

Paul and Women Leadership in the Early Church: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Gender Inclusiveness in Contemporary Nigerian Churches

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examine the Apostle Paul's vision for women's leadership in the early church and its implications for fostering gender inclusiveness in contemporary Nigeria churches. While Paul has often been misrepresented as a proponent of patriarchal ecclesiology, a closer exegetical and contextual reading of his writings reveals a more inclusive and liberative theological stance. Key texts such as Romans 16, Galatians 3:28, 1 Corinthians 11, and Philippians 4:2-3 demonstrate Paul's recognition and commendation of women like Phoebe, Junia, Priscilla, and Euodia, who held significant leadership roles in the early Christian movement. This study argues that Paul's ecclesiology, rooted in the new creation inaugurated by Christ, transcended rigid gender boundaries and affirmed the active participation of women in ministry. Using a literary-historical and contextual theological methodologies, supported by feminist hermeneutics and socio-rhetorical criticism, the paper argued that Paul's inclusive vision is a theological foundation for gender-equitable leadership in Nigerian churches. It challenges both theological misinterpretations and cultural barriers that hinder women's full participation in church leadership. By revisiting Paul through a contextual African lens, the study offers a transformative framework for reimagining leadership structures that reflect the inclusive spirit of the early church.

Keywords: Apostle Paul, Women Leadership, Early Church, Gender Inclusiveness.

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Introduction

The role of women in church leadership remains a subject of theological, cultural, and ecclesiastical contention within global Christianity, particularly in African contexts such as Nigeria. While Christian's foundational texts affirm the dignity and agency of women, interpretations of some texts, especially the Pauline epistles often contributed to the marginalization of women in leadership roles (Oduyoye, 2001). The Apostle Paul is frequently cited as both a theological opponent and supporter of women's leadership, depending on the on the biblical context. This tension presents a critical challenge: How should the Nigerian church understand Paul's writings in a way that is faithful to Scripture yet responsive to contemporary concerns of gender justice and ecclesial relevance? The central problem of this study lies in the persistent misreading of Pauline texts that has led to the exclusion of women from formal leadership in many Nigerian churches. This exclusion is often justified by selective readings of texts such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12, without the consideration of broader Pauline affirmations of female leaders such as Phoebe, Junia, and Priscilla (Romans 16:1-7). This interpretive imbalance necessitates a re-evaluation of Paul's actual vision for gender and ministry.

This research, therefore seeks to answer the following questions: What was the historical and theological context of Paul's references to women in leadership roles? How have Pauline texts been interpreted to support or resist women's leadership in the church? What implications does a reclaimed, contextually faithful reading of Paul have for promoting gender inclusiveness in Nigerian churches today? This paper argues that a literary-historical and contextual reading of Paul's writings reveals a more inclusive ecclesiology than traditionally acknowledged. Reclaiming Paul's vision offers a corrective to both theological misinterpretations and socio-cultural constraints that hinder women's full participation in ministry. For the Nigerian church, where gender inequality often mirrors wider societal patriarchy, recovering this vision is not only biblically necessary but pastorally urgent (Okure, 1993; Kanyoro, 2002). By engaging with feminist biblical scholarship, socio-rhetorical analysis, and African contextual theology, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to dismantle gender-based exclusion in the church and to envision leadership models that reflect the liberating ethos of the early Christian movement.

Paul and the Early Church: Contextualizing Women Leadership

To understand Paul's references to women in leadership, it is essential to examine the social and religious environment of the Greco-Roman and Jewish world in the first century. Generally, the ancient Mediterranean world was patriarchal, with women often relegated to the private sphere and denied access to positions of authority in religious, social, and political life. In both Roman and Jewish cultures, men held dominance in public leadership roles, while women were largely excluded from decision-making structures (Winter, 2003). In Jewish religious settings, women were not permitted to read the Torah publicly or to serve as rabbis. The synagogue system mirrored a strict gender hierarchy, and women were often confined to passive participation (Brooten, 1982). Roman society, though somewhat more flexible in allowing elite women to hold influence in familial and economic settings, still viewed women as inferior in rationality and moral capacity (Osiek & MacDonald, 2006). Therefore, Paul's context was one in which the prevailing norm strongly discouraged female public leadership.

Despite these limitations, early Christian communities were shaped by a countercultural ethic rooted in the teachings of Jesus, who affirmed the dignity of women and included them in his ministry (Luke 8:1–3; John 4:27–30). This radical inclusion created space for a reimagining of gender roles within the emerging Christian ecclesia.

Paul’s Ministry and the inclusion of Women

Against this socio-religious backdrop, women inclusion in Paul’s ministry was both radical and transformative. While Paul is often viewed through the lens of restrictive passages, a broader reading of his letters reveals a deep appreciation for the contributions of women to the mission of the church. Paul names several women as co-workers, leaders, and ministers, indicating their active roles in church planting, teaching, and pastoral care. One of the most striking examples is Phoebe, described in Romans 16:1–2 as a *diakonos* (minister) of the church at Cenchreae and *prostatis* (benefactor, support or leader) of many, including Paul himself. The use of these titles suggests both ecclesial function and spiritual authority (Belleville, 2000). Similarly, Junia is referred to in Romans 16:7 as “outstanding among the apostles,” a designation that affirms her prominence in the apostolic circle contrary to later attempts to masculinize her name and role (Epp, 2005).

Paul also collaborates with Priscilla, often named before her husband Aquila (Acts 18:18; Romans 16:3), signaling her prominence in ministry. Together, they taught Apollos, an eloquent preacher, suggesting a teaching and discipling role that included theological instruction. Furthermore, Paul acknowledges women such as Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4:2–3 as his co-laborers in the gospel, further reinforcing the legitimacy of women’s leadership roles in the early church. Theologically, Paul’s proclamation in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”, serves as a doctrinal foundation for gender equality in the body of Christ. While Paul worked within the patriarchal limitations of his time, his vision of a new creation in Christ subverted the prevailing gender norms and laid the groundwork for inclusive ecclesiology (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1983).

Re-examining and Exegesis of Key Pauline Texts

This section offers a critical exegesis analysis of the selected Pauline texts often used both to support and challenge women’s leadership in the church. While certain passages appear to restrict women’s roles, a closer literary-historical and contextual reading reveals that Paul consistently affirmed and collaborated with women in ministry. This section re-examines five key texts: Romans 16, Galatians 3:28, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, and Philippians 4:2-3.

Exegesis of Romans 16

Greek Manuscript:

“Συνίστημι δὲ ὑμῖν Φοίβην τὴν ἀδελφὴν ἡμῶν, οὗσαν [καὶ] διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐν Κεγχραῖς, ἵνα αὐτὴν προσδέξησθε ἐν κυρίῳ ἄξιως τῶν ἁγίων, καὶ παραστήτε αὐτῇ ἐν ᾧ ἂν ὑμῶν χρῆζῃ· καὶ γὰρ αὐτὴ προστατίς πολλῶν ἐγενήθη καὶ ἐμοῦ αὐτοῦ.”

Translation:

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a *prostatis* of many people, including me.”

διάκονος (*diakonos*) – Accusative feminine singular of διάκονος used here in a technical sense for a church (cf. Phil 1:1). It is used 29 times in the NT. While translated as “servant,” when referring to official church roles (e.g., Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8), it means “minister.” The masculine form here is significant. It affirms an official, possibly ordained role. Also, προστάτις (*prostatis*) Nominative Singular feminine noun from προστημι denotes leadership or one who stands before, patron /protector. In Roman society, this term referred to one who provides legal protection or financial support, especially of a public cause.

Romans 16 is perhaps the most comprehensive listing of Paul’s ministry partners, and strikingly, over one-third of those mentioned are women. Phoebe is introduced as a *diakonos* (minister) of the church in Cenchreae and a *prostatis* (patron or leader) of many, including Paul (Romans 16:1–2). Phoebe is seen as Paul’s helper, not passive, but an influential. The term *diakonos*, when used elsewhere in the New Testament, refers to recognized ministry leaders (e.g., Philippians 1:1), and its application to Phoebe suggests formal ecclesial responsibility (Belleville, 2000).

Romans 16:7 Junia, the Woman Apostle

Gk. Manuscript:

“ἀσπάσασθε Ἀνδρόνικον καὶ Ἰουνίαν τοὺς συγγενεῖς μου καὶ συναιχμαλώτους μου, οἵτινες εἰσιν ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις, οἱ καὶ πρὸ ἐμοῦ γέγοναν ἐν Χριστῷ.”

“Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives and fellow prisoners. They are *episēmoi en tois apostolois* (notable among the apostles), and they were in Christ before I was.”

Grammatical Insight:

Ἰουνίαν (*Iounian*) – accusative of Junia. The earliest manuscripts and patristic writings (e.g., John Chrysostom) support Junia as a woman. The masculine “Junias” is unattested in Greek/Latin literature until the medieval era. ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις – “outstanding among the apostles.” The preposition ἐν with dative τοῖς ἀποστόλοις suggests inclusion in, not reputation before. Junia is Identified as “outstanding among the apostles” (Romans 16:7), she represents strong evidence that women were not only involved in ministry but recognized among the apostolic leadership. Attempts by later interpreters to masculinize her name or reinterpret her role reflect later patriarchal bias, not Paul’s original intent (Epp, 2005).

Galatians 3:28: Theological Foundation for Equality

Galatians 3:28 is a theological cornerstone in Pauline thought:

Greek Text:

“οὐκ ἔστι Ἰουδαῖος οὐδὲ Ἕλληνας, οὐκ ἔστι δοῦλος οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερος, οὐκ ἔστι ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ· πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἰς ἐστὲ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.”

Translation:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

οὐκ ἔτι – a Pauline idiom meaning “there is no longer.” It signifies a transformative negation of social boundaries within the redeemed community. The triadic pattern (ethnicity, class, gender) dismantles Greco-Roman and Jewish hierarchies. “Male and female” is an allusion to Genesis 1:27, now reinterpreted under the lens of the “new creation” in Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). This verse reflects Paul’s eschatological vision in which old social hierarchies transcended the new creation. While some argue that this passage speaks only of spiritual equality, the practical outworking of this vision is evident in Paul’s ministry relationships, where women actively served alongside men. Paul’s statement disrupts deeply entrenched Greco-Roman and Jewish constructs of gender, ethnicity, and social status. As Schüssler Fiorenza (1983) notes, Galatians 3:28 functions as a baptismal creed that calls the community to reorder relationships according to the gospel’s liberating power.

1 Corinthians 11:2–16 – Head Coverings and Headship

This passage has been interpreted to restrict women’s authority, especially verse 3: “the head of the woman is man.” However, a contextual reading reveals that Paul is not forbidding women from speaking or leading in worship he assumes they are doing so (1 Corinthians 11:5). His concern is with how they do so, particularly regarding cultural symbols of honor and modesty in Corinthian society. *κεφαλὴ* (*kephalē*) in v.3 – “head.” Traditionalists interpret this as “authority over,” and *προσευχομένη ἢ προφητεύουσα* “praying or prophesying” (v.5) are the key words in this discourse. This shows women had a public, vocal, and spiritual role in worship.

The Greek term *kephalē* has been interpreted in the past as authority over, however, some scholars would argue that it would be more appropriately translated as source or origin particularly in the context of the creation story that Paul seems to allude to (Payne, 2009). As Paul argues in the given passage, men and women in the context of the Lord are interdependent (v. 11). This reasoning on gender relations on Paul’s part seems to defy gender hierarchy. He seems to value families and makes a pun on the term ‘head’ (Gk. *kephaleu*). While Paul is relying on a pun, contemporary scholars seem enthusiastic on focusing on the single *kephaleu* arguing fiercely on why a husband is termed the wife’s head. Some have posited that it denotes “authority” or “boss.” The Hebrew for “head” could mean this and occasionally *kephaleu* would in the Septuagint as expounded by W.A. Grudem and J.A. Fitzmyer. Other scholars have disputed this meaning, noting that the translators usually bent over backward to avoid translating the Hebrew *rou< su* with the Greek term *kephalieu*; *kephaleu* does not normally mean “authority” or “boss” in Greek. These latter scholars often argue for the meaning “source,” a word it could mean in some texts as interpreted by A. Mickelsen and R. Scroggs.

Advocates of the “authority” interpretation of the term *kephaleu* maintain that “source” is a meaning that is even rarer than “authority” in the Septuagint. Both of these scholarly positions have a degree of merit in what they affirm, but they may be lacking in what they deny. The label “source” and “authority” can at the very least, in “Jewish Greek” influenced by the cadence of the Septuagint, be used interchangeably. In the case of the term *kephaleu* in 1 Corinthians 11:3, what meaning is to be given? 1 Corinthians 11:8 suggests that Paul alludes to Adam as the source of Eve, and so it is likely he refers to the man as the husband’s “source” and does so in the manner that he birthed his wife. In Ephesians 5:23, the wife is instructed to be submissive “regard her husband as the head,” meaning one in authority over her, though the husband is also expected to contextualize headship in terms of sacrificial love for his wife. Even though the entirety of Ephesians 5 stands apart from the rest of Scripture in that it attempts to justify the husband’s

authority, it is telling that the authority a husband is portrayed to possess in this passage is subordinate to the prevailing notion of women's status in that time period. Husser, as we will discuss below, attempts to steer the passage away from a trans-cultural interpretation.

The second reasoning offered by Paul is the order of Creation (1 Cor. 11:7-12). Effectively, Paul is saying, "Woman must wear a head covering because Adam was created first." This reasoning, though far from appealing to contemporary standards, certainly drove the point home for the Corinthians. While Paul understood, as we noted in Genesis 1:26-27, along with Romans 8:29 and 2 Corinthians 3:18, that man and woman together represented the image of God, he makes the point that a woman, created from man, is a partial reflection of his glory (1 Cor. 11:7) and thus might distract men from worship; this could be related to the issue of typical masculine lust in that society. Once Paul has made his argument from the creation order, however, he retracts some of it: yes, it is true that woman is taken from man, but it is equally true that men come from women; each is truly dependent on the other in the Lord, confirming their interdependence rather than male domination (1 Cor. 11:11-12). While Paul draws from cultural background, he is, however, ambivalent on the dual interdependence of both sexes. Paul only needs woman's derivation from man to support his point, but he qualifies the argument so that no one can press more meaning into it than he intends: he offers it as an explanation for head coverings, not for every plausible extrapolation that could be drawn from it. The concluding statement on this argument is so brief that the variety of interpretations is truly remarkable, and thus, his words have become a source of confusion: "Therefore it is proper for a woman to exercise authority over her head" (Hooker, transl. note 1). "On her head," as in the many translations of Hooker, is not where she serves authority.

In his third argument, Paul reasons from nature; that is, from the order of the universe (1 Cor. 11:13). The Stoics often based their arguments on nature, and many other writers followed a similar path. Paul may be drawing here from the customs of his time since men in Paul's era, and even earlier among the Greeks, were known to wear their hair long. Still, "nature" usually suggests something deeper than social habit. He could also be pointing out that, in general, a woman's hair naturally grows longer than a man's. Paul ends with a rhetorical approach familiar to both early Jewish thinkers and Greco-Roman audiences: an appeal to custom "this is simply how it's done" (1 Cor. 11:16). One group of philosophers, the Sceptics, relied solely on customary practice in argument, while others considered it valid support. By bringing in reasoning familiar to those shaped by Jewish tradition, Stoic logic, or even Sceptic thought, Paul circles back to his underlying goal: to prevent division. As C.S. Keener notes, this closing argument anchors his point unity, not dispute, is what he seeks. Engaging these issues, Paul uses the culture as his starting point. He supports Protestant family values and church wholeness including arguments on how to maintain oneness in the church through appropriate attire. He tries to inspire the woman who listens to his letter read in the church to remember (1 Cor. 11:10) without challenging the notion of her choice of dressing freely. This is very different from stronger arguments he gives elsewhere in the letter (1 Cor. 4:18-5:5; 11:29-34). Most importantly for my point of view is the absence of the arguments: Paul does not, in this text, appear to subordinate the woman, but maintain family order in the church.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 – Silence in the Churches

Greek Text:

αἱ γυναῖκες ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις σιγάτωσαν· οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτρέπεται αὐταῖς λαλεῖν...

Translation:

“Let the women be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak...”

Critical Analysis:

The phrase *σιγάτωσαν* (*sigatwsan*) is used three times in this chapter (vv.28, 30, 34) — each refers to disruptive or out-of-turn speaking, not permanent silence. This is perhaps the most controversial Pauline text regarding women: “Women should remain silent in the churches...” (1 Corinthians 14:34–35). However, serious scholarly debate questions whether these verses were even authored by Paul or are later interpolations, given their disruption of the flow of the chapter and contradiction of 1 Corinthians 11, where women are clearly permitted to speak (Fee, 2014). Even if original, the context suggests Paul was addressing a specific disruptive behavior, not instituting a universal ban on women speaking. The likely issue was disorderly questioning during the prophetic evaluation, not general participation in worship. Therefore, using this text as a blanket prohibition on female leadership misrepresents Paul’s intent and contradicts his practice of affirming women leaders.

Philippians 4:2–3 Euodia and Syntyche as Ministry Leaders.**Greek Text:**

Εὐδοίαν παρακαλῶ καὶ Συντύχην παρακαλῶ... αἵτινες ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ συνήθλησάν μοι...
 “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche... who have contended at my side in the gospel.”

Lexical Insight:

συνήθλησαν (*synēthlēsan*) – from *athleō*, “to struggle or compete alongside.” Used for apostolic-level ministry struggle (cf. Phil 1:27). *συνεργός* in Pauline use typically refers to fellow missionaries or teachers (Rom 16:3, Phil 2:25). In Philippians 4:2–3, Paul appeals to Euodia and Syntyche, two women he describes as having “contended at my side in the cause of the gospel.” The Greek word *synēthlēsan* (“contended”) is a term of apostolic struggle and leadership, often used in athletic or military imagery (Fee, 1995). These women were not passive attendees but active leaders in the Philippian church. Paul’s urging that they reconcile and receive help from a trusted companion further confirms their central role in the church’s mission. The public acknowledgment of their dispute and leadership status implies they were highly visible figures in the Christian community.

Taken together, these key texts demonstrate that Paul’s vision of ministry was more inclusive than later ecclesiastical traditions have acknowledged. Far from being a patriarchal oppressor, Paul affirmed the spiritual authority, leadership, and gifting of women within the early church. A contextual and responsible re-reading of these passages is critical for the Nigerian church today, where cultural and theological misreading continue to hinder gender inclusiveness.

Methodological Approach

This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach combining literary-historical exegesis, feminist hermeneutics, and African contextual theology. These methodologies are employed to responsibly interpret Pauline texts within their socio-cultural and theological settings, while drawing relevant insights for the contemporary Nigerian church. This integrative approach ensures a faithful reading of the biblical text, a critique of gender bias in interpretation, and an application that is theologically and culturally relevant to Nigeria’s ecclesial context.

Literary-Historical Exegesis

Literary-historical exegesis involves the critical examination of biblical texts within their original literary structure, historical background, and socio-religious context. This method allows for a careful reading of Paul's letters, attending to their genre, purpose, cultural assumptions, and the rhetorical strategies Paul employed in addressing specific communities (Keener, 2014). For instance, a historical reading of Romans 16 helps to highlight the significance of women such as Phoebe and Junia within early Christian leadership structures, often overlooked in patriarchal interpretations. By situating Paul's writings in the Greco-Roman and Second Temple Jewish worlds, this approach reveals how the Apostle engaged with and sometimes subverted prevailing gender norms. It challenges static or Universalist readings of texts such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, encouraging readers to distinguish between cultural practice and theological principle (Wright, 2012).

Feminist Hermeneutics

Feminist hermeneutics interrogates the ways in which traditional interpretations of Scripture have marginalized women's voices and experiences. This methodology critiques androcentric biases in both ancient and modern readings of Paul, while recovering women's agency and leadership within biblical narratives (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1983). Through this lens, Paul's references to female co-workers such as Euodia, Syntyche, Priscilla, and Phoebe are re-examined not as marginal notes but as central to the formation and mission of the early church. This hermeneutical stance is particularly vital in contexts like Nigeria, where theology has often been shaped by colonial, patriarchal structures that silence women's contributions in the church. Feminist hermeneutics calls for justice in interpretation and aims to recover the liberating potential of Scripture for all genders, (Oduyoye, 2001).

African Contextual Theology

African contextual theology serves as a framework for interpreting Scripture in light of African cultural realities, social structures, and lived experiences. It recognizes that biblical interpretation is never neutral, and that theology must speak meaningfully within the African context (Ukpong, 1995). In Nigeria, where cultural patriarchy intersects with ecclesiastical authority, many churches continue to resist women's leadership despite biblical evidence to the contrary.

This methodology emphasizes a communal and participatory model of leadership that resonates with indigenous African values of inclusiveness and relationality. Contextual theology challenges the Nigerian church to re-express its ecclesiology in ways that affirm women's gifts and callings in leadership, in continuity with the liberating vision of the early church as seen in Paul's letters. By engaging African realities alongside biblical truth, this approach resists both Western feminist impositions and uncritical traditionalism. It fosters a theology that is biblically rooted, socially engaged, and culturally transformative.

Therefore, these three methodological lenses allow for a holistic engagement with the topic. Literary-historical exegesis provides the textual and contextual grounding; feminist hermeneutics offers a justice-oriented critique of interpretation; and African contextual theology ensures the relevance and applicability of findings to the Nigerian church. This integrated approach enables a reclamation of Paul's inclusive vision and a re-imagining of leadership practices in contemporary ecclesial communities.

Scholars View on Romans 16 and Galatians 3:28

Paul's commendation of Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 presents one of the clearest examples of women exercising authoritative roles in early Christian communities. Paul identifies her as a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchreae, a term that in Pauline usage often denotes a recognized ministerial function rather than a generic servant role (Moo, 2018). While some scholars argue that *diakonos* here is nontechnical, the phrase "of the church" (*tēs ekklēsiās*) strongly suggests an official position, as Paul uses similar constructions elsewhere to describe established ministry roles (Belleville, 2005). Furthermore, that Paul entrusts Phoebe with the likely responsibility of conveying the Roman letter underscores her status: couriers were expected not merely to deliver letters but also to explain and orally defend them (Jewett, 2007). Paul's request that the Roman believers "receive her in the Lord" and "assist her" signals delegated authority, not merely courtesy.

Additionally, Paul's description of Phoebe as a *prostatis* ("patron" or "benefactor") conveys a social status that typically involved providing material support, hosting travelers, and exercising influence within civic or congregational networks (Osiek & Balch, 1997). The term often denoted leadership within Greco-Roman patronage systems, and its application to Phoebe suggests a woman of substantial resources and standing (Jewett, 2007). This portrayal aligns with what we know of women benefactors in antiquity, who frequently used patronage networks to support philosophical, religious, and voluntary associations. Thus, far from depicting Phoebe in a subordinate capacity, Paul's language points to her functioning as both minister and patron within the early church. The cumulative evidence makes Phoebe a paradigmatic figure for understanding how women shaped and sustained the Pauline mission.

The social-historical context of households in Paul's world further supports this view. Early Christian communities often met in private homes, creating networks of hospitality and leadership that depended on household heads and patrons (Balch & Osiek, 1997). Phoebe, as a wealthier woman capable of hosting and supporting itinerant ministers, fits naturally into this model. Her prominence in Romans 16 signals not only her local importance but also her broader significance in facilitating Paul's mission. Consequently, Phoebe serves as a paradigmatic example of female leadership that was both practical and spiritual, combining material support with ministerial authority.

Romans 16:7 introduces Junia in the contested phrase *episēmoi en tois apostolois*, traditionally translated as "outstanding among the apostles." The debate surrounding Junia's gender and apostolic status has been one of the most significant in Pauline scholarship. Historically, some translations and scholars assumed Junia to be male (*Junias*), reflecting a bias against female apostleship. However, modern linguistic and epigraphic studies confirm that *Junia* was a well-attested female Latin name, while *Junias* has no known parallel in Greco-Roman inscriptions (Epp, 2005). Patristic witnesses, including Chrysostom, also recognized Junia as female, suggesting that early interpreters understood the name as feminine without difficulty (Brooten, 1977). These findings demonstrate that the gender of Junia was originally and consistently female.

The apostolic status of Junia is supported by both grammatical analysis and historical context. The Greek construction *episēmoi en tois apostolois* most naturally indicates inclusion: Junia was "notable among the apostles," rather than merely "well-known to the apostles" (Belleville, 2005). Critics of the inclusive reading argue for the alternative translation, citing rare

comparative usages, but the overwhelming majority of manuscript evidence, patristic interpretation, and Hellenistic Greek parallels favor the inclusive sense (Burer & Wallace, 2001). Moreover, Paul's broader usage of the term "apostle" often extends beyond the Twelve to include missionaries and leaders recognized for their role in spreading the gospel (Brooten, 1977). Therefore, reading Junia as a female apostle aligns both with linguistic evidence and Paul's functional definition of apostleship.

The implications of Junia's apostleship are substantial. If Junia is recognized as an apostle, this suggests that women were not merely passive recipients of ministry but **active agents in the expansion and governance of early Christian communities**. Junia's inclusion among the apostles challenges hierarchical assumptions and provides historical precedent for female leadership in ministry, particularly in mission-oriented contexts. Furthermore, the pairing of Junia with Andronicus, another Jewish Christian of prominence, reinforces the idea that early Christianity embraced diverse agents for its missionary program, without rigid gender exclusion (Epp, 2005).

Hogan (2008) in this study "*No Longer Male and Female: Interpreting Galatians 3:28 in Early Christianity*", traces the reception history of Galatians 3:28 across the first four centuries CE. As she observes, "early Christians did not always approach this verse with the same concerns as modern readers" sometimes reading "no longer male and female" as a metaphor for spiritual unity or heavenly identity, rather than a mandate for social or institutional gender-equality. (Hogan, 2008, 12). Hogan demonstrates that among pre-Augustinian interpreters the verse was variously used: to describe Christian perfection (celibate ideal), communal identity in Christ, or soteriological status, rather than as a basis for egalitarian church order. For example, in her survey of fourth-century Cappadocian theology, she notes that although "male and female" were sometimes allegorized as Christ and the Church, the application seldom overturned contemporary social norms.

The argument that Galatians 3:28 establishes "ontological equality" for all believers is sharpened in modern scholarship, such as *Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute* by Richard W. Hove. Hove contends that the verse undermines any doctrinal basis for gender-based discrimination in access to salvation, rights, and dignity within the Christian community. (Hove, 1999, 1). Affirming this interpretive move, some contemporary theologians argue that Galatians 3:28 provides a "faith-based response" to gender-specific marginalization and persecution; that the Gospel dismantles the social inequities rooted in gender, class, or ethnicity so that women and men enjoy equal personal dignity and community standing. (Okanlawon, 2016).

Nonetheless, historical-critical scholars caution against directly mapping modern egalitarian categories (e.g., gender equality in ministry, social justice, and institutional parity) onto Paul's world. As the article in *Biblical Archaeology Review* argues, Paul's "new creation" ideal envisions a cosmic reordering (a future eschatological unity) rather than a full social revolution, and the triadic formula (Jew/Greek; slave/free; male/female) most clearly addresses identity and belonging, not necessarily functional social structures or offices. (Neutel, 2024). The divergence in early Christian interpretation suggests that "Galatians 3:28" functioned more as a flexible theological symbol than a fixed blueprint for church order. Indeed, as Hogan summarizes: "There is no single interpretation given to the phrase 'there is no longer male and female' across early Christianity." (Hogan, 2008, 223).

In light of this, a balanced interpretive approach recognizes that Galatians 3:28 most securely affirms **equal standing, dignity, and belonging in Christ**, a foundational ontological

and soteriological equality. Yet this need not automatically entail **uniform social or institutional roles**, especially given the varied social-historical contexts of early churches and the broader New Testament literature which sometimes presumes social and gender distinctions. Practically, for modern Christian ethics and ecclesiology, this means Galatians 3:28 provides a **normative principle** of equality and inclusion especially for marginalized groups but requires **contextual discernment** for application. This reflects both the verse's radical theological claim and the historical reality of Christian communities navigating existing social structures.

Feminist hermeneutics approaches Romans 16 as a text that highlights the visible leadership and ministry of women in the early Christian movement. Rather than treating Paul as uniformly restrictive toward women, feminist interpreters emphasize that Romans 16 contains some of the most significant evidence of women serving as coworkers, leaders, apostles, household-church leaders, patrons, and missionaries. Feminist scholars argue that Romans 16 presents Paul's ministry as deeply collaborative with women. He commends several women for labor, leadership, and authority within the church (e.g., Phoebe, Prisca, Junia, Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis). This reflects a more egalitarian early Christian environment than later traditions acknowledged (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1983). Feminist hermeneutics stresses that Paul uses official ministerial language for her. This challenges later interpretations that minimized women's roles in ecclesial offices (Glancy, 2003).

Romans 16:7 is central in feminist interpretation: "Greet Andronicus and Junia ... prominent among the apostles." Feminist scholars consistently argue: **Junia is a woman's name**, widely recognized as such in early Christianity. The phrase "prominent among the apostles" indicates she **was herself an apostle**, not merely esteemed by them. Her later "masculinization" (changing Junia to 'Junias') in medieval manuscripts reflects patriarchal bias rather than original meaning (Epp, 2005; Bauckham, 2002). This verse is therefore taken as **direct evidence that a woman held the highest missionary office** in the early church.

Feminist hermeneutics notes that the erasure or downgrading of women like Junia illustrates how patriarchal assumptions influenced translation and interpretation. The recovery of women's leadership requires rereading texts "from the margins" and restoring historically lost female voices (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1992). Thus, the text challenges restrictive readings of women's roles in Christianity and supports an egalitarian understanding of early Christian leadership.

Feminist Hermeneutics and Social-Rhetorical Critics on Galatians 3:28

Feminist hermeneutics approaches **Galatians** by examining how Paul's arguments challenge or reinforce patriarchal structures. Central to feminist readings is **Galatians 3:28** "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This verse is interpreted as a **radical egalitarian statement** that undermines gender hierarchies and offers a theological basis for women's equality in the church (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1983).

Feminist scholars argue that Paul's emphasis on **freedom from the law** and the **new identity in Christ** opens space for dismantling patriarchal norms. They highlight that Paul uses **baptismal imagery** to assert a new social reality, making distinctions based on gender religiously irrelevant (Campbell, 2003). This becomes a foundation for feminist theological claims that early

Christianity imagined a community not structured by male privilege. At the same time, feminist interpreters acknowledge tensions within Pauline texts overall. While Galatians offers egalitarian themes, other Pauline passages were later interpreted to enforce women's subordination. Feminist hermeneutics therefore emphasizes a **liberative reading strategy**, prioritizing passages like Galatians 3:28 that align with the gospel's emancipatory trajectory and questioning later patriarchal uses of Paul (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2014).

Moreover, feminist scholars explore how Galatians can be misused in traditions that spiritualize equality without addressing real structural oppression. They argue that Galatians' message should be applied to **material, social, and ecclesial inequalities**, not treated merely as a theological abstraction (Petersen, 2008). Thus, feminist hermeneutics sees Galatians as both **a resource for liberation** and **a text requiring critical interpretation** within patriarchal contexts.

Social-rhetorical criticism, interprets biblical texts by integrating **rhetorical, social, cultural, and ideological** textures. This method examines how Paul's declaration in **Galatians 3:28** functions **persuasively** within the social world of early Christian communities.

First, social-rhetorical critics highlight the **inner texture** of Galatians 3:28 its repetitive, balanced structure ("neither...nor...") functions as a rhetorical strategy to dissolve previously accepted social divisions (Robbins, 1996). By placing male/female alongside Jew/Greek and slave/free, Paul uses a triadic formula to assert a new identity grounded in **baptismal unity**, not social hierarchy.

Second, the **social and cultural texture** focuses on the Greco-Roman world, where distinctions of ethnicity, legal status, and gender structured daily life. Social-rhetorical critics argue that Paul's statement is **countercultural**, challenging deeply embedded social classifications (Hester, 2002). In this interpretive frame, Galatians 3:28 becomes a "social reversal" claim asserting that Christ-followers belong to a community defined by a new symbolic world rather than conventional status markers.

Third, the **ideological texture** examines how Paul positions power within the community. Social-rhetorical scholars note that Paul's rhetorical goal is to demonstrate that the Galatians' identity in Christ transcends the distinctions used by opponents who promote Torah observance as a boundary marker (Robbins, 1994). Thus, Galatians 3:28 serves as an ideological critique of any system ancient or modern that reinforces inequality or exclusion.

Finally, social-rhetorical criticism emphasizes **sacred texture**. The theological claim that unity "in Christ" forms the basis for the social reconfiguration Paul argues for. This theological grounding provides a sacred legitimation for the social transformation envisioned in the verse (Robbins, 1996).

Overall, social-rhetorical criticism views **Galatians 3:28** as a **rhetorical, social, and ideological proclamation** of a new community identity in which prior social boundaries are rendered theologically irrelevant.

Implication for the Nigerian Church

The Nigerian church reflects a complex intersection of traditional African patriarchy, colonial ecclesiastical structures, and conservative biblical interpretation, all of which contribute to the marginalization of women in church leadership. Cultural norms across many Nigerian ethnic groups traditionally assign women to domestic and subordinate roles, and these expectations are often carried into ecclesiastical life (Oduyoye, 2001). As a result, even in denominations where

women are the majority in membership and participation, leadership roles remain predominantly male (Okonkwo, 2020).

Ecclesiastically, many mainline churches in Nigeria either limit or entirely prohibit the ordination of women. For example, while some dioceses within the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) have begun to admit women into the diaconate, resistance to full priesthood and episcopal ordination persists (Uzor, 2022). Pentecostal churches, though more flexible in some organizational aspects, often reinforce patriarchal models of spiritual authority, where women serve primarily in supportive or auxiliary capacities (Kgatla, 2015). These barriers are further entrenched by theological misinterpretations of Pauline texts such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:12, which are often quoted without contextual analysis. Such readings ignore Paul's affirmation of women leaders like Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2), Junia (Rom 16:7), and Priscilla (Acts 18:26), and fail to distinguish between cultural instructions and universal theological principles (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1983).

Despite prevailing resistance, some churches and individuals are pushing against these limitations. In 2023, the Methodist Church of Nigeria consecrated Rt. Rev. Nkechi Nwosu was the first female bishop, a landmark event that challenged long-standing ecclesiastical norms and created new possibilities for gender-inclusive leadership (Daily Post, 2023). This step reflects a growing recognition among some denominations that the restriction of leadership roles to men is not a theological necessity but a cultural inheritance in need of reform. In Pentecostal circles, influential female leaders such as Pastor Folu Adeboye (Redeemed Christian Church of God) and Bishop. Funke Felix-Adejumo (Agape Ministries) plays a prominent role in evangelism, social work, and teaching. Their ministries demonstrate the competence, authority, and spiritual impact of women in leadership, even in contexts that lack formal ecclesiastical endorsement (Adebayo, 2022).

Emerging theologians, scholars, and Christian feminists are also contributing to this shift through research, advocacy, and grassroots mobilization. Organizations such as the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians have been instrumental in creating platforms for African women to articulate faith perspectives rooted in both biblical authority and contextual reality (Kanyoro, 2001).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the role of women in Paul's ministry within the early church and the implications of his writings for the Nigerian church today. Contrary to commonly held assumptions that Paul was restrictive toward women, a literary-historical and contextual reading of his epistles reveals a pattern of collaboration with and commendation of female leaders such as Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia, and others (Romans 16:1-7). Through feminist hermeneutics, it becomes evident that certain interpretations of Pauline texts have been shaped by patriarchal assumptions, rather than Paul's original intent. African contextual theology further emphasizes the need to interpret Scripture within the lived realities of Nigerian Christians, advocating for models of leadership that reflect both biblical truth and cultural relevance. Despite strong cultural and ecclesiastical resistance to women's leadership in Nigeria, positive shifts such as the ordination of Bishop Nkechi Nwosu and the emergence of female Pentecostal leaders indicate growing receptivity. Reclaiming Paul's inclusive vision is thus both a theological and pastoral imperative.

In sum, a historically informed and theologically balanced reading of biblical passages will go a long way in addressing gender balance, but no scriptural should be interpreted in isolation. Galatians 3:28 affirms that Paul intended to establish **a new identity in Christ**, dissolving the decisive power of ethnicity, social status, and gender over believers' standing and belonging. This equality is ontological and spiritual rooted in baptism and in Christ and foundational for Christian community, ethics, and identity.

At the same time, the historical record and Paul's broader praxis suggest that the verse does **not automatically abolish all social or institutional distinctions**. Rather, it establishes a principle of unity, dignity, and equal status that must be lived out and interpreted in context. The early church's varied reception of the verse reminds us that unity in Christ does not necessarily translate into uniform social practices, but it does demand mutual respect, inclusion, and equality of spiritual standing which the Nigeria church can learn from in addressing issue of marginalization in ministry and leadership position. Thus, Galatians 3:28 remains a powerful, provocative, and normative text one that calls Christians to uphold unity and dignity, while exercising discernment and contextual wisdom in social, cultural, and ecclesial application.

Recommendations

To advance gender inclusiveness in the Nigerian churches, there is need for a balance theological interpretation of Biblical text. The following recommendations are proposed:

- **For ethics and social justice:** For the Nigeria Church, Romans 16 and Galatians 3:28 provides a robust theological basis for affirming human dignity, opposing discrimination, and promoting inclusion especially for historically marginalized groups (ethnic minorities, slaves/poor, women). It challenges churches to treat all believers with equal worth and access to the means of grace, fellowship, and ministry.
- **For ecclesiology and church leadership:** While ontological equality does not automatically demand identical roles in every cultural context, it does challenge any doctrine or practice that privileges ministry, leadership, or worship roles solely on the basis of gender, ethnicity, or social status. The Nigerian Churches may still adopt culturally informed roles, but these should not undermine the fundamental unity and equal dignity of believers.
- **For pastoral and intercultural ministry:** The church as a multicultural and global contexts, should see Galatians 3:28 as a unifying theological foundation that transcends ethnic, economic, or gender divisions encouraging solidarity, mutual respect, and shared mission.
- **For historical theology and doctrine development:** there is need for the church to recognizing that the early Christian interpreters themselves diverged in how they applied Galatians 3:28 warns against simplistic appeals to "tradition." Contemporary applications must be conducted with theological reflection, social awareness, and hermeneutical humility.⁹¹

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