

Contextual Reading of 1 Corinthians 14:34-40 and Women's Institutional Pastoral Leadership

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Abstract

This article explored 1 Cor. 14: 34- 40 and how it impinges on women's leadership or participation in higher courts of the church through readings with a selected group in the Presbyterian church of Ghana, Hope Congregation, Nima¹. Situated in Accra, Ghana. Firstly, a scholarly reading of the text was undertaken. This was followed by a Contextual Bible reading²/study (reading with) of the text, to give a voice to ordinary reader to also be heard. The research went on to establish the implications of the text on the church including the decisions of the church council or General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church concerning women in Pastoral leadership in general and also the possibilities of their progression to higher positions of the Church's hierarchy even if they are given the opportunity for it. Qualitative method was employed in the collection and analysis of data through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) for a Contextual Bible reading. This was followed by reflections on the entire study. The final stage was the documentation of the social and personal transformation indicated by the people involved.

¹ Nima is a suburb of Accra, in the southern part of Ghana.

² West, Gerald. O. *Contextual Bible study*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster. 1993

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INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians draws increasing importance in biblical scholarship due to the interpretation of Pauline texts in the scholarly field with the works of some scholars like, Howe (1982), Fee (1987), Dunn (1995), Thiselton (2000) among many. In most of these works, the authors depict how Paul's writings to Corinth have had some impact on the contemporary church from the scholarly standpoints. Thus, the varying interpretations given to the texts by biblical scholars have, according to Barrett, "excited theological thinking and also opened new challenges to Paul's gospel³."

Paul's first letter to the people of Corinth, addressed the issue of spiritual gifts, thus, the Biblical text under study, 1 Corinthians 14:34-40, falls within 1 Corinthians 14:1-40 that which addresses the issue of speaking in tongues and prophecy. The text is therefore within the general framework of the problems the Corinthian assembly encountered in exercising their Christian worship. This research is particularly essential because in contemporary times there are resemblances concerning the challenges that Christian communities face in the mode, essence, individual responsibilities and participation in worship and will, therefore, help women in the churches, to understand the text in their own way.

Through this, scholarly and ordinary readers of the text have arrived at conflicting interpretations of what Paul may have actually meant and this has, however given rise to some controversies over the role of women in the church⁴. The

³ Barrett, Charles Kingsley. *The first epistle to the Corinthians*. New York: Harper and Row. 1968.

⁴ Howe, Margaret E. *Women and church leadership*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1982.

actual concern here, is how 1 Corinthians 14:34-40 has been used to legislate on women's leadership roles in the church, specifically, institutional pastoral leadership even though women are mostly in the majority and are equally skilled.

Such a contentious issue, however requires an act of engagement with contextual realities rather than an interpretative experiment or scholarly research⁵. This Article employed the use of Contextual Reading to examine 1 Corinthians 4:34-36 from the perspective of the Presbyterian church of Ghana, Hope Congregation, Nima a suburb of Accra in Ghana. Focus Group Discussion(FGD) was used in collecting and analyzing the data received. Due to the knowledge and the caliber of respondents being in less privileged areas and situations, it became imperative to also recount prior to the interactions with them, the history of the church and its decision regarding women joining higher ministries in the church such as being ministers or teachers. This is intended to help appreciate the baggage with which the women approach the text under study.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To fulfil the main aim of the study, the following research objectives have been outlined

1. To explore the concept of institutional pastoral leadership in the church from the perspective of the ordinary reader.
2. To Analyse the ordinary reader's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:34-40 with regards to women's leadership positions in churches.
3. To Establish the implications of 1 Corinthians 14:34-40 on the selected Church and their

⁵ West, Gerald O. (2006a). Contextualized reading of the Bible. Analecta: Bruxellensia.

doctrinal standpoint in relation to women's leadership status.

4. To make recommendations for improving women's institutional pastoral leadership roles in the church.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions are framed:

1. What is the Concept of institutional pastoral leadership in the church?
2. What is 1 Corinthians 14:34-40 about with regards to women's leadership positions in churches?
3. What are implications of 1 Corinthians 14:34-40 for the Presbyterian Church (the reader) and their doctrinal standpoint in relation to women's leadership status?
4. What recommendations will you make for improving on women's leadership in the Church?

HISTORY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF GHANA AND THE HOPE CONGREGATION, NIMA-ACCRA, GHANA⁶

The Presbyterian Church of Ghana is a protestant reformed church, of which the Hope Congregation, Nima, is one of its outlets. As stated in the history of The Presbyterian church, in its constitution represents the harmonious blending of several traditions, primarily through the Basel Mission and the Scottish Mission. The Basel Mission started the work in 1828. After difficult beginnings the mission was firmly established by

⁶ Presbyterian Church of Ghana (2016). Constitution. Accra: Waterville Publishing House

1854, with the help of Christians from the West Indies. A seminary was founded, and the Twi language put in writing. By the end of the century the mission achieved its long-cherished goal of working among others, the Asante people of Ghana in West Africa. In 1917 the Basel missionaries had to leave because of the first world

war in Europe. The Church of Scotland responded to a call for help. This explain why the Reformed Church in Ghana adopted the

Presbyterian organizational model. In the 1940s the church extended its work to the northern parts of the country. In the year 2000 the church adopted the general assembly system for its governance.

The Presbyterian Church of Ghana has six departments. Church Life and Nurture deals with various ministries: children and youth, women, men, ministry of the aged, worship, Christian education, training, scholarships, and counselling. Mission and Evangelism is responsible for global mission and specialized ministries. The department of Development and Social Services oversees development and environment, General Education, agriculture and small-scale technology, and publications. Ecumenical Relations looks after the involvement of the church in ecumenism, in the society and with people of other faiths. Two other departments were the Finance Department and the Human Resource Department. The church runs health and educational facilities as well as Agricultural services in 9 stations. Media work is done through 2 printing and publishing houses, 3 newspapers and eight bookshops. The PCG has three lay training centres and runs four guest houses and three conference halls.

The Hope Congregation in Nima⁷, was established between the years 1941 and 1942 and was placed under the supervision of

⁷ History of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Hope Congregation, Nima. Unpublished. 2022

the Accra District until the Adabraka Church gained a district status where the Nima congregation was put under the supervision of the Adabraka Congregation in Accra. The Nima congregation also gained a district status since 1985 till now and oversees other local congregations.

Groups in the church were the women's Class (Fellowship), Singing Band, The Church Choir and the Children's Service. In 1958, the Ewe group unilaterally broke away to form the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (E. P. Church) because of a misunderstanding arising from preaching methods and language barriers. This secession nearly landed the Church on rocks but for the timely intervention of Mr. J. K. Antwi the Church was saved from total collapse.

DECISIONS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF GHANA ON WOMEN IN MINISTRY

The issue of women being a part of the higher decision-making body of the church with specific mention to clerical ministry became a bone of contention among the leadership of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. In the minutes taken at the 66th Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG), held in Takoradi (Western Presbytery) on 19th – 24th August 1995, has it that "Synod Decision that the admission of women into ordained ministry of PCG, be remitted to the presbyteries for their views"⁸.

In the year 2001, at the first General Assembly meeting held at St. John Bosco's Training College in Navrongo under the Northern Presbytery, Remission number 3 had it that "General assembly should review the decision that prevents spouses of ministers of PCG from entering the ordained ministry of the church"⁹. This issue attracted a long and lively discussion from

⁸ Presbyterian Church of Ghana (1995). Minutes of 66th Synod. Appendix 'P', Decision Number 2.

⁹ Presbyterian Church of Ghana (2001). 1st General Assembly Minutes, Remission number 3.

which two motions were tabled. Mr. R. H. Akrong moved that the old decision be revoked and was seconded by Rev. K. A. Ampadu – Daaduam. The counter motion moved by Mr. E. O. Acheampong called for the retention of the old decision. His motion was seconded by Rev. Asiama Bekoe.” Due to the two motions, a vote was casted, and the results were as follows: First Motion – 38 votes and Second Motion – 147 votes. General assembly therefore concluded that the decision that the spouses of ministers could not enter the ordained ministry of the church be retained.

The issue appeared again at the 5th General Assembly held at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology under the Ashanti Presbytery on 29th July- 4th August 2005. The issue was again remitted to the presbyteries¹⁰ but at the 6th General Assembly meeting at the Presbyterian Boy’s Secondary School at Legon under the Ga Presbytery on 18th – 24th August 2006 it resurfaced. Item ‘C’ of Constitutional Matters (Remission of Presbyteries) stated that “after the issue of debarring spouses of ministers from entering the ministry had been discussed, the Moderator opened the floor for motions and the first motion was moved by Reverend Sam Odjelua, that: “The discussion preventing spouses of ministers from entering the ministry should be reviewed¹¹. A technical committee should be set up to present a well-informed paper to the General Assembly before a final decision is taken”. The motion was seconded by Reverend E. W. Nagba. The second motion was made by Reverend Yaw Danso that: “in view of the fact that allowing spouses of ministers to enter the ministry is problematic, minister’s spouses should be debarred from entering the ministry. He was seconded by Rev. E. Agyem – Frempong. A vote was casted, and the results are as follows: Motion 1 - 89 votes and Motion 2 – 126 votes. At this meeting the final decision on this issue was made. The Assembly

¹⁰ Presbyterian Church of Ghana (2005) 5th General Assembly Minutes.

¹¹ Presbyterian Church of Ghana (2006) 6th General Assembly Minutes.

therefore decided that minister's spouses should be debarred from entering the ministry. The Moderator therefore said that a committee would be appointed to prepare a study material on the issue¹².

INTERPRETATION OF THE TEXT

Firstly, in reading the text, we decided to engage with the text historically. Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians contains what some consider one of the most misogynistic passages in all of

scripture (1 Cor 14:34-36): "women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church"¹³

"Hai gunaikai en tais ekklesiiais sigatōsan, ou gar epitrepetai autais lalein; alla hupotassesthōsan, kathōs kai ho nomos legei. ei de ti mathein thelousin, en oikō toūs idioūs andras eperotatōsan, aischron gar estin gunaiki lalein en ekklesiā." (Greek Translation)

Ironically, these verses are found in the same epistle that contains Paul's responses to the conflicts among Corinthian believers that had been reported to him by "Chloe's people" (1:11- "tōn Chloēs")¹⁴. Again, the term "Chloe's people" refers to "members of Chloe's household," and likely indicates that Christian meetings were held at the house of a woman named

¹² Presbyterian Church of Ghana (2006) 6th General Assembly Minutes.

¹³ The Holy Bible: New International Version. (2011). Zondervan

¹⁴ Metzger, Bruce M. A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (Fourth Revised Edition). Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994. 2nd ed.

Chloe. Thirdly, it seems quite improbable that Paul would mandate silence for Chloe in her own home. Additionally, Paul's discourse on proper dress for women who prophecy in 1 Cor 11 makes the supposed Pauline command in 1 Cor 14:34-36 for women to be completely silent in the Church more problematic. Due to the seeming contradiction between 1 Cor 14:34-36 and these other aspects of the letter, many Scholars have concluded that the passage is a non-Pauline interpolation. They point

to the divergent placement of the passage in many ancient manuscripts as evidence that it was a late non-Pauline addition to the Pauline letter. Moreover, these interpolation advocates claim that verses 34-36 contain rhetoric and language which is foreign to Paul and do not match his otherwise tolerant attitude toward women's participation in worship as manifested in his other works. Although many scholars uphold this theory, many interpretations given to this text and its usage in churches, seem to depict otherwise. Hence the need to interact with women from the presbyterian church to have knowledge on their opinion on this text. In doing this contextual reading the writers chose to adopt Gerald West's four commitments in doing a contextual reading.

The four commitments of the organic reader in undertaking a contextual study

Gerald West¹⁵, outlines four key commitments or levels of consciousness for doing contextual Bible reading, particularly in the African context. These commitments ensure that biblical interpretation remains socially relevant and empowering for marginalized communities. The four commitments are:

¹⁵ West, G. O. *Contextual Bible study*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster. 1993

1. Critical Consciousness – this has to do with engaging with the text critically, questioning assumptions, and uncovering underlying power structures.
2. Contextual Consciousness – Understanding the historical, cultural, and social contexts that shape a text's meaning or basically the context in which the text was written.
3. Community Consciousness – Recognizing the role of the reader's own community and how their lived experiences shape interpretation. That is to say that everyone approached text with their own cultural baggage.
4. Transformational Consciousness – Applying insights from the text to bring about personal and social transformation to the day to day lives of the community or people you're reading with.

These commitments help readers engage deeply with texts, ensuring interpretation is both reflective and relevant to real-world contexts¹⁶. In light of the above, since community consciousness deals with seeking the opinion of the everyday user of the text by formulating Community conscious questions and interacting with them through a Contextual Bible Study, a Focused group discussion was organized to engage in a contextual reading using 1 Cor. 14: 34-40 and the following is the outcome.

¹⁶ West, G. O. *Contextual Bible study*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster. 1993

ANALYSIS

Biodata

Women who participated in the Focus Group Discussion ranged between the ages of thirty (30) to seventy-five (75) years and have served in the church for between ten (10) to thirty-eight years (38). They are mostly market women or housewives who have either an average, little or no formal education at all. Others are also retired educationists and retired nurses who are running their own private schools or small businesses. Below is an analysis of the data collected.

Contextual Consciousness

With regards to the Concept of Leadership in the Church, a few ideas came up

Historical Exclusion of Women

The Early Church: Both respondents noted that in the early church, women were largely sidelined. Respondent 1 observed that women were not given the chance to speak or express themselves, while Respondent 2 mentioned that baby girls were not regarded, and this disregard became a lasting stigma.

Contemporary Shifts

Changing Roles Today: Respondent 1 contrasts the past by highlighting that while women were once relegated to housekeeping (even as biblical texts like the “capable woman” were used to justify limited roles), there is now a growing acknowledgment of their talents. Women have begun taking on roles traditionally reserved for men.

Continued Discrimination: Respondent 2, however, points out that discriminatory practices still persist in some churches. For example, segregating women during their menstrual

periods or seating them separately, indicating that change is gradual and uneven.

Alignment with Leadership Norms: Both respondents agree that higher leadership roles (e.g., the Presbytery Chairmanship and moderatorship) have historically been and, to a large extent, continue to be occupied by men. This reflects a continuity of tradition, even as more women are participating in various church ministries.

Critical Consciousness

Interpreting 1 Corinthians 14:34-40 with Regards to Women's Leadership Positions in Churches

Content of the Text:

Literal Interpretation: Respondent 1 explains that the passage instructs women to remain silent in churches, suggesting that this may have been a cultural mandate of that time.

Behavioural Rationale: Respondent 2 offers an alternative view, proposing that the silence was a response to perceived pride or a lack of respect toward husbands by the women in the early church.

Implications for Leadership Roles:

Restriction on Spiritual Expression: Both respondents agree that the text has been interpreted as limiting women's ability to exercise their spiritual gifts. Respondent 1 emphasizes that women were expected to seek information from their husbands rather than speak in church.

Maintaining Hierarchical Order: Respondent 2 adds that the text was intended to preserve the leadership hierarchy, ensuring that men remained the visible and authoritative figures in church settings.

Modern Correlations: While historical interpretations imposed strict limitations, both respondents noted that there has been significant progress. Nowadays, women serve in various leadership capacities (Bible study leaders, liturgists, ushers, praise and worship leaders) even though debates about the extent of their roles persist.

Community Consciousness

Implications of 1 Corinthians 14:34-40 on the Presbyterian Church and their Doctrinal Standpoint in Relation to Women's Leadership Status, showed that:

Doctrinal Interpretations:

Linking to Early Church Practices: Respondent 1 sees similarities between the issues addressed in 1 Corinthians 14:34-40 and other contentious topics (like prophecy and speaking in tongues), suggesting that contemporary churches are drawing parallels with early church practices.

Contextual Misapplication: Respondent 2 argues that the issues in the text were specific to the cultural and situational context of the early church and that applying them rigidly today overlooks the evolution in societal and church contexts.

Impact on Leadership Perceptions:

Shift in Perception: According to Respondent 1, the higher leadership is beginning to recognize the value of a "feminine touch" in decision-making, even as certain decisions continue to restrict full inclusion.

Room for Improvement: Respondent 2 emphasizes that while women are increasingly finding space in church roles, significant barriers remain—particularly in the higher echelons of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.

Transformational Consciousness

Recommendations for Improving Women's Leadership in the Church were suggested by the participants

Empowering Through Structural Changes

Increased Representation: Both respondents agree on the need to promote more women into leadership positions. Respondent 1 advocates for more women ministers and presbyters, while Respondent 2 suggests a focus on roles such as District ministers, moderators, and even presbytery chairmanship.

Capacity Building:

Training and Education: There is a call for practical measures such as training (Respondent 1) and further education—both formal and informal (Respondent 2)—to build the confidence and skills of women for active leadership roles.

Strategic Reforms:

Revising Nomination and Voting Practices: The data suggests that despite frequent nominations of women, there remains a systemic bias in the voting process for higher leadership roles. Addressing these systemic issues is seen as key to fostering a more inclusive leadership structure.

Conclusion

This analysis reflects a clear evolution in the discourse on women's leadership within the church, highlighting a few key issues worth considering:

1. **Historical Constraints vs. Modern Shifts:** The early church's exclusion of women is acknowledged as a product of its cultural context. Today, while some traditions continue to exert influence, there is a

growing movement toward inclusivity and empowerment of women in leadership.

2. Biblical Texts as Both Constraint and Catalyst: The interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:34-40 plays a central role. It has historically been used to limit women's roles, but modern interpretations increasingly see it as context-specific rather than universally binding.

3. Pathways for Transformation: The recommendations emphasize a transformational approach that includes structural reform, educational empowerment, and a re-evaluation of long-held doctrinal interpretations to pave the way for a more inclusive leadership model in the church.

This analysis, thus, underscores the tension between tradition and transformation, highlighting both the progress made and the challenges that remain in the journey toward equitable church leadership.

REFLECTIONS ON THE CONTEXTUAL BIBLE READING

With regards to the above analysis of the readings with women in the Presbyterian Church, it is obvious that these women agree to the position that women in the early church were relegated to the background and were overlooked and suppressed, therefore, could not freely express themselves and share their visions and prophecies, thus had no place in the church.

On the contrary, New Testament traditions do not totally support this idea. Contrary to what Paul said, that women should be silent, there were indications of women's participation in the early Church. In Jensen's article '*Women in the christianization of the west*' in the *Origins of Christendom*

*in the West*¹⁷, at most, Mary, may have been seen alongside the Apostles in depictions of the Pentecost, while others such as Mary Magdalene, Prisca and Junia were seen from the

outset as second- class apostles, like many of their male counterparts. Another example could be found in Romans 16: 1-27 where these women mentioned above including phoebe, Aquila and others were said to have held churches in their homes. Thus, it becomes very evident that the issue about the women's leadership becomes a contextual issue, where at a point, women are allowed to be pastors or teachers and at another instance other women are not allowed.

In my deduction from the readings, women are of the opinion that they have been suppressed for far too long with regards to the leadership positions or roles in the Church, where 1 Corinthians 14: 34 -40 is used as a reference point. However, they are beginning to fight for liberation regarding roles in the church. These women attest to the fact that in some C21st churches, women still sit separately from men; that is the men in front and women behind.

To them, the solution to all these problems they face concerning gender roles in the church is good education, encouragement, and motivation. The women think that the men downplay on their intelligence and therefore they do not have enough information or enlightenment to counteract them, which always gives the men power over them. They strongly suggested that girl child education should be taken more seriously because when the education starts from the fundamental stages, it goes a long way to help the child stand tall to tackle situations just as their male counterparts. Also, it would be appropriate for resource persons to be invited to women's meetings to give them talks on important issues that can help them get out of their shells and speak out.

¹⁷ Kreider, Alan. *The Origins of Christendom in the West*. Edinburgh & New York: T&T Clark. 2001

In my deductions, I saw that though there is some difference between the Corinthian era and now, some roles and positions in the church are being restricted. However, it would be much appropriate if all the roles and positions were made open for all, to give equal opportunities to both men and women in carrying out the work of God.

Furthermore, in accessing the decisions of the Presbyterian Church with regard to women being placed in ministerial positions, it is very clear that although the church is somehow giving women the chance to hold some positions, they still use some sort of barricades to stop them from absolute leadership. Again, in the Presbyterian church of Ghana, it has been categorically stated that once the spouse is in the ministry, it is just impossible for the other spouse of that minister to be ordained. Meanwhile there are just few women ministers who are district ministers, they are either made assistants or made to just oversee a local congregation and the position of a moderator has never been occupied by a woman while the Church leaderships are still underpinning women with some decisions, they take in their General Assembly meetings.

I believe that the Presbyterian Church must come out and clearly state their mission and purpose for women in the Church, rather than hiding behind the pretense of placing them in figurative positions, where they only hold the titles, but the main work is virtually done by their male counterparts since there has been only one woman who has ever occupied the position of a Presbytery Chairperson.

ISSUES OF SOCIAL AND PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION (RECOMMENDATION)

The final stage in the Contextual Bible Reading leads to the social and personal transformation of the people. Firstly, the women found the need to take major steps in making changes in terms of finding some solutions to the problems they face daily in the Church.

Secondly, the Presbyterian women, felt the need to start right away, by holding leadership training sessions for the young women of the church, to give them the needed skills to take up positions in the church.

Again, the women were also of the view that adult women who might already have the skills needed to take up leadership positions and are either reserved or hesitant, must be given the needed support and encouragement, by deliberately making policies to engage them

in higher decision-making bodies, campaigning for them, and even advocating for them to take up Priesthood and higher positions in the Church.

Lastly, the women had the impression that there is a need to create an awareness in the Christian communities about the potentials women have, so that, the community at large will also begin to appreciate the skills and abilities of their women counterparts. Therefore, women's groups should not just limit themselves to being home keepers but to be empowered to take up other leadership responsibilities in the community, church and nation at large.

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