to value and listen to the voices and lived experiences of women throughout the world who have been impacted by the sins of sexism and racism.

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- Scripture is our authoritative guide for faith, life, and practice.
- Patriarchy (male dominance) is not a biblical ideal but a result of sin that manifests itself personally, relationally, and structurally.
- Patriarchy is an abuse of power, taking from women and girls what God has given them: their dignity, freedom, and leadership, and often their very lives.
- While the Bible reflects a patriarchal culture, the Bible does not teach patriarchy as God's standard for human relationships.
- Christ's redemptive work frees all people from patriarchy, calling women and men to share authority equally in service and leadership.
- God's design for relationships includes faithful marriage between a woman and a man, celibate singleness, and mutual submission in Christian community.
- The unrestricted use of women's gifts is integral to the work of the Holy Spirit and essential for the advancement of the gospel worldwide.
- Followers of Christ are to advance human flourishing by opposing injustice and patriarchal teachings and practices that demean, diminish, marginalize, dominate, abuse, enslave, or exploit women, or restrict women's access to leadership in the home, church, and world.

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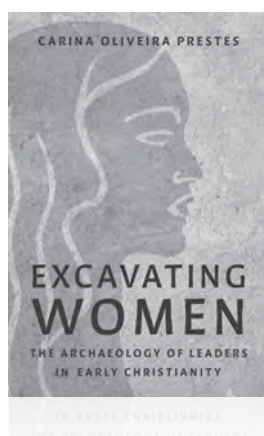


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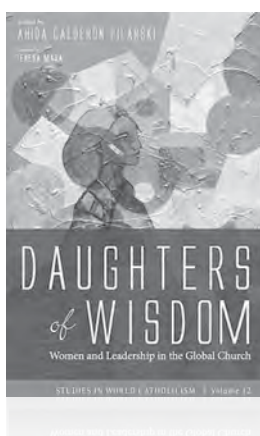
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***Excavating Women: The
Archaeology of Leaders in
Early Christianity***

Carina Oliveira Prestes

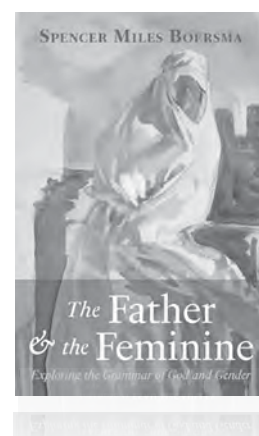
Modern readers often look at the past with distorted presuppositions about women's participation in early Christianity. However, women had a prominent role in society and in religious leadership in the Greco-Roman world. *Excavating Women* investigates the leadership of women in Christian churches during the first six centuries of the common era through a study of the archaeological remains.



***Daughters of Wisdom:
Women and Leadership in
the Global Church***

Ahida Calderón Pilarski, ed.

This book offers a window into current realities regarding women's leadership in the global church and explores strategic recommendations to nurture this leadership in the twenty-first century. The authors address different aspects of women's leadership in the Catholic Church, with a special emphasis on the global South.



***The Father and the Feminine:
Exploring the Grammar of God
and Gender***

Spencer Miles Boersma

How should Christians speak of God when our language for persons is almost always gendered? Is male imagery the only appropriate way? And how does the use of such language impact humans as gendered people? Boersma argues that male language for God need not be problematic if used and understood correctly but that it cannot be the exclusive way Christians speak of the Divine.