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Jesus Christ and women: A theological and practical reflection for churches in Nigeria

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This research examines how Jesus Christ's engagement with women carries theological significance and explores the consequences of this reality for the life and practice of churches in Nigeria. The study begins by analysing the inclusive transformative nature of Jesus' ministry, which upheld the value of women in a society that often sidelined them. It acknowledges that Jesus' treatment of women represented not just social reform, but God's purpose for humanity. The issue addressed in this research stems from the ongoing gender inequality present in numerous churches in Nigeria, where cultural customs and patriarchal readings of scripture continue to impede women's involvement in leadership and ministry. This research utilises intercultural interpretation, primarily drawing from gospel accounts and using it to probe Nigeria's cultures expressed in churches' beliefs and practices. The study analyses significant biblical texts and engages pertinent theological literature to reveal the redemptive arc of Jesus' interactions with women. The findings indicate that women held essential positions in Jesus' ministry and the early church as disciples, supporters and witnesses to the resurrection. Jesus' relationship with women illustrated that God's kingdom surpasses social hierarchies and gender divisions. The study further illustrates that when churches adopt Christ's inclusive model, they encounter spiritual renewal, remarkable progress and community transformation.

Contribution: The study concludes by advocating for theological revitalisation in Nigerian seminaries, gender-inclusive leadership policies and a conscious commitment from church leaders to foster justice, equity and collaboration.

Keywords: church; Jesus Christ; inclusion; Nigeria; women.

Introduction

Christian theology presents Jesus Christ as the complete revelation of the love of God, purpose and redemptive will. Through his words, actions and relationships, he disclosed the heart of divine grace. Among the most striking aspects of his earthly ministry was his relationship with women. In a patriarchal world where women were socially and religiously marginalised, Jesus treated them with dignity, respect and equality. His interactions with women were not peripheral acts of kindness, but deliberate expressions of God's redemptive purpose to restore humanity to its original harmony in creation (Gill & Cavaness 2004).

In 1st-century Jewish society, women were confined to domestic life and excluded from public religious participation (Gill & Cavaness 2004). Their education was limited, and their testimonies were often disregarded. Against this restrictive background, Jesus' openness to women was revolutionary. He spoke with them publicly, taught them divine truth, healed them and received their service. Individual women like Mary Magdalene, Johanna, Susanna, Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary (of Bethany) were not mere spectators; they were active disciples and witnesses of his mission (Lk 8:1–3; 10:38–42; Jn 20:11–18). Jesus' treatment of women redefined discipleship, showing that access to the kingdom of God depends on faith rather than gender.

From a theological perspective, the ministry of Jesus discloses the core of the gospel message. His engagement with the Samaritan woman in John 4, the restoration of the woman suffering from haemorrhage in Mark 5 and his post-resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene all testify that God's saving mercy is offered universally, transcending social, gender and religious boundaries. The Samaritan woman became a proclaimer of salvation to her society, Mary (Lazarus' sister) was affirmed as a learner of divine truth, and Mary Magdalene was the first testifier of the risen Lord. Each of these moments illustrates that Jesus did not merely speak of equality; he embodied it, revealing that in God's kingdom, men and women are partakers in the mission of redemption.

This message bears profound relevance for the Nigerian church today. In many congregations, patriarchal traditions still subjugate women to auxiliary activities (Olajide & Oderinde 2024). Such practices contradict the liberating example of Christ, who affirmed the equal worth and calling of women. A renewed theological reflection on Jesus' relationship with women is therefore essential for churches in Nigeria. By turning to the model of Christ, churches can rediscover a model of community grounded in justice, love and mutual service, reflecting the true nature of the gospel in both word and practice.

This study addresses the persistent disconnect between the gospel portrayal of Jesus' inclusive treatment of women and the realities of church practice, especially in Nigeria. Although the gospel narratives present Jesus as welcoming women as disciples, engaging them openly in public settings, recognising their authority and testimony and entrusting them with the first proclamation of the resurrection, many present-day Christian communities continue to uphold ecclesial systems that limit women's participation in ministry, leadership and visible roles within the church.

Research methods and design

The research employs an intercultural approach to reading selected New Testament passages, grounded in the conviction that biblical meaning is generated through a dynamic conversation between the ancient social and cultural setting of the text and the present-day context of those who interpret it. Accordingly, the study brings into critical conversation the socio-historical setting of Jesus' ministry in 1st-century Palestine and the Nigerian ecclesial and cultural context, with particular attention to African worldviews, religious sensibilities and communal practices. This framework is informed by African biblical scholarship that emphasises contextual relevance without abandoning historical-critical responsibility (Loba-Mkole 2007; Ukpong 1996).

The selection of texts is guided by their direct relevance to the teachings and practices of Jesus that bear on communal life, ethics and ecclesial praxis. Priority is given to Gospel passages in which Jesus' praxis and didactics explicitly address issues such as social responsibility, religious authority, community formation and moral conduct. These texts are chosen because of their theological significance within the New Testament and their potential to illuminate contemporary challenges faced by churches in Nigeria. The focus on Gospels' traditions allows the study to engage directly with the foundational narratives and teachings that shape Christian identity and practice.

The analytical procedure unfolds in three interrelated stages. Firstly, each selected text is examined within its original historical and literary context, drawing on socio-historical data, narrative analysis and relevant exegetical engagement to clarify its meaning within 1st-century Palestinian Judaism. Secondly, the study undertakes a contextual analysis of Nigerian church praxis, identifying dominant cultural assumptions, religious practices and socio-economic realities that influence contemporary Christian life. Thirdly, intercultural reading is conducted by placing these two horizons in dialogue. This dialogical process seeks to identify points of convergence, tension and critique, allowing the biblical text to interrogate Nigerian ecclesial practices while also allowing contemporary concerns to raise fresh interpretive questions of the text. Through this method, the study aims to generate interpretations that are both exegetically grounded and contextually transformative.

Women in the socio-religious world of Jesus' mission

Grasping the social position of women in 1st-century Palestinian society is essential for recognising how radically Jesus' conduct departed from prevailing norms. The world into which Jesus was born was deeply patriarchal, both socially and religiously. Jewish culture, though shaped by divine revelation through the Law and Prophets, had over time become heavily influenced by patriarchal customs that placed men at the centre of authority and visibility. Women were regarded as essential within the family, but marginal in the public and religious spheres (Olajide & Oderinde 2024). Their identity was often tied to their relationship with men as daughters, wives or mothers, and their participation in communal life was carefully restricted.

In religious practice, the synagogue and the temple were dominated by male presence. Women could enter the outer courts of the temple, but were forbidden from entering areas reserved for men. In most synagogues, they sat separately, often behind partitions or galleries, and were not permitted to read from the Torah or lead in prayer (Jeremias 1969:372). Rabbinic teachings frequently reflected these boundaries. One rabbi was recorded as saying that it would be better for 'the words of the Law' to be 'burned than delivered to a woman' (Gill & Cavaness 2004). Such views show how education and spiritual participation were privileges reserved almost entirely for men.

This exclusion extended into legal and social life. Women's testimonies were often not admissible in court because they were viewed as unreliable witnesses (Cohen 1987:121). Marriage laws also reflected a strong male bias: men could issue a certificate of divorce with relative ease, while women had little or no recourse if abandoned. A woman's social security depended largely on her husband or male relatives. These realities combined to create a context where women were visible primarily in domestic settings, contributing to the household economy, but rarely seen as agents of theological or moral instruction (Gill & Cavaness 2004).

It is against this backdrop that the actions and teachings of Jesus must be interpreted. His ministry, recorded in the Gospels, brought a theological reordering of human relationships. Jesus did not merely show compassion towards women; he restored their dignity by treating them as persons capable of faith, understanding and service. He spoke to

them directly and publicly in ways that defied cultural and social conventions. His exchange of words 'with the Samaritan woman at the well' (Jn 4:7–26) not only violated ethnic and gender barriers, but also revealed in-depth theological mysteries about worship and redemption. The fact that she later became an evangelist to her own community highlights how Jesus assigned the responsibility of proclaiming the gospel to women.

Similarly, in Mary-Martha's narrative according to Luke 10:38–42, Jesus commended Mary for sitting close to him to learn, an action that signified the posture of a disciple before a rabbi. Based on the socio-cultural context of those days, women were not permitted to study under rabbis (Gill & Cavaness 2004). Yet Jesus affirmed Mary's choice (ἐξελέξατο in Lk 10:42) as 'the better part',[1] thereby validating her intellectual and spiritual pursuit (Wright 2001:132). This episode symbolises a paradigm shift from the domestic confinement of women (here epitomised by Martha) to their inclusion in the community of learners and disciples (Mary). In this narrative, domestic hospitality is virtuous (Lk 10:7–8) but in this instance, Martha's behavioural disposition is described as 'distracted and troubled' [μεριμνᾷς καὶ θορυβάζῃ] (Lk 10:41).

Another remarkable instance is the presence of women among Jesus' closest followers. Luke notes that certain women, 'including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, accompanied Jesus' and supported his ministry from their resources (Lk 8:1–3). Joanna is included in this list 'because as a wife of Herod's steward she is a person of substance' (Nolland 1989:232); despite her social profile, she was probably travelling with Jesus' group away from home (Lk 18:29?). These women along with others were reputable individuals in the society. Along with many others, they were 'contributing to their support out of their private means' [αἵτινες διηκόνουν αὐτοῖς ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐταῖς] (Lk 8:3). Nolland (1989) commented that Luke uses the dative of ὑπαρχόντα to emphasise means, possession or property, slightly different from Mark 15:41. He added that evidence abounds for women supporting rabbis and their disciples of their own money, property or foodstuffs.

Their participation demonstrates not only inclusion, but also agency; they were partners in the ministry, contributing materially and spiritually to its advancement (Bauckham 2002:33). The Gospels' records indicate that women waited last at the cross (Mk 15:40–41) and were the first to witness the resurrection (Mt 28:1–10). Theologically, this reversal of order is significant: those considered untrustworthy witnesses in Jewish courts became the first heralds of the risen Christ (Gill & Cavaness 2004).

Such details are not incidental but deliberate theological statements. The early Christian community drew its understanding of equality and mission from the example of Jesus himself. As Ben Witherington notes, Jesus' ministry 'gave to women a new dignity and a new status' that neither the 'Greco-Roman world nor Jewish society offered' (Witherington 1984:122). He did not institute a feminist revolution in the modern sense, but his actions and teachings subtly dismantled oppressive gender structures and affirmed the divine image in both men and women (Oderinde 2012).

Furthermore, Jesus often used women as examples of faith. He praised the persistent Canaanite woman for her undaunting quest of healing for her daughter (Mt 15:21–28), commending her faith as 'great' [μεγάλη]. Jesus' commendation of the woman is like that of the centurion in Matthew 8:10. Before now, she was compared to a house dog in verse 27 in contrast to a child. She did not resent; she turned the seeming reproach into a reason for optimism. This episode and exchange bring to fore the woman's resilience, humility and '*her unswerving God-given faith in Jesus*, who she confessed as Lord and Messiah' (Hendriksen 1973:340).

He also drew attention to the widow who gave her last coins as a model of sacrificial devotion (Mk 12:41–44). These stories demonstrate that spiritual insight and faithfulness were not limited by gender or social standing. By exalting such examples, Jesus redefined righteousness as a matter of the heart rather than social position. The widow was 'πτωχὴ' that is poor, miserable or beggarly. She has a low economic profile. Yet 'she cast all that she could live on' [αὐτῆς πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν ἔβαλεν ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς] (Mk 12:44). The two lepta [λεπτὰ δύο] (Mk 12:42), the smallest coinage in circulation (a denarius was the standard wage for a day's labour) (Mt 20:8–10), a lepton was 1/64 of a denarius. Mark's portrayal of the scenario highlights the destitution and insignificance of the widow and her present. To the spectators, the widow's offering is unimportant and undeserving. But in the divine economy, and according to Jesus, her giving was commendable, sacrificial and pious (Edwards 2002:296).

Theologically, this redefinition is grounded in the creation narrative (Oderinde 2012). According to the Genesis account, 'Adam and Eve were created in the image of God', sharing equal worth and divine calling. Sin introduced distortion, leading to the domination of one gender over another. Christ's redemptive work, therefore, includes the restoration of that original harmony. Jesus' approach to women embodies this redemptive intent. He related to them not as subordinates but as coheirs of God's kingdom (Oderinde 2012).

Theological meaning of Jesus' relationship with women

Jesus' engagement with women is theologically weighty, reflecting intentional aspects of his mission rather than incidental encounters, and it discloses God's all-embracing mercy as integral to the work of redemption. In Genesis creation narrative, humans were made in God's image. They jointly commissioned to exercise influence over the earth. Humanity was created in equality and partnership, but sin disrupted this harmony, producing alienation, oppression and silencing. In Jesus' ministry, God began to restore the

1.Luke 10:42 poses dilemma for us because some manuscripts render it 'a few things' [ὀλίγος] while others 'one thing' [ἑνὸς].

broken order and to reestablish the dignity and equality that characterised creation before the fall (Gill & Cavaness 2004). Jesus' interactions with women should be understood not as mere departures from social convention, but as a theological announcement of God's reign, a kingdom defined by radical inclusion rather than exclusion.

'Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well' in John 4:7–26 is an example of this reality. By initiating a conversation with her, Jesus defied three major social conventions of his time: gender exclusion, ethnic prejudice and moral judgement (Gill & Cavaness 2004). Jewish men did not publicly speak with women, much less with Samaritans, who were considered religious outsiders (Gill & Cavaness 2004). Yet Jesus not only addressed her, but also engaged her in a significant theological discussion recorded in the New Testament. He spoke to her about living water, authentic worship and the revelation of himself as the Messiah. This act demonstrated that theological discourse and spiritual insight are not limited by gender or social status. In response, the woman became an evangelist to her community, showing that women too could be bearers of divine revelation and proclaimers of the good news (Keener 2003:597).

A further episode that reveals the core theological meaning of Jesus' engagement with women is found in John 8:1–11, where he responds to the case of the woman accused of adultery. The religious leaders dragged her before him to test his adherence to the Mosaic Law, demanding that she be stoned. Jesus' reaction revealed both divine wisdom and mercy. He refused to participate in the injustice of condemning a woman while her male counterpart remained unpunished. His words, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone' (Jn 8:7), exposed the hypocrisy of her accusers and affirmed the equal moral responsibility of both genders (Gill & Cavaness 2004). When he finally said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more' (Jn 8:11), he granted her both forgiveness and moral agency (Wright 2011:215). Jesus treated her not as an object of shame, but as a person capable of repentance and transformation, showing that God's grace restores rather than diminishes.

Jesus deliberately welcomed women into the circle of those who travelled with him and sustained his mission. Luke 8:1–3 records that figures such as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, along with other women, provided material assistance for his work from what they possessed. In a cultural context that largely confined women to household roles, this practice was strikingly unconventional. By valuing their participation, Jesus underscored a theological principle that participation in God's reign rests on committed discipleship rather than on gender distinctions.

The clearest theological affirmation of women emerges in the narratives surrounding the resurrection. All four Gospels agree that women were the first to arrive at the tomb and to realise that it was empty, and they were also the earliest recipients of appearances by the risen Jesus. John 20:11–18 recounts how Jesus revealed himself to Mary Magdalene and commissioned her to carry the message of his resurrection to the disciples. By placing the central confession of Christian faith in the hands of a woman, God disrupted established social hierarchies and demonstrated that divine disclosure is not bound by cultural norms (Bauckham 2002:310). Mary's function as the initial herald of the resurrection thus represents the renewal of women's involvement in God's saving purposes and signals the dawn of a new order in which spiritual authority is no longer shaped by gender.

The significance of women in Jesus' ministry

The role of women in Jesus' ministry was not marginal but central to the unfolding of his redemptive mission. Far from being passive observers, women actively participated in Jesus' life, ministry, work and witnessing. According to the Gospels' account, women accompanied him from Galilee to Jerusalem, provided material support for his ministry and served as faithful witnesses in times of crises. Luke records that 'some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases, Mary called Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chuza, and Susanna, and many others' provided support to him from their purse (Lk 8:1–3). This acknowledgement underscores that women were vital partners in the ministry of Jesus, contributing not only financially, but also spiritually through their discipleship and devotion (Johnson 1991:129).

When the hour of suffering came, the faithfulness of these women became even more evident. During this tragic period, most of the male disciples, even the Twelve, deserted him, but the women, such as 'Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome', remained close to the cross, courageously identifying with the crucified Messiah (Mk 15:40, 41). Their presence at Calvary was a profound act of love and loyalty, demonstrating that their discipleship was not dependent on social approval or personal safety (Witherington 1984). The steadfastness of these women stands as a rebuke to the faithlessness of others and highlights the inclusive nature of Jesus' ministry, which valued devotion above gender or status.

At the resurrection, women were not only spectators, but also the proto-witnesses of the risen Christ. The angel's instruction was, 'Go and tell his disciples'. They were entrusted with the first proclamation of the gospel (Mt 28:7). In this act, God reversed cultural expectations, affirming women as credible bearers of divine truth. Mary Magdalene, often called the 'apostle to the apostles', was the first to encounter the risen Lord and to declare his victory over death (Wright 2003:608). This moment signalled a new era in which the old boundaries of gender-based exclusion were overcome by the power of resurrection life (Keener 2009:689).

The influence of these women extended into the 1st-century church. Acts and the Pauline epistles mention prominent women such as Lydia, a church founder in Philippi; Priscilla, a teacher alongside her husband Aquila; Phoebe, a deacon and benefactor of the church at Cenchreae; and Junia,

recognised among the apostles (Ac 16:14–15; Rm 16:1, 7). Their ministries reveal a continuation from Jesus' example to the life of the nascent Christian community. Women were not exceptions but essential partakers in the ongoing mission of God, affirming that in Christ, regardless of gender persuasion, all humans are called to lead, serve and proclaim in the household of faith.

Cultural and ecclesial realities in the Nigerian context

The experience of women in the Nigerian church cannot be separated from the wider cultural realities that shape the nation's social structure. Nigeria, like much of Africa, remains deeply influenced by patriarchal customs that define gender relations in both family and public life (Gill & Cavaness 2004). These cultural patterns reflect society more than scripture. Within this framework, women are frequently viewed through the lens of domesticity and subordination, expected to play supportive roles rather than positions of leadership and theological influence.

In many Nigerian congregations, women occupy essential yet limited spaces, singing in choirs, leading women's fellowship groups and providing hospitality, while the roles of governance, preaching and pastoral oversight are largely reserved for men. This pattern persists across denominational lines, from mainline Protestant traditions to Pentecostal assemblies (Fatokun 2006). Even in communities that acknowledge the gifting of women, institutional barriers still prevent them from exercising their call fully. These restrictions are often justified through selective interpretations of 1 Timothy 2:12 or 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, without proper consideration of the redemptive context of the gospel or the broader witness of scripture, which affirms women as prophetic and apostolic witnesses.

This situation reveals a pressing theological tension. While the gospel of Jesus proclaims liberation and equality, many churches remain entangled in cultural norms that perpetuate exclusion (Ukpong 1996:12–14). On the one hand, the gospel of Jesus Christ articulates a radically inclusive vision of human community grounded in liberation, reconciliation and equality before God. On the other hand, many churches continue to operate within inherited cultural frameworks that subtly – or overtly – reinscribe exclusion, particularly along gendered lines. His engagement with women demonstrated that access to divine truth and service is not based on gender but by faith and compliance. The Nigerian church, therefore, must undergo a theological reorientation that allows the message of Christ to transform its understanding of ministry and community (Maseno 2021).

Beyond ecclesial structures, Nigerian women face broader social challenges that further complicate their participation in church life. Poverty, domestic violence, limited access to education and systemic inequality continue to hinder their full flourishing (Olajide 2025). The church cannot remain silent in the face of such realities. To follow the example of Christ is to advocate for justice and empowerment, especially for those who are marginalised. Theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye rightly asserts that 'women's participation in the life of the church is not a matter of privilege but of theological necessity' (Oduyoye 2004:57). The omission of women from meaningful leadership and decision-making is, therefore, not just a sociological concern but a theological contradiction that weakens the witness of the body of Christ in Nigeria.

Hermeneutic concerns of 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35

In many Nigerian church contexts, restrictions placed on women's leadership are often justified through appeals to Pauline passages such as 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, as seen in denominations like the Evangelical Church Winning All (cf. Olajide & Oderinde 2024). Yet closer, critical interaction with these texts shows that their meaning is far from straightforward. Responsible interpretation requires situating them within their socio-historical circumstances, attending to their literary purpose and interpreting them alongside the broader trajectory of Paul's theology rather than in isolation.

In 1 Timothy 2:12, Paul states, 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority [αὐθεντεῖν] over a man; she is to remain quiet'. The interpretive debate centres on the rare verb αὐθεντεῖν, which carries connotations of domineering, coercive or self-assertive authority rather than legitimate or shared leadership. This semantic range suggests that Paul's concern may not be teaching per se, but a particular form of abusive or disruptive exercise of authority. Such a reading coheres with Greco-Roman rhetorical conventions that warned against disorderly or aggressive speech, as well as with the broader pastoral emphasis on good order within the community. Seen in this light, Paul's reference to the creation account in 1 Timothy 2:13–15 operates as a contextual argument designed to address a particular doctrinal confusion and communal imbalance in Ephesus, not as a universal or permanent ban. As Towner (2006) observes, Paul frequently employs scripture in a typological and situational manner, allowing the creation account to serve a corrective purpose shaped by context rather than a universal norm governing all churches in all times.

A comparable interpretive strain arises when reading 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, a passage that calls on women to refrain from speaking [σιγάτωσαν] during congregational gatherings and labels such speech as improper. When read on its own, this instruction seems to stand in sharp contradiction to 1 Corinthians 11:5, where Paul clearly envisages women actively praying and prophesying within the assembled church. This apparent contradiction has led some scholars to question the textual stability of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, noting that these verses occur in different locations in certain manuscript traditions and may represent a later interpolation. Even if their authenticity is maintained, the command to 'be silent' must be interpreted within the immediate literary context, where the same verb is used to regulate the speech

of tongue-speakers (14:28) and prophets (14:30). Silence, in this sense, is situational and functional, imposed for the sake of order rather than as an absolute ban on participation.

What is ultimately at stake is the kind of verbal activity Paul intends to regulate. The directive that women are to 'inquire of their own husbands at home' (14:35) points to the likelihood that the concern centred on interruptive speech or the public interrogation of prophetic messages within the service. Considerations of proper conduct within the worship setting likewise seem to have shaped the apostle's guidance. Winter (2003:123–130) argues that some women in Corinth, influenced by the contemporary 'new women' movement, may have publicly asserted social freedoms that transgressed accepted norms of modesty and restraint. Within such a context, public speech by women in a mixed assembly could be perceived as socially destabilising, prompting Paul's call for restraint.

When approached through a dialogical lens, these Pauline passages function as situational responses designed to safeguard harmony, stability and unity within particular church communities. This priority is clearly articulated in 1 Corinthians 14:33, where Paul affirms that God's character is marked by peace rather than disorder. Consequently, such texts should not be read as enduring mandates that bar women from leadership roles. Instead, they call for thoughtful reflection on how values such as order, communal edification and reciprocal respect are to be expressed across varying ecclesial realities, including present-day Nigerian contexts. Taken together, 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 indicate that Paul's intent was to address specific irregularities within the Corinthian congregation rather than to legislate universal norms (Chukwuedo 2025:12). Commands aimed at correcting local disruptions should therefore not be elevated into timeless or broadly applicable prescriptions.

Theological implication for the church in Nigeria

The theological vision emerging from Jesus' engagement with women presents far-reaching challenges for the church in Nigeria today. It urges a fresh interrogation of assumptions about leadership, formation and power through the lens of the gospel's emancipatory thrust. Jesus' interactions with women were not isolated departures from social convention; they expressed a deliberate theological affirmation of God's inclusive redemptive intent for humanity. Through his ministry, Jesus embodied the reality that both women and men bear the divine image and share equally in the saving work of grace. This conviction provides a crucial framework for shaping the church's understanding of communal life, vocation and active participation in the faith community (Wright 1979:54).

Firstly, the Nigerian church must reaffirm the egalitarian status of male and female both at creationand salvation (cf. Gl 3:26–28; Ac 2:17–18). Genesis presents humanity as male and female sharing a common vocation to steward creation. In Christ, this original partnership is restored, erasing all forms of gender-based hierarchy within the kingdom of God. When the church denies women the opportunity to use their God-given gifts, it not only restricts their calling, but also diminishes its own witness. The omission of women from leadership and theological discourse undermines the very gospel that proclaims freedom and equality in Christ (Stott 1979:54).

Secondly, this theological perspective calls for a responsible rereading of scripture that keeps its redemptive trajectory at the centre. Passages often cited to restrict women's involvement in ministry – such as 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 – require interpretation that is attentive to their original historical and social situations. Such texts cannot be divorced from the wider biblical witness, which repeatedly presents women as indispensable agents in God's saving work. Figures like Deborah, Huldah, Mary, Priscilla, Phoebe and many others illustrate the diverse ways God authorises women to instruct, guide and minister. This pattern reaches its fullest expression in Christ himself, who entrusted women with weighty spiritual tasks, including bearing witness to his resurrection (Witherington 1984:112).

Thirdly, the church must intentionally create spaces where women's voices are valued and their contributions celebrated as Jesus did (cf. Lk 8:1–3; 10:30–41; Jn 4:7–30). Theological education for women should be promoted at all levels, ensuring that they are equipped to teach, preach and lead. Nigerian churches that have embraced women in leadership often testify to renewed vitality and balanced ministry. When women participate fully in decision-making and spiritual guidance, the church more faithfully represents the inclusive nature of Christ's body as described in 1 Corinthians 12.

Finally, the theological vision of Jesus requires the church to confront social and systemic injustices against women. Faith that remains indifferent to oppression betrays the gospel (Gutiérrez 1973:69–70). The Nigerian church must therefore advocate for women's dignity in society, addressing issues such as domestic violence, economic inequality, limited access to education and cultural discrimination. Jesus' ministry integrated compassion with justice; he healed, defended and restored women, affirming their worth before God and society. Similarly, the church's theology must be expressed through practical compassion and prophetic advocacy. True theology leads to action, and Christ-like action demands the defence of every person's dignity (Tutu 2004:67).

By embracing these theological imperatives, the Nigerian church can embody a more faithful witness to the gospel. A community that mirrors the inclusiveness of Jesus will not only experience spiritual renewal, but also contribute to the moral transformation of society. In following Christ's example, the church becomes both the sign and instrument of the new creation where all stand equal in the grace and calling of God.

Practical reflections for church renewal

For churches in Nigeria to embody Jesus Christ's vision regarding women, deliberate and transformative engagement is indispensable. Theology cannot remain an abstract exercise limited to academic discourse; it must actively inform the church's patterns of life, teaching and service. Jesus' encounters with women present a compelling paradigm for ecclesial renewal, one characterised by dignity, mutuality and shared vocation. The reflections that follow are intended to assist Nigerian churches in translating this paradigm into concrete practices that promote justice, cohesion and spiritual renewal (Mbiti 1991:203).

A primary area requiring attention is theological renewal. Many theological institutions in Nigeria still function within interpretive traditions that minimise women's contributions to the life and mission of the church (Olajide & Oderinde 2024). There is therefore a need to revise curricula to embrace gender-inclusive theological education, drawing on biblical narratives and historical evidence that foreground women's active participation in God's redemptive work. Such reform is not aimed at fostering competition between genders, but at recovering theological completeness. When the church acknowledges women as integral participants in salvation history, it nurtures leaders who understand ministry as a communal calling grounded in Christ rather than a male preserve (Fiorenza 1983:53).

Closely related to this is the cultivation of pastoral attentiveness. Church leadership must intentionally open spaces for women to deploy their gifts in worship, teaching, governance and administration. Women's ministries should not be treated as peripheral or supplementary to the church's mission, but woven into its core structures and strategic vision. The inclusion of women in decision-making bodies and theological forums strengthens the church's spiritual discernment and intellectual depth. Welcoming their perspectives allows the church to more fully reflect the richness of God's kingdom, where every believer contributes according to the grace bestowed by the Spirit.

Equally essential is the church's prophetic vocation. Faithfulness to the gospel demands that the church speak decisively against cultural and systemic practices that undermine the dignity of women. The example of Jesus, who confronted social injustices and defended the dignity of marginalised individuals, provides a clear theological mandate for the church's engagement. Authentic prophetic witness balances boldness with empathy, addressing injustice not to condemn but to restore human worth and communal righteousness.

Taken together, these measures offer a pathway for Nigerian churches to approximate more closely Christ's vision for the community of faith. In this vision, women and men – equally redeemed and empowered – labour side by side for the advancement of God's kingdom and the well-being of society. The intentional inclusion of women in leadership and ministry is not merely corrective but catalytic, fostering growth, renewal and progress within both church and nation.

Conclusion

Jesus' relationship with women stands as one of the most profound demonstrations of the inherent worth and equal dignity. Jesus broke social barriers, restored women's voices and commissioned them as vital participants in the mission of God. In his ministry, women were not treated as subordinates but as disciples, thinkers, supporters and witnesses of divine grace. This radical inclusiveness reveals that the kingdom of God does not operate on human hierarchies, but on the equality of all who bear the Creator's image. It challenges the church to confront cultural patterns and ecclesial systems that continually restrict women's roles and voices. The call of Christ is a call to repentance from any practice that diminishes the spiritual potential of half of the body of Christ. Renewal begins when churches recognise that silencing women not only contradicts the gospel, but also weakens its witness in the world. Therefore, a faithful church must mirror the inclusiveness and compassion of its Lord.

The task before churches in Nigeria is to cultivate a new ministry culture grounded in mutual respect, partnership and service. This transformation begins in the pulpit, continues in the classroom and flourishes through daily acts of love and justice. When the church allows women to lead, teach and contribute according to their God-given gifts, it reflects the true nature of the body of Christ: diverse yet united, distinct yet interdependent.

Ultimately, Jesus' life and ministry summon the church to embody redemptive presence within societies fractured by inequality and oppression. The Christian gospel is therefore not confined to the promise of personal salvation but extends to the transformation of social relationships and communal structures. When churches in Nigeria affirm the full inclusion of women in their theology, leadership and praxis, they give concrete expression to the reconciling work of Christ, who restores human dignity and reorders community according to God's purposes.

In this sense, the example of Jesus functions both as revelation and as summons. It reveals a vision of humanity renewed in love, justice and mutuality, while simultaneously confronting ecclesial traditions and cultural practices that fall short of this vision. God's redemptive intent, as disclosed in Christ, transcends gender, status and inherited hierarchies, calling the church to continual self-examination and reform. By responding faithfully to this call, the Nigerian church can stand as a credible witness to the gospel's power to renew persons, communities and the wider society, thereby participating in God's ongoing work of making all things new.

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