

*Evaluation of the Practice of The Apostolic Church LAWNA Territory Nigeria on
Women's Role in Church Leadership*

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Abstract

In this paper women's role in church leadership is critically examined with reference to The Apostolic Church LAWNA Territory, Nigeria. The doctrine of the church places limitation on the role women can perform/play in the church, for instance women are not allowed to minister in the congregation that contain men and women. Women can only rise to the office of a deaconess and can be appointed by the Area Council on the recommendation of the District Council. She must be a full member of the church. The Apostolic church view is in contrast with the Egalitarian thought as articulated in Gal. 3:28.

Keywords: Women's role, Church administration, The Apostolic Church, Leadership, Lawna Territory

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Introduction

In this paper, women's role in church leadership is critically examined with reference to The Apostolic Church, LAWNA Territory, Nigeria.

The Apostolic Church as a denominational was adopted in 1916 in the United Kingdom by the body of Christians who believed they had been led by God, subsequent to the Welsh Revival of 1904-1905, into truth of the principles and practices of the early Apostolic Church as contained in the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament.

In 1918, during the period of influenza epidemic, some brethren in Nigeria began to practice divine healing as a result of which they had to withdraw from their denomination and form the "Diamond Society", due to persecution from those who did not believe in divine healing.

"Diamond Society" became associated with the "Faith Tabernacle Congregation of Philadelphia, USA in 1921 because they also believed in divine healing, confessing and forsaking of sins, tithes and offerings, baptism by immersion, opposition to divorce and re-marriage and other similar scriptural teachings

A great revival started in the churches in Ilesa on 10th June 1930 in fellowship with "Faith Tabernacle Congregation " and much persecution resulted. This revival was led by the late Evangelist Joseph Ayo Babalola. Appeals for help to the leaders in Philadelphia went unheeded, correspondence had, however, been exchanged with the headquarters of The Apostolic Church in the British isles and now an appeal was made to that body for assistance. In response to the invitation, three Missionary Delegates arrived in Lagos, Nigeria on 23rd September, 1931, they were the late Pastors D. P. Williams (President), A. Turnbull (Vice-President) and W. J. Williams (International Prophet). God richly blessed their ministry and after an exchange of views on doctrinal matters and other fundamental scriptural truths, the leaders of the Faith Tabernacle Congregation of Nigeria unanimously decided to affiliate with The Apostolic Church of Great Britain and adopted The Apostolic Church as a denominational name, together with its principles and practices.

LAWNA TERRITORY – is a geographical demarcation of The Apostolic Church Nigeria with missions overseas covering US, UK and sub-Sahara Africa.

LAWNA – is an acronym of Lagos and Western / Northern Areas. It is a referent to groupings of the Church in Nigeria.

The Apostolic Church does not appropriate leadership role to women. The doctrine of the Church places limitation on the role women can play in the Church, for instance, women are not allowed to minister in the congregation that contain men and women. Women can only rise to the office of a deaconess and can be appointed by the Area Council on the recommendation of the District Council. She must be a full member of the Church. She also has responsibility as minister's wife.

The Apostolic Church view is in contrast with the Egalitarian thought as articulated in Gal. 3:28. The word "Deaconess" is derived from the Greek word diakonia, thus means a servant or minister who run errands for another person who is in a higher order in the Church/ministry.

The word “Deaconess” means maid servant or stewards, with these background meanings, the use of deaconess could be practically and historically traced to several places in the Holy Scripture, both in the Old and New Testament. Although, the term ‘deaconess’ might not be written or mentioned literally in the Old Testament but the nature of services rendered by deaconess in the Bible portrays them to be seen as helpers which also connotes being deaconesses.

The calling of a deaconess is as sacred as any other calling, her duties and sphere of labour are both temporal and spiritual, enter into many avenues of the Church other than Government. In an assembly where there are widows indeed as rightly stated in the Bible, the responsibility for the care of the poor and fatherless who are so in need in the Church is in the hands of deaconesses. They must be those who are duly appointed by the assembly leadership. The administration of this office is under the control of the assembly, such deaconesses can only exercise their rights and privilege under the direction and control of the assembly eldership.

As helpers in the assembly, it is the responsibility of the deaconesses to cooperate with the assembly eldership in visiting the Church members who are irregular in Church meetings and services, the backsliders, those who are bereaved, those who are getting married, those who are known to travelling or returning from journey, those who are sick, the lukewarm in the Church and those who are in trouble of any kind known to the Church. All their visitation activities must be reported each time to the assembly eldership for consideration of any necessary help that may arise from their observations during the visitation exercise.

Faith home is where the sick and physically weak members are accommodated temporarily for the purpose of caring for them in prayers and services by church elders, workers and ministers. It is the responsibility of deaconesses to make it a point of duty to visit the assembly faith home from time to time. They should go there for ministrations to the sick in prayers, gift in cash and kind, comfort and encourage the sick.

Maternity home is a place where pregnant women and sisters are kept until the time of their delivery. It is the responsibility of deaconesses to arrange between themselves to visit them from time to time. They should go there to pray for them, encourage the pregnant sisters with voluntary donations in cash and kind to comfort and care for them. They should also assist the workers there in anything committed to them. They are not expected to go there and fight, to command or to criticize the female workers; they are to report their observations or recommendations to the assembly leadership.

It is the responsibility of the deaconesses to take care of the church premises, to keep it clean and tidy both inside and outside. It is their duties to ensure from time to time that the floor, pews and all furniture both inside and outside the church are kept in proper condition.

It is part of the duties of women especially deaconess in the church to take care of the Holy Communion materials, it should be washed and maintained in clean condition at the close of each Lord’s Supper celebration. This could be arranged for and executed under strict supervision of the assembly leadership as might be conveniently and suitably considered, if possible. The arrangement is also applicable to the keeping of the church water system, toilets, gutters and well in tidy condition.

Deaconesses are expected to be the custodians of the church properties. It is their duty to keep a true record of what the assembly is having as for women and general use like: pews, chairs, ceiling fans, tables, bedding, mats and bed sheets, lamps and matches, cutlasses, cupboard, brooms and spades, dustbins and any other necessary materials.

Deaconesses are expected to perform miscellaneous duties such as taking care of female candidates during water baptism. Cooking and serving and seeing to the success of every arrangement during funeral obsequies; to see to the proper sitting order and helping the church members in buying and cooking.

Women in The Apostolic Church, LAWNA Territory, Nigeria have the privilege and opportunity in the Public gatherings of ministering the gospel. Her aim will be the salvation of sinners when on special missions and according to the arrangements with the District Apostolic or Pastor or local Presbytery, she will have the responsibility of leading the meetings. Her ministry will certainly embrace exhortation to a life of holiness and godliness, and all that is conducive to growth and development of Christian characters and conducts.

In true effectiveness and maintaining scriptural principles, she will apply the unquestionably accepted truths of God's word in dignity and simplicity, avoiding doctrinal and debatable matters. The deaconess has authority in accordance with her call among the women member of the church. Deaconesses can do much to propagate the work of the Lord and it should be done tactfully in love and holiness. When an open air meeting has been held in a street, the houses in that street should be visited with tracts. The sick sisters of the assembly should be systematically visited and sister whose attendance at the meeting is irregular should be kept in touch with.

The purpose of creating woman is to be a help-mate to man, A minister of God cannot do without his wife, because his wife has a greater role to play in his ministry. It is a common saying that "behind a successful man is a woman". If a minister will be successful, his wife must be faithfully co-worker in the ministry.

Both the pastor and his wife are called to Shepherd the flock of God, they are Christian workers, therefore a minister without wife is not complete as both provide companionship and warmth required in time of weakness. An example is the ministry of husband and wife, especially in the family of Aquila and Priscilla Acts 18:2, 18:26 . They became fellow workers of Christ who risked their lives for the preaching. Rom 16:3-4, the specific mentioning of their names frequently in the epistle show the extent of their submission to the work of God to which Paul testified I Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19. The support of the wife of a minister to the ministry cannot be over-emphasized, it is very important to see minister's wife as a partner or co-worker in the ministry at every aspects of their lives.

Women are not allowed in the administration of the Church. It is restricted to only the Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors and Teacher who of necessity must be male. Under no circumstance must women prophesy in their private homes, they cannot lead any church activity except among the women i.e. during women meeting.

In the practice of The Apostolic Church, women are not allowed to lead the church choir. During normal service, they cannot preach or participate in the conduct of the service but they are allowed to pray.

Women in The apostolic church are not allowed to participate in night vigil, and also not allowed to sit with men in the church during service.

During His ministry on earth, there are some women who were influential in Jesus life. Jesus considers women to be disciples and leaders who were equal with men and relates with them equally.

Women were identified in his ministry and meant to be involved in spreading his gospel as well as contribute in a similar way to the growth of his kingdom. Women became disciples of Jesus by following him.

All the gospel writers recorded incidents that reveal how Jesus involved women in his work financially, emotionally and in evangelism. Apostle Paul also mentioned some of the women that worked with him in the ministry, we have example of Priscilla,. Paul commended sister Phoebe deaconess of the church at Cenchrae who helped Paul and many other Apostles. Paul's approval of women ministers had afforded them high status in the early church.

The position of Jesus Christ and Apostle Paul on the role of women is in adjacent with the doctrine of The Apostolic Church on the role of women in church leadership. However the school of thought that postulates gender equality seem to differ in their perception of women's role in leadership vis-à-vis the doctrine of The Apostolic Church. It is the position of this paper that the doctrine of The Apostolic Church on the role of women is leadership is doctrinely sound and in love with biblical principles articulated and supported by the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and the letter of Paul to the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 14:33b-36.

The doctrine of The Apostolic Church on women leadership role is in line with the perception of Jesus and Apostle Paul about women. There are other people that believe in women participation we have example of Deborah. Deborah attained a height that can only be equaled by man.

Jezebel was another woman who was a great influence behind the throne. She was a devoted worshipper of baal who perpetuated her religion in Israel, she was behind the killing of the prophets of God. Because of some excesses of some women they were not given any role in the church.

In the contemporary world, the Beijing declaration affirm that gender equality should be promoted in all sphere of life. Beijing conference of 1996 where it was discussed that in every country, even the smallest and the least developed there is a greater awareness of women, women's problems and women's importance than ever before. And in every country, women's consciousness about themselves has changed. Feminism is no longer viewed as relevant only to the industrialized nations of the North. In all but most conservative of countries, the feminist message that women are people, not just wives and ,mothers, is taken seriously.

However, the limitation placed on women have killed the potencial of several women in the Apostolic Church who could have done equally well. Religion have to do with dogma indoctrination and belief.

The position of The Apostolic Church which is in contrast with that of Jesus Christ and Apostle Paul draw is inspiration as source from biblical passages e.g. 1 Cor. 14: 34-36, 1Tim. 2: 11-15. These passages account for the reason while the Church does not allow women participation in the administration.

Conclusion

In summary, the doctrine of The Apostolic Church even though it negate modern and contemporary perception of the place of women in the society. As doctrinal backing from the scriptures the position is equally accepted by the saints in The Apostolic Church, more importantly that the Church believes in the directive of the Holy Ghost in its administration.

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