

Christ, Women and Culture: Model for the Nigerian Society

By

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Abstract

Patriarchal societies usually ascribe subordinate status to women on the average. Examples of such societies include, the Jewish society, the African society and the ancient Near East to some extent. This may not be unconnected with the belief that women are meant to follow, at all times while the men lead by divine sanction. Christ lived in the Jewish society and was influenced as much as he influenced the society. By Jewish prescription Jesus could be described as a non-conformist; he proposed alternatives to laid down prescriptions within the traditional Jewish society. The status and role of women happen to be one of such alternative teachings. The aim of this paper is to examine the reasons adduced for the non-conformist attitude of Jesus to laid down regulations within the Jewish society and the implications of such. Another aim of the paper is to examine the implication of the above discussed situation for women and the society in contemporary Nigeria. We hope at the end of the paper to suggest ways by which Jesus' submissions could help Christian women and men in Nigeria today. Suggestions may also be made on the application of such a situation for Christian leaders in the contemporary Nigerian society.

Women in the Jewish Culture

The Jewish society from which the Old Testament evolved reflects the prevailing treatment of women as subordinates. The woman's duty was to care for her husband and children; she could own property through her husband. The Jewish law addresses only

men; women are not considered legally responsible. The sayings of the Elders in the Jewish society are a good reflection of the status ascribed to women in the Jewish setting. According to Rabbinic traditions, "To teach the law to a woman was to cast pearls to the swine."¹ Societal regulation and norms forbid a man to speak to or ask for any type of service from a woman on the street. In the same vein, women were denied any access to the law; rather than give the book of the law to a woman, it is better to burn it. Phyllis Bird rightly illustrates the cultural treatment of women in the Jewish setting when he says:

One only needs to see the genealogies of the Old Testament (Gen.5:10 and (1Chron. 1 and 2) in order to see that the Biblical world is a man's world, for the genealogies are fundamentally lists of males in which women do not normally appear. As is well known, ancient Jewish society as well as that of Greco - Roman world were essentially male dominated.²

It therefore becomes glaring that the lot of women in the Jewish setting was that of inequality and subordination at all fronts, not necessarily because of their inadequacies but due to prescribed traditions enacted and enforced by men.

Jesus and Women in a Jewish Setting

Jesus interacted with women throughout his ministry at different levels. A. Briggs submits that "The fact of suffering is nothing new to women, for they have always borne their young ones in pain and lived their days in frequent tears before man's aggressions."³ Jesus in recognition of this plight of women attended to their various needs and thus ensured both their physical and spiritual well-being. Jesus taught women the truth of life, just as he instructed men. With Jesus a woman is first a person, an entity, a personality, an individual and then a woman. As far as cultural traditions in dealing with women in the Jewish setting was concerned Jesus could be described as a non-conformist. Loyal as Jesus was to his

Jewish inheritance, he was both critical and faithful also. With him the dichotomy between the male and female ceases to exist because in him all are equal. Women ministered to the needs of Jesus and his disciples just as he took care of their own needs. Examples of such women include, Mary, Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, Martha and Salome. Against Jewish tradition, Jesus interacts with women openly, (John 4:27, Lk. 10:39, 13:16, Mk. 1:29 and John 11:1-44). Jesus therefore opened the privileges of religious faith equally to men and women. The fact that Jesus did not appoint a woman as one of his twelve disciples is best understood in the light of the subordinate status of women in the Jewish setting as of this period. It is certainly not due to the inability of women to perform such duties creditably.

The Christian Woman and Culture in Nigeria

Various definitions have been proffered for culture. For the purpose of this paper, we would like to define culture as a social phenomenon with various separable parts. It is a way of thinking and an approach to life. Neither theology nor anthropology can say decisively when culture began, but it can be submitted that God is responsible for culture, because God created humankind in such a way that humans are culture-producing beings.

Scholars through the years have expressed different shades of opinion as regards what the attitude of the Christian should be to culture. To some, God is opposed to culture because culture is identifiable with "the world", hence the essence of culture is evil⁴ (I John 2:15-16 and 5:19). Early missionaries to Africa subscribe to this stand as deduced from their utterances and actions as concerns the African culture. Viewed critically, however, this position is based on some premises that can be described as fallacies: One, equating culture as a concept with only the negative use of the Greek word *Kosmos* in the New Testament; Two, assuming that culture is only an external thing to humans; and three, assuming that since satan is able to use culture to his ends, all of culture is evil.

It is worthy to note that culture, especially African culture, is within as well as around the individual. In fact the culture of the African cannot be separated from his/her orientation, mission and vision in life. The African is inalienably bound to and by his/her culture. As Charles H. Kraft has rightly noted "cultural structures are best regarded as a vehicle or milieu, neutral in essence, though warped by the pervasive influence of human sinfulness."⁵

Culture therefore is not to be seen as an enemy or friend but rather as something that can be employed by human beings. Bearing in mind the enormous potential of culture for the African it therefore becomes glaring that for Christianity to be meaningful in an African setting the importance of culture cannot be undermined. The authenticity of the above claim has already been established by the African Independent Churches in Nigeria. While Christianity is sin-denying, it is not world-denying.

Women in Christianity in Nigerian are operating within the African culture. The effect of this on women is double faced. One, is the need for the authorities and policy makers of Christianity to yield to calls for a re-appraisal of the subordination of women in the church and allow women to occupy leadership cadres if they are so qualified. The Bible prescribes equality in the Body of Christ and it is the duty of the church to enforce this. As John Totte and R. Coote note:

A special responsibility rests on Christians to be sensitive to the movement of history to discern the signs of the times, to distinguish between that which is of real advantage and that which has a merely deceptive attractiveness, to ensure that the will of God becomes the criterion of change and that the whole life of man is conformed to the likeness of Christ and renewed according to the pattern which God himself has revealed to us in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁶

This is also closely related to the status of women in African culture. Women are not denied participation in leadership positions, especially in the religious realm. This is based on the

African belief of the need to maintain a balance in their cosmology and their relationship with the supersensible world.

Two, is the need for Christian women in Nigeria to appreciate the African culture and not discard it in its entirety as being evil. While there are some customs and practices within every given culture that Christianity cannot condone due to Biblical injunctions, there are others that can be utilised to further the course of the gospel. While Christianity cannot accommodate witchcraft of any kind, twin-murder, cannibalism, physical mutilation and ritual prostitution to mention a few, the African concept of hospitality and being your brother's keeper is worthy of emulation. The Bible enjoins Christians to care not only for friends but for enemies as well. Marrying this biblical injunction with the African hospitality for example can only mean a plus for Christianity.

Moreover, there is the need for the Christian women in Nigeria to appreciate and develop the African way of dressing and behavioural patterns. Respect and humility are two concepts distinct from stupidity. Both respect and humility are recommended by both the Bible and African culture, women need to heed such advice. Less emphasis should be placed on the Western mode of dressing while the focus is shifted to the African mode of dressing which is more complimentary to the physical features of the Nigerian woman.

Conclusively, we would like to stress the need for the Nigerian Christian woman to cultivate a cultural identity which is crucial to her total appreciation of the Christian message in an African setting.

Recommendations

Jesus' attitude to women as persons first and then as personalities is strongly recommended for policy makers in Christianity today. It is only in this light that the spirit of Galatians 3:28 can prevail.

Women need to identify more with the African culture being Africans. This is to facilitate a deeper appreciation of the christian message in a cultural setting.

There is the need to identify and appreciate the fact that culture as a concept is neither a friend nor an enemy but a vehicle that can be employed by entities for a desired goal. The New Testament and consequently Christianity is therefore not against culture. In fact the New Testament attitude to cultural values can be described as positive, (Rev. 21:24 - 26).

¹ W. Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, Edinburgh, St. Andrew Press, 1956, p. 160

² Phyllis, A. Bird *The Bible as the Church's Book*, Philadelphia, West Minster Press, 1982, p.62

³ Argye Briggs, *Christ and Modern Woman*, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960, p. 15

⁴ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, New York: Orbis Books, 1984, p. 104.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 113

⁶ J. Totte and R Coote, *Down to Earth, Studies in Christianity and Culture*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, p. 13