

The Role of Women in New Testament Ministry and Its Implications for Contemporary Church Practice: A Biblical-Theological Exploration

Jezreel Smith Mietuade

Crowther Graduate Theological Seminary, Abeokuta, Nigeria

Email: smithjezreel@gmail.com

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Abstract

Women held visible, significant roles in the New Testament church, despite operating within a patriarchal culture that restricted female public and religious participation. Jesus affirmed women as disciples, valued their theological insight, and appointed them as key resurrection witnesses. Early church figures like Phoebe, Priscilla, Lydia, and Junia contributed to teaching, hospitality, financial support, and apostolic work. Yet contemporary debates persist between complementarian and egalitarian views on women in ministry. This study examines the biblical portrayal of women in ministry and its implications for church practice today. The research adopts a qualitative method involving grammatical-historical and lexical exegesis of key New Testament texts and contested ministry terms (*diakonos*, *prostatis*, *apostolos*, *kephalē*, *authentēin*), a historical survey of early Christian practice from the patristic through the modern period, and theological reflection on unity and equality in Christ through Galatians 3:28 and the pneumatological framework of 1 Corinthians 12 and Acts 2:17. Findings indicate that women were not only participants but also influential leaders in the early church, and that many present day restrictions are more culturally conditioned than biblically mandated. The study concludes that faithful contemporary ministry should affirm the New Testament principle of equality in Christ while discerning cultural expressions responsibly. It recommends that churches intentionally recognize spiritual gifts in women, provide structured leadership development, and foster collaborative ministry models where men and women serve together in advancing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Keywords: Equality, Leadership, Ministry, New Testament, Women.

1. Introduction

The role of women in leadership and ministry constitutes one of the most enduring and contested issues in New Testament scholarship and contemporary ecclesial praxis. Although the New Testament affirms women as indispensable participants in the divine mission, interpretive traditions across Christian history have produced divergent theological frameworks regarding gender, authority, and ecclesial office. Consequently, the status of women in ministry remains a site of tension between egalitarian and complementarian readings of Scripture, each appealing to different strands of biblical interpretation and theological reasoning. Within the New Testament narrative, women are not depicted as peripheral adherents but as active agents in the proclamation and advancement of the gospel. Their participation is evidenced through diverse ministries, including teaching, prophecy, patronage, hospitality, diaconal service, and apostolic collaboration. Figures such as Mary Magdalene, Priscilla, Phoebe, Lydia, and Junia illustrate the multidimensional leadership roles women occupied in the formation and expansion of early Christian communities. In this context, leadership denotes divinely sanctioned responsibility for teaching, governance, and communal formation, while ministry refers to Spirit empowered service oriented toward the edification and mission of the church (Keener, 2014).



Recent scholarship confirms that this debate remains ongoing and sharply divided, with ordination and teaching authority as the main pressure points (Kariuki, 2024). Most recent contributions argue from egalitarian premises, grounding women's ministry in shared *imago Dei*, Spirit-gifting, and Galatians 3:28 rather than gendered office restrictions (Kariuki, 2024; Nicolaides, 2021), and describe women as substantive ministry agents rather than merely symbolic participants in early Christian communities (Bøsterud, 2021; Diko, 2024). At the same time, empirical studies of contemporary church settings show that women's ministry often expands in practice while institutional authority lags behind: women clergy in the Church of England are frequently denied the social and spiritual capital needed for advancement despite formal access to senior office (Fry, 2021), a pattern echoed in Nigerian digital ministry, where women gain visibility online but face greater scriptural scrutiny and lower authority than men (Oloba & Blankenship, 2024), and in the largely unrecognized discipleship labor of pastors' wives in Zimbabwe (Sande & Maforo, 2021) and the second-class religious standing of women leaders in Amsterdam African Independent Churches (Kyei et al., 2021).

Notably, this recent corpus offers comparatively little direct, peer-reviewed complementarian exegesis of the same Pauline texts, leaving the debate asymmetrically represented (Kariuki, 2024), and rarely tests how specific exegetical commitments translate into the institutional leadership patterns documented across these denominational contexts. The central scholarly problem, therefore, extends beyond the historical question of women's participation in early Christianity to the hermeneutical challenge of determining how the entirety of the New Testament witness should inform contemporary ecclesiology, particularly in relation to gender, authority, and ministry (Cunningham & Hamilton, 2000).

In response to this lacuna, the present study undertakes a critical and integrative examination of the New Testament portrayal of women in leadership and ministry, with the objective of articulating its theological and ecclesiological implications for contemporary church practice. This study argues that a canonical and context sensitive reading of the New Testament reveals not marginal or exceptional female participation but a structurally significant inclusion of women in diverse ministerial and leadership roles. These finding challenges reductionist interpretations and calls for a reconstructed ecclesiology that more faithfully reflects the integrative nature of early Christian ministry. Accordingly, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly discourse by bridging historical critical exegesis with constructive theological reflection on gender and ecclesial office.

Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary framework that integrates biblical exegesis, theological analysis, and socio historical contextualization. The exegetical component critically engages key New Testament texts pertaining to women in ministry, including Romans 16 and associated Pauline references to Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia, and Lydia, among others. The theological dimension employs the doctrine of unity in Christ (Gal 3:28) as a hermeneutical lens for evaluating gendered distinctions in ecclesial function. The contextual dimension examines first century Mediterranean socio-cultural structures alongside contemporary ecclesial realities to assess the extent to which cultural conditioning informs interpretive traditions. Through this tripartite methodology, the study seeks to provide a robust, critically engaged, and theologically coherent contribution to the ongoing discourse on women in leadership and ministry within global Christianity.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on the role of women in New Testament ministry has proliferated across exegetical, historical, and theological subfields, yet remains stratified along interpretive lines that largely mirror the broader complementarian-egalitarian divide. This review synthesizes four intersecting strands of existing research: exegetical studies of key New Testament texts, historical-theological accounts of women's ecclesial participation, lexical and linguistic investigations of ministry terminology, and contemporary global surveys of women in ecclesial leadership. While this literature is substantial in volume, it is evaluated here not merely for its descriptive content but for the strength of its argumentation, the consistency of its interpretive method, and the gaps that remain unaddressed.

2.1. Exegetical Scholarship on Women in the New Testament

A substantial body of exegetical literature has examined the Gospel accounts and Pauline corpus for evidence of women's discipleship and ministerial function. Witherington (1987) offers a foundational two-volume treatment establishing that women were integral to Jesus' itinerant ministry and to the formation of the earliest Christian communities. Bauckham (2002) extends this inquiry through close textual analysis of named women in the Gospels, arguing that their narrative prominence signals a deliberate theological emphasis rather than incidental inclusion. However, both works rely substantially on inference from narrative prominence and silence, a method that is suggestive rather than conclusive and leaves open the possibility that narrative inclusion reflects theological interest in women as recipients of grace rather than as evidence of ministerial office. Fiorenza's (1983) feminist theological reconstruction remains a seminal, if contested, intervention, positing that early Christian egalitarianism was subsequently suppressed by patriarchal institutionalization. This reconstruction has been criticized for its reliance on a hypothesized egalitarian origin that is not directly attested in the extant textual record, making it more a plausible interpretive construct than a demonstrated historical finding. Cohick (2009, 2020) provides a socio-historical corrective by situating women's roles within the material and cultural conditions of the Greco-Roman world, thereby grounding exegetical claims in first-century realia rather than anachronistic categories, a methodological strength that distinguishes her work from more purely literary approaches, though it still depends on analogical reasoning from broader Greco-Roman social patterns to specifically Christian communities.

Debate persists most acutely around the Pauline restriction texts. Keener (1992, 2001, 2014) advances a contextual reading of 1 Timothy 2:11-15, arguing that the passage addresses a localized crisis of false teaching in Ephesus rather than instituting a transcultural prohibition. This position finds lexical reinforcement in Payne's (2015) extensive study of the disputed term *authentein*, which he construes as denoting domineering or coercive authority rather than legitimate teaching function. Fee (2023) similarly interprets 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 as a situational corrective to worship disorder, a reading buttressed by Paul's earlier acknowledgment of women praying and prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11:5. These contextual readings are individually persuasive but collectively vulnerable to the charge of interpretive convergence: Keener, Payne, and Fee arrive at compatible conclusions through different lexical and rhetorical routes, which strengthens the cumulative case but also raises the question of whether the scholarly consensus reflects the strength of the textual evidence or a shared set of prior theological commitments. Countervailing this trajectory, more traditionalist exegetes continue to read these texts as establishing enduring ecclesial norms, underscoring that the hermeneutical dispute is not merely lexical but methodological, turning on how interpreters weigh occasional instruction against canonical trajectory.

The identity and status of specific New Testament women have likewise generated focused scholarship. Epp's (2005) monograph on Junia traces the textual and translational history by which a

female apostolic figure was progressively masculinized in later manuscript and translation traditions, a finding corroborated by Belleville (2000). Notably, this body of literature engages the traditionalist position largely in summary rather than through sustained direct rebuttal, leaving the comparative strength of the two interpretive traditions incompletely tested against one another. Cohick (2009) and Witherington (1987) similarly examine Phoebe's designation as *diakonos* and *prostatis*, arguing that these titles carry ministerial and patronal weight comparable to their application elsewhere in the Pauline corpus. This argument rests on an assumption of terminological consistency across Paul's letters that, while reasonable, is not itself demonstrated within the cited studies.

2.2. Theological and Hermeneutical Frameworks

A second strand of literature addresses the theological warrant for women's ministry beyond individual exegetical cases. Dunn (2006) situates Galatians 3:28 within Pauline theology proper, contending that the unity formula carries ecclesiological as well as soteriological force. Grenz and Kjesbo (1995) construct a systematic biblical theology of women in ministry that integrates creation, Christology, and pneumatology, while Cunningham and Hamilton (2000) offer a widely cited survey explicitly framed around the question of whether biblical warrant exists for restricting women's ministry, concluding in the negative. These works collectively establish the theological infrastructure, unity in Christ, pneumatological giftedness, and creational equality, upon which egalitarian ecclesiology is typically constructed. A limitation shared across this strand is that the theological synthesis tends to proceed from the exegetical conclusions of the works discussed in 2.1, such that any weakness in the underlying exegesis is carried forward into the theological framework rather than independently tested.

2.3. Historical-Theological Accounts

Historical scholarship complements the exegetical literature by documenting women's ministerial participation across the Christian tradition. Torjesen and Torjesen (2003) study of early church leadership structures argues that women's exclusion from formal office was a gradual institutional development rather than an apostolic given. Clark (1990) and Bynum (1987) extend this historical inquiry into the patristic and medieval periods, while Salisbury (2013) provide focused treatments of individual figures, Perpetua and Macrina respectively, whose theological and spiritual authority exceeded conventional institutional boundaries. Reformation-era scholarship (Bainton, 2013; Ozment, 2009) Clapper, G. S. (2011). The renewal of the heart is the mission of the church: Wesley's heart religion in the twenty-first century. reveals a more ambivalent picture, in which women exercised significant informal influence even as formal ecclesial office remained closed to them. Chaves (1999) bridges the historical and contemporary literatures through an empirical sociological analysis of ordination practices across American religious denominations, documenting persistent structural disparities even where formal inclusion has been achieved. Chaves (1999) empirical approach stands apart methodologically from the largely textual and biographical studies elsewhere in this strand, and its findings, that formal inclusion does not resolve structural disparity, raise a question the historical-theological literature as a whole does not fully address: whether the barriers documented across centuries are primarily interpretive, institutional, or cultural in origin.

2.4. Contemporary Global Perspectives

A final and comparatively recent strand of scholarship addresses women's ministry within contemporary global Christianity, with particular attention to the Majority World. Phiri and Nadar (2012), Oduyoye (2001), and Kanyoro (2002) contribute African feminist theological perspectives that foreground indigenous ecclesial structures, notably African Independent and Pentecostal Churches, as

sites of expanded female religious authority. Akpanika (2017) and Orogun (2023) situate these developments within the specific socio-religious context of Nigeria, documenting the coexistence of patriarchal cultural structures with vigorous female participation in prayer ministries, evangelism, and prophetic leadership. Comparable regional studies from Asia (Hyo-Jae, 1985; Wommack, 2006) and Latin America (Drogus et al., 1997; Gebara, 2002) reveal analogous patterns in which formal ecclesial restriction coexists with substantial informal or charismatic authority. Across this strand, the recurring pattern, formal restriction alongside informal or charismatic authority, is well documented descriptively but rarely theorized: the literature does not adequately explain why charismatic authority so consistently substitutes for rather than translates into formal office, leaving the mechanism connecting cultural context to ecclesial structure underexamined.

Taken together, this body of literature demonstrates broad scholarly consensus regarding the historical and textual evidence for women's active ministerial participation in the New Testament and subsequent Christian history. What remains contested, and what constitutes the central lacuna this study addresses, is the hermeneutical synthesis of this evidence into a coherent framework capable of informing contemporary ecclesial practice across diverse cultural and denominational settings.

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary research design integrating biblical exegesis, historical-theological analysis, and socio-cultural contextualization. The approach is deliberately tripartite, reflecting the conviction that the question of women's role in ministry cannot be adequately addressed through textual analysis alone but requires triangulation across exegetical, historical, and contextual lines of inquiry. Interpretive validity and analytical consistency across these three stages were maintained through triangulation itself, findings generated at the exegetical stage were checked against the historical-theological survey and the theological synthesis, so that no single stage's conclusions were accepted independently of corroboration from the other two. Consistency was further supported by applying the same set of contested texts and terms across all three stages, rather than introducing new textual material at each stage, and by evaluating secondary sources across the egalitarian, complementarian, and mediating range described so that interpretive conclusions were tested against competing scholarly positions rather than derived from a single interpretive tradition.

3.1. Research Design

The study adopts a document-based qualitative methodology, consistent with established practice in biblical-theological research. Rather than generating primary empirical data through fieldwork or survey instruments, the research proceeds through the systematic examination of primary textual sources (the New Testament canon, with particular attention to Pauline literature) and secondary scholarly sources spanning biblical studies, historical theology, and contemporary ecclesiology.

3.2. Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Primary data consist of New Testament passages bearing directly on women's ministerial participation, selected on the basis of their centrality to existing scholarly debate. These include Gospel narratives depicting Jesus' engagement with women (John 4:1-42; Luke 10:38-42; John 20:11-18; Luke 24:1-10), Pauline texts commending named female ministers (Romans 16:1-7; Acts 18:24-26; Acts 16:14-15,40; 1 Corinthians 16:19), and the contested restrictive passages (1 Corinthians 11:3-12; 1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-15). Secondary sources were selected to represent the range of interpretive positions

within contemporary scholarship, encompassing egalitarian, complementarian, and mediating perspectives, so as to avoid a one-sided evidentiary base.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds in three interrelated stages, corresponding to the study's tripartite framework:

- A. Exegetical analysis: Selected New Testament texts are examined with attention to grammatical-historical context, lexical semantics (particularly of contested terms such as *diakonos*, *prostatis*, *apostolos*, *kephalē*, and *authentēin*), and literary genre. This stage draws on established principles of historical-grammatical exegesis to determine the most probable original meaning and function of each text within its immediate literary and rhetorical setting.
- B. Historical-theological survey: The study traces the reception and practical outworking of these texts across successive periods of church history, from the patristic era through the medieval, Reformation, and modern periods, in order to assess continuity and discontinuity between textual witness and institutional practice. This diachronic survey serves to test whether restrictive interpretations reflect consistent apostolic precedent or later institutional development.
- C. Theological synthesis and contextual reflection. Findings from the exegetical and historical stages are synthesized through the interpretive lens of Pauline unity theology (Galatians 3:28) and pneumatological giftedness (1 Corinthians 12; Acts 2:17), with attention to how first-century Mediterranean socio-cultural structures inform, without necessarily determining, contemporary ecclesial application. This stage explicitly engages the hermeneutical distinction between transcultural theological principle and culturally contingent expression. Procedurally, this stage first identifies the theological principle from exegetical and historical findings. It then assesses whether that principle is expressed through a culturally contingent form or a transcultural norm, using canonical coherence with the broader Pauline witness and New Testament trajectory as the primary criterion. Where a restrictive instruction reflects a culturally contingent expression, the underlying transcultural principle is carried forward into the theological conclusions, while the specific cultural form is treated as historically situated rather than normative.

3.4. Scope and Delimitation

The study is delimited to the New Testament canon as its primary textual base, with historical and contemporary material serving a corroborative and contextualizing rather than primary evidentiary function. While the study surveys global expressions of women's ministry, including African, Asian, Latin American, and Western contexts, it does not undertake original empirical fieldwork within any single regional setting; rather, it draws on existing scholarly and case-study literature to illustrate broader theological conclusions. The Nigerian ecclesial context receives particular, though not exclusive, attention given its relevance to the researcher's institutional setting.

3.5. Limitations

As an exegetical and historical-theological study rather than an empirical social-scientific investigation, the research is necessarily interpretive and does not claim to resolve the complementarian-egalitarian debate through appeal to demonstrable proof. Conclusions are offered as the most exegetically and historically defensible synthesis available within current scholarship, subject to ongoing theological discourse and further research, particularly from underrepresented Majority World scholarly voices, as noted in the study's recommendations.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Women in the New Testament: A Biblical Survey

The New Testament presents a complex yet theologically significant portrayal of women in relation to the ministry of Jesus and the life of the early church. Against the backdrop of first century Greco Roman and Jewish socio-cultural structures, which generally limited women's public and religious participation, the New Testament narrative introduces a discernible shift in which women emerge as active participants in discipleship, mission, and leadership. A careful survey of the Gospels and Pauline literature demonstrates that women were not marginal figures but integral contributors to the spread and establishment of early Christianity, although subsequent ecclesial traditions often reinterpreted or restricted these roles.

In the Gospel narratives, Jesus's interaction with women reflects a counter cultural inclusivity that challenges prevailing social and religious norms. In John 4:1-42, Jesus engages the Samaritan woman in theological discourse, ultimately revealing His messianic identity to her and commissioning her as a witness to her community. Similarly, in Luke 10:38-42, Mary of Bethany is depicted as sitting at the feet of Jesus, a posture traditionally associated with rabbinic discipleship. Jesus's affirmation of her "better part" signals the legitimacy of women as learners within the discipleship community. Furthermore, Mary Magdalene occupies a central role in all four resurrection accounts and is uniquely commissioned as the first witness of the risen Christ (John 20:11-18). Her proclamation to the disciples has led several scholars to describe her as having apostolic significance, often referred to as *apostola apostolorum* (Fiorenza, 1983). Collectively, these texts indicate that Jesus's ministry actively included women as disciples and credible witnesses within the emerging kingdom community.

The Pauline corpus further reinforces evidence of women's participation in leadership and ministry roles. In Romans 16:1-2, Phoebe is commended as a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchreae and as a *prostatis*, terms that many scholars interpret as indicating both ministerial function and patronal or leadership authority within the Christian community (Cohick, 2009). Priscilla, alongside Aquila, is likewise portrayed as an authoritative teacher of Apollos (Acts 18:24-26), with several Pauline references listing her name before her husband's, a pattern often interpreted as indicative of prominence in ministry (Witherington, 1987). Similarly, Junia is described in Romans 16:7 as "outstanding among the apostles," a designation that has generated extensive scholarly discussion. Contemporary linguistic and historical research widely supports Junia as a female apostolic figure rather than a later masculinized reading of the name, reflecting early Christian recognition of women in missionary leadership roles (Belleville, 2000).

Nevertheless, Pauline writings also contain passages that appear to restrict women's teaching or authority, notably 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15. These texts have historically been central to complementarian arguments limiting women's ecclesial authority. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes the importance of contextual and rhetorical analysis in interpreting these passages. In 1 Corinthians 11:5, Paul acknowledges women praying and prophesying in public worship, indicating that silence cannot be understood as an absolute prohibition. Many scholars therefore interpret 1 Corinthians 14 as addressing specific disruptions in worship rather than instituting a universal restriction (Fee, 2023). Similarly, 1 Timothy 2 is frequently understood in light of the Ephesian context, where false teaching and uninformed instruction may have necessitated corrective measures. The rare term *authentēin* has been widely debated, with some lexical studies suggesting meanings related to coercive or abusive authority rather than normative leadership (Keener, 1992). These observations support the argument that such texts must be interpreted in harmony with the broader Pauline witness, which affirms active female participation in ministry.

Beyond individual texts, the New Testament also highlights the structural participation of women in early Christian communities. Women were among the first witnesses of the resurrection (Luke 24:1–10; John 20:18), a theological detail that underscores their role in foundational Christian proclamation despite prevailing cultural assumptions regarding female testimony. Additionally, the emergence of house churches provided significant spaces for female leadership and hospitality-based ministry. Lydia of Philippi, described as a businesswoman and convert of Paul, becomes a patron and host of the Philippian church (Acts 16:14–15, 40). Likewise, the household of Priscilla and Aquila functions as an ecclesial gathering place (1 Cor. 16:19), illustrating the centrality of domestic spaces, often managed or influenced by women, in early Christian organization.

A linguistic analysis of key ministry terms further reinforces this inclusion. The term *diakonos* applied to Phoebe (Rom. 16:1) is the same designation used for recognized ministers within Pauline communities and for Paul himself in certain contexts (2 Cor. 3:6). The term *apostolos*, used in Romans 16:7 in reference to Junia, denotes a commissioned representative or missionary envoy, a role closely associated with authoritative proclamation of the gospel. Although the term *presbyteros* is not explicitly attributed to women in the New Testament, later patristic and ecclesial traditions provide evidence of women serving in leadership capacities in certain early Christian communities (Clark, 1990). Collectively, the lexical and narrative data suggest that New Testament ministry terminology was not intrinsically gender restrictive but functionally defined by calling, gifting, and ecclesial recognition.

4.2. Theological Implications of Women's Roles in the New Testament

The New Testament not only provides descriptive accounts of women in leadership and ministry but also establishes theological frameworks that inform ecclesiology, gender, and participation in the mission of God. One of the most frequently cited texts in this regard is Galatians 3:28, where Paul declares that “*there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” This passage has been widely interpreted as a foundational statement of unity in Christ that relativizes socio cultural divisions within the new covenant community. While some interpreters restrict its application to soteriological equality, a significant body of scholarship argues that it also carries ecclesiological implications, shaping how identity and function operate within the body of Christ (Dunn, 2006). In this sense, the passage challenges any theological system that grounds ministry participation in gender-based hierarchy rather than in union with Christ and empowerment by the Spirit.

A second key text in this discussion is 1 Corinthians 11:3, where Paul employs the term *kephalē* (“head”) in relation to Christ, man, and woman. The semantic range of *kephalē* has generated sustained scholarly debate. While traditional interpretations understand it as “authority over,” several lexical and contextual studies argue that it may also signify “source” or “origin,” particularly in light of creation narratives and intra Trinitarian analogies (Payne, 2015). Within this interpretive framework, the passage is not primarily concerned with hierarchical subordination but with relational order and interdependence within worship. This is further supported by 1 Corinthians 11:11–12, where Paul explicitly affirms mutual dependence between man and woman “in the Lord,” thereby resisting any reading that implies ontological or spiritual inequality. The emphasis, therefore, appears to be on proper worship practice and relational honor rather than restrictive gender hierarchy.

The pneumatological dimension of New Testament theology further strengthens the case for inclusive ministry participation. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul articulates a theology of spiritual gifts in which the Holy Spirit sovereignly distributes charismata, such as prophecy, teaching, healing, and leadership, to all believers without gender distinction. This egalitarian distribution of gifts is reinforced in Acts 2:17, where Peter interprets the Pentecost event as the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy: “*your sons and your*

daughters shall prophesy.” The outpouring of the Spirit thus constitutes a decisive theological marker in which both men and women are equally empowered for witness and ministry. Consequently, any restriction on the exercise of Spirit given gifts on the basis of gender raises significant theological tension with the New Testament’s pneumatological vision of the church.

Nevertheless, several Pauline instructions reflect the socio-cultural realities of the first century Mediterranean world, particularly concerning honor shame dynamics and public worship decorum. Practices such as head coverings (1 Cor. 11) and certain silence instructions (1 Cor. 14) must therefore be interpreted within their historical and cultural contexts, rather than assumed to constitute timeless ecclesial regulations in all forms and settings (Winter, 2003). A critical hermeneutical task for contemporary theology is thus the differentiation between culturally contingent expressions and transcultural theological principles. Whereas principles such as order in worship, mutual edification, and holiness remain normative, their cultural expressions may vary across time and context.

This hermeneutical balance requires a careful integration of scriptural authority and contextual sensitivity. On one hand, the authority of Scripture demands that difficult texts not be dismissed or minimized. On the other hand, responsible exegesis requires attention to genre, historical context, lexical meaning, and canonical coherence. For example, Paul’s concern for order in worship remains normative, while specific cultural expressions such as head coverings may not be universally binding. Similarly, the participation of women in prayer and prophecy (1 Cor. 11:5) indicates active female engagement in public worship, which must be held in tension with localized corrective instructions elsewhere in the Pauline corpus. The overarching theological trajectory emphasizes mutual edification, order, and Spirit empowered participation within the body of Christ.

In synthesis, the theological implications of the New Testament witness point toward a pneumatologically grounded and christologically unified ecclesiology in which both men and women participate fully in the mission of God according to the distribution of spiritual gifts. If gender barriers are relativized in Christ (Gal. 3:28), if leadership is understood in relational rather than ontological or hierarchical terms, and if the Holy Spirit distributes gifts without gender distinction, then the church is theologically compelled to recognize and affirm the full participation of women in ministry. This does not negate cultural discernment or contextual sensitivity; rather, it calls the church to embody the redemptive unity of the gospel in ways that transcend restrictive structures that are not grounded in the full canonical witness of the New Testament.

4.3. Women in Church History and Christian Tradition

The role of women in the history of the Christian church is both substantial and theologically significant, although it has frequently been underrepresented or minimized in official ecclesiastical narratives. From the early centuries of Christianity through the medieval, Reformation, and modern periods, women have contributed meaningfully to theological reflection, spiritual formation, mission, and ecclesial leadership. A historical theological survey demonstrates that while institutional recognition of women’s leadership has often been restricted, their actual participation in shaping Christian faith and practice has remained consistently evident across diverse contexts and eras.

In the early church period, women emerged as influential witnesses, martyrs, and theological contributors. Perpetua of Carthage (d. 203 CE), whose prison diary provides one of the earliest extant Christian females authored texts, exemplifies courageous discipleship and spiritual leadership in the context of persecution (Salisbury, 2013). Similarly, the Acts of Thecla, though apocryphal, reflects early Christian traditions in which women were portrayed as active evangelists and ascetic leaders, suggesting that some early Christian communities envisioned expanded roles for women in ministry. In the fourth century, Macrina the Younger exerted significant theological influence within the

Cappadocian tradition, with Gregory of Nyssa explicitly referring to her as a *didaskalos* (teacher), thereby acknowledging her intellectual and spiritual authority in shaping early Christian theology (Holman, 2001). Collectively, these examples indicate that women were not marginal to early Christian development but were active participants in its theological and spiritual formation.

During the medieval period, women continued to exercise spiritual and intellectual leadership, often through monastic, mystical, and reform movements. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) emerged as a prominent abbess, theologian, composer, and visionary, whose correspondence with ecclesiastical and political leaders reflects recognized authority within her historical context (Flanagan, 2002). Likewise, Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) played a central role in the Carmelite reform movement and produced enduring theological works on mystical prayer and spiritual formation, including *The Interior Castle* (Kavanaugh et al., 1988). Although such women were frequently categorized as exceptional or charismatic figures rather than institutional leaders, their influence demonstrates that spiritual authority was not entirely confined to formal ecclesiastical office.

In the Reformation and early modern period, women's roles remained significant, albeit often indirect or informal within ecclesiastical structures. Katharina von Bora, though not a public preacher, contributed substantially to the stability of the Lutheran Reformation through household management and economic administration, thereby enabling Martin Luther's reforming work (Bainton, 2013). Susanna Wesley exercised formative theological influence through domestic catechesis and structured devotional leadership within her household, which significantly shaped the early Methodist movement (Roberts, 2018). In the nineteenth century, Catherine Booth, co-founder of the Salvation Army, advanced a sustained theological argument for women's right to preach, grounding her position in a pneumatological and biblical understanding of divine calling (Booth, 1870). Her ministry represents a decisive shift toward the formal recognition of women's preaching and leadership within certain Protestant traditions.

At the same time, the historical development of church structures reveals a complex trajectory in which women's visibility in ministry was shaped by broader institutional and cultural changes. In the post Constantinian era, increasing ecclesiastical institutionalization contributed to the restriction of women's formal leadership roles, particularly within ordained offices (K. J. Torjesen, 1993). While women continued to serve as nuns, abbesses, and mystics, access to sacramental and clerical authority became increasingly limited (Bynum, 1987). During the Reformation, although theological emphases such as the priesthood of all believers could have expanded opportunities for women's leadership, most reformers maintained traditional gender distinctions in ecclesial office (Ozment, 2009). In contrast, certain modern movements, including Methodism, Pentecostalism, and the Salvation Army, adopted more inclusive practices regarding women's ministry, while other traditions, such as Roman Catholicism and segments of conservative Protestantism, maintained restrictions on ordination and formal leadership roles (Cunningham & Hamilton, 2000). These divergent trajectories reflect not only theological interpretation but also the influence of socio cultural and institutional factors in shaping ecclesial gender roles.

In view of the evidence, the historical record demonstrates that although women's ministerial contributions were often constrained by institutional frameworks, they remained consistently active in shaping Christian theology, spirituality, and mission across centuries. This evidence challenges any interpretation that limits women's participation in ministry as historically anomalous or theologically unsupported. Rather, the historical witness suggests that the Christian tradition, in both formal and informal expressions, has continually been shaped by the spiritual, intellectual, and leadership contributions of women. The implication for contemporary ecclesiology is therefore the need for a more

historically informed and theologically integrated recognition of women's enduring role in the life and mission of the church.

4.4. Women in Contemporary Ministry

In contemporary global Christianity, the role of women in ministry remains a dynamic and contested subject shaped by theological interpretation, cultural context, and ecclesial tradition. While the global church does not present a uniform position on women's leadership, there is a discernible trend toward increasing recognition and participation of women in diverse ministerial roles. Across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Western world, women have significantly contributed to church growth through evangelism, pastoral leadership, theological education, and social transformation. These developments indicate that contemporary discussions on women in ministry must be situated within both global diversity and local cultural frameworks rather than reduced to isolated doctrinal positions.

In the African context, women have historically played vital roles in the expansion of Christianity, particularly in prayer movements, evangelistic outreach, and indigenous church planting. African Independent Churches, for instance, often provide space for women to function as prophets and spiritual leaders, reflecting an understanding of spiritual authority grounded in charismatic experience (Phiri & Nadar, 2012). However, in many mainline and conservative Evangelical traditions, cultural constructions of gender continue to influence restrictive interpretations of biblical texts, thereby limiting women's access to ordained leadership. Despite these constraints, the increasing presence of women as pastors, bishops, and theological educators across the continent reflects a gradual but significant shift in ecclesial practice and theological perception.

Similarly, in Asia, women have contributed meaningfully to church growth and spiritual renewal, particularly within revivalist and house church movements. In South Korea, women have played central roles in prayer movements and revival gatherings, even where formal ordination remains debated within certain denominations (Hyo-Jae, 1985). In China, women have been instrumental in sustaining and expanding house church networks, often exercising leadership under conditions of social and political constraint (Wommack, 2006). In Latin America, the rise of Pentecostalism and liberation theology has created spaces for women's active involvement in pastoral care, evangelism, and social advocacy, particularly in addressing issues of poverty and justice (Gebara, 2002). These regional dynamics illustrate that women's ministry is not merely institutional but also deeply relational, charismatic, and contextual.

In Western Christianity, debates surrounding women in ministry have been significantly shaped by theological interpretations of gender, ecclesial authority, and modern egalitarian movements. Many Protestant denominations, including Anglican, Methodist, and several Baptist traditions, now formally ordain women to pastoral and episcopal offices (Chaves, 1999). A notable milestone was the consecration of female bishops within the Church of England in 2015, marking a major ecclesiological shift. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church maintains its position that priestly ordination is reserved for men, grounded in Christological and apostolic arguments, while the Eastern Orthodox tradition similarly upholds male only ordination but increasingly affirms women's roles in theological education and lay ministry (John Paul II, 1994). Pentecostal and charismatic movements, by contrast, tend to emphasize Spirit gifted ministry, resulting in broader acceptance of women's leadership in preaching, prophecy, and church administration (Alexander & Yong, 2009).

Contemporary case studies further demonstrate the global visibility and impact of women in ministry. Figures such as Bishop Vashti McKenzie of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Pastor Funke Adejumo in Nigeria, and theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye of Ghana illustrate the diverse ways

in which women contribute to pastoral leadership, theological scholarship, and ecclesial development (Oduyoye, 2001). In Latin America, women in Pentecostal and charismatic movements are similarly active in evangelism, church planting, and community transformation, often integrating spiritual leadership with social advocacy (Drogus et al., 1997). These examples collectively challenge the assumption that ecclesial leadership is inherently male dominated and instead demonstrate the ongoing diversification of ministry leadership in global Christianity.

The Nigerian context presents a particularly illustrative case of both continuity and change. Nigeria remains strongly influenced by patriarchal cultural structures, which often shape perceptions of leadership and gender roles within both society and the church (Ellis & Ter Haar, 2004). Consequently, some denominations continue to restrict women from ordained ministry, while others allow limited forms of leadership within defined ecclesial boundaries. Nevertheless, Nigerian women have consistently demonstrated significant ministerial impact through evangelism, prayer ministries, teaching, and church planting. Indigenous movements such as the Aladura churches and several Pentecostal networks have historically recognized women's prophetic and leadership roles, particularly within revival and intercessory contexts (Adedibu, 2020). Moreover, the gradual inclusion of women in theological education within institutions such as Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary and related seminaries reflects a growing institutional recognition of women's ministerial capacity (Kanyoro, 2002).

Despite these advancements, significant challenges remain. Cultural stereotypes, denominational restrictions, and socio familial expectations continue to limit women's full participation in ministry in many regions. Even in contexts where women are formally ordained, issues such as unequal access to leadership positions, limited institutional recognition, and disparities in influence persist (Cunningham & Hamilton, 2000). These realities highlight the gap between theological affirmation and ecclesial implementation. Nevertheless, the increasing visibility of women in ministry provides evidence of an ongoing transformation within global Christianity, suggesting a gradual reconfiguration of leadership paradigms.

Therefore, women in contemporary ministry embody a complex intersection of theological conviction, cultural negotiation, and ecclesial transformation. While restrictions remain in certain traditions, the global trajectory reflects increasing inclusion and recognition of women's ministerial gifts and leadership capacities. When viewed alongside biblical witness and historical precedent, contemporary developments affirm that women are not peripheral to the mission of the church but are active participants in its theological, pastoral, and missional life. The continuing challenge for the global church is to align ecclesial practice more fully with the comprehensive witness of Scripture and the lived reality of the Spirit's work in gifting all believers for ministry.

4.5. Challenges Facing Women in Ministry Today

Despite the increasing visibility and participation of women in global Christian ministry, significant structural, theological, and socio-cultural barriers continue to limit their full inclusion and effectiveness. These challenges are multidimensional, arising from the interaction of cultural norms, interpretive traditions, institutional frameworks, and gendered expectations within both the church and society. Consequently, the experience of women in ministry is often characterized by a tension between recognized calling and constrained opportunity.

A primary challenge is the persistence of patriarchal cultural frameworks that shape perceptions of leadership in many parts of the world, particularly in African, Asian, and Middle Eastern contexts. In such settings, leadership is frequently associated with masculinity, while women are traditionally positioned within domestic or supportive roles. These cultural assumptions have significantly influenced ecclesial practices, resulting in resistance to female leadership even in cases where no

explicit biblical prohibition exists (Phiri & Nadar, 2012). As a result, cultural norms often function as implicit interpretive filters through which biblical texts are read and applied.

Closely related to this is the challenge of biblical interpretation, particularly the use of select Pauline passages, such as 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:11–12—to restrict women’s participation in teaching and leadership roles. Contemporary biblical scholarship increasingly emphasizes the importance of historical, linguistic, and contextual exegesis in interpreting these texts, arguing that they address specific situational concerns rather than establishing universal prohibitions (Keener, 1992). However, within many ecclesial traditions, these passages continue to be applied in ways that override the broader New Testament witness to women’s active participation in ministry, thereby creating interpretive tension and institutional inconsistency.

Institutional structures within many denominations also present significant barriers to women’s advancement in ministry. Even in contexts where women are formally permitted to serve, disparities often exist in access to resources, leadership opportunities, and ministerial recognition. Empirical studies of religious organizations indicate that women clergy frequently receive fewer institutional supports, including smaller congregational assignments and limited pathways to senior leadership positions (Chaves, 1999). Such disparities suggest that formal inclusion does not always translate into substantive equality within ecclesial systems.

In addition, gender stereotypes and evaluative double standards continue to shape perceptions of women in leadership. Women in ministry are often subjected to heightened scrutiny regarding personality, leadership style, and work life balance, expectations that are not equally applied to their male counterparts (Ingersoll, 2003). These implicit biases create additional emotional, psychological, and vocational pressures that may hinder long term ministerial effectiveness and sustainability.

Furthermore, denominational restrictions on ordination and ecclesial authority remain a major point of contention. Certain traditions, including Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, maintain male only priesthood based on theological and Christological arguments (John Paul II, 1994). Within segments of Protestantism, although ordination of women is permitted, access to senior leadership roles such as bishops, lead pastors, or denominational executives remains uneven (Cunningham & Hamilton, 2015). Even in more charismatic and Pentecostal contexts, where women often exercise significant spiritual influence, structural leadership recognition may still be limited or contested.

Taken together, these challenges indicate that the obstacles facing women in ministry are not primarily rooted in issues of competence or divine calling, but in the interaction of cultural assumptions, interpretive traditions, and institutional structures. Addressing these barriers requires not only theological re-examination but also structural reform and intentional institutional support. Without such transformation, the church risks operating below its full theological and missional potential by failing to fully recognize and utilize the Spirit given gifts of all its members. Toward a Theology of Equality and Partnership

A theology of equality and partnership in ministry is grounded in the foundational biblical affirmation that humanity, male and female, is created in the image of God and entrusted with shared responsibility for stewardship of creation (Gen. 1:27–28). This creational framework establishes that dignity, vocation, and participation in divine mission are not determined by gender but by divine calling and giftedness. The New Testament further develops this theological trajectory through the ministry of Jesus Christ, who consistently engaged women as disciples, affirmed their dignity, and included them as credible witnesses to His life, death, and resurrection (Witherington, 1987). In continuity with this Christological vision, Paul’s declaration in Galatians 3:28 that “there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” has been widely interpreted as a soteriological and ecclesiological statement of unity in Christ that relativizes gender-based distinctions in relation to access to salvation, spiritual

status, and participation in the life of the church. Within this framework, partnership in ministry emerges not as a modern innovation but as a theological implication of the gospel's reconciling work.

Nevertheless, interpretive tensions arise from certain Pauline passages, particularly 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:11–12, which have historically been employed to restrict women's participation in teaching and ecclesial authority. Contemporary exegetical scholarship increasingly emphasizes the necessity of situating these texts within their historical, rhetorical, and ecclesial contexts, particularly in relation to issues of order, false teaching, and public worship practice in the early church (Keener, 2001). When these passages are read in canonical context alongside Paul's commendation of female co-workers, such as Phoebe (Rom. 16:1–2), Priscilla (Acts 18:26), and Junia (Rom. 16:7), a more integrated theological picture emerges in which women are actively recognized within ministerial and apostolic networks. This suggests that Paul's occasional restrictive instructions should be interpreted as context specific interventions rather than universal ecclesial prohibitions, especially when evaluated against his broader affirmation of female ministry participation (Fiorenza, 1983).

The pneumatological dimension of Pauline theology further strengthens the case for ecclesial partnership. In 1 Corinthians 12, the Holy Spirit is described as sovereignly distributing spiritual gifts to all believers for the common good, without gender differentiation. These charismata include leadership, prophecy, teaching, and pastoral care, all of which function as constitutive elements of ecclesial life. The distribution of gifts underscores that ministry within the body of Christ is determined by divine empowerment rather than biological or cultural categorization (Grenz & Kjesbo, 1995). Consequently, the restriction of women from exercising Spirit-given gifts introduces a tension between ecclesial practice and the New Testament's pneumatological framework, potentially undermining the functional unity of the church as the body of Christ.

Translating this theological vision into ecclesial practice requires intentional structural and institutional reform. Such reforms include equitable access to theological education, intentional mentoring systems for women in ministry, revision of ordination policies where necessary, and inclusion of women in decision making and leadership structures. These measures are not merely administrative adjustments but represent attempts to embody a biblically informed ecclesiology of shared participation. At the same time, contextual sensitivity remains essential. In more conservative ecclesial environments, gradual and dialogical approaches may be necessary to foster theological reflection and communal discernment without exacerbating division. Conversely, in more progressive contexts, it remains important to ground advocacy for inclusion in robust biblical theology rather than sociocultural ideology, thereby maintaining fidelity to Scripture as the normative authority for ecclesial life.

Thus, a theology of equality and partnership affirms that men and women are equally created in the image of God, equally redeemed in Christ, and equally endowed by the Holy Spirit for participation in the mission of the church. A holistic reading of Scripture, attentive to both canonical unity and contextual diversity, supports the conclusion that gender is not a limiting factor in the distribution of spiritual gifts or ministerial calling. Accordingly, the church is called to embody a model of ministry that reflects the reconciling power of the gospel, characterized by mutual recognition, shared service, and cooperative participation in the fulfillment of God's mission in the world.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the New Testament presents women not as peripheral participants but as Spirit-empowered agents integral to the mission, leadership, and formation of the early church. Through exegetical engagement with texts on Mary Magdalene, Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia, Lydia, and others, the canonical witness reveals a structurally significant inclusion of women in teaching, prophecy, patronage, diaconal service, and apostolic collaboration. The theological frameworks of unity in Christ (Gal. 3:28) and pneumatological empowerment (1 Cor. 12; Acts 2:17) relativize gender-based barriers and ground ministry participation in calling, gifting, and ecclesial recognition rather than in cultural hierarchy. These findings directly address the hermeneutical gap identified in the introduction and literature review, namely the absence of a coherent framework synthesizing exegetical, historical, and theological evidence on women's ministry into guidance capable of informing ecclesial practice across diverse cultural and denominational settings. By tracing a single, consistent line of argument from grammatical-historical exegesis through historical reception to theological synthesis, this study supplies the integrative synthesis that the existing literature, though rich in individual exegetical and historical contributions, had not yet drawn together.

Historical and contemporary surveys further show that although institutional structures have often restricted women's formal leadership, women have consistently shaped Christian theology, spirituality, and mission from the early church to present-day Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the West. Restrictive Pauline passages, when interpreted through socio-historical and rhetorical lenses, function as localized correctives rather than universal prohibitions, and must be read in harmony with the broader New Testament trajectory of mutual edification and Spirit-led service. This historical survey addresses the second dimension of the research gap by connecting exegetical conclusions about the restrictive passages to the actual institutional record, showing that the persistence of restriction across church history reflects institutional development rather than a consistent apostolic mandate, and thereby linking textual interpretation to lived ecclesial practice in a way the reviewed literature had left largely untested. Therefore, a canonical and context-sensitive reading compels the church toward a reconstructed ecclesiology that faithfully reflects the integrative nature of early Christian ministry. Such an ecclesiology affirms that the full participation of women in ministry is not a modern innovation, but a theological and historical continuity with the New Testament vision of the body of Christ.

Based on these findings, the study proposes the following recommendations for contemporary ecclesial practice. Churches and theological institutions should adopt a canonical, context-sensitive hermeneutic that interprets restrictive texts in light of the whole New Testament witness, giving priority to transcultural theological principles, unity in Christ, order in worship, mutual edification, over culturally conditioned expressions. Ecclesial structures must also align with the pneumatological vision of the New Testament by recognizing and affirming women who demonstrate biblical qualifications and Spirit-given gifts for teaching, pastoral care, administration, and leadership, so that ministry appointment is based on calling and gifting rather than gender alone. Seminaries, Bible schools, and denominational bodies should revise curricula and ecclesial policies to include the historical and biblical contributions of women in leadership, equipping future ministers with a balanced theology of gender that resists both cultural bias and reductionist exegesis.

At the same time, while affirming women's full participation, churches must apply these principles with wisdom in diverse cultural settings, through respectful dialogue, gradual implementation, and emphasis on unity, so that the inclusion of women enhances rather than divides the witness of the church. Finally, more African and global South scholarship is needed on women in ministry, especially case studies from indigenous churches and Pentecostal movements, to enrich global

ecclesiology with voices that reflect the lived reality of women in ministry today. Thus, by embracing these recommendations, the church can more fully embody the redemptive unity of the gospel and release the gifts of all believers, male and female, for the edification and mission of the body of Christ.

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