Re-Examining the Role of Women in the Ministry of Jesus and its Implications for Women's Ministry in the Church

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Abstract

Discussions about women's ministry in the church are often shaped more by tradition and cultural assumptions than by a careful reading of the Gospels. This paper re-examines the role of women in the ministry of Jesus by returning to the biblical narratives and listening attentively to how women appear, act, and are affirmed within Jesus' mission. Rather than treating women as passive recipients of ministry, the Gospels present them as active participants—disciples, supporters, witnesses, and proclaimers of the good news. Drawing primarily from the New Testament, particularly the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John, this study highlights key encounters between Jesus and women, including Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman, Mary and Martha of Bethany, and the women who accompanied Jesus and supported his ministry. These narratives reveal a pattern of inclusion, dignity, and trust, as Jesus consistently engaged women across social, religious, and cultural boundaries. His interactions challenged prevailing norms and affirmed women's capacity for spiritual insight, faithful service, and leadership within the community of faith. The paper employs a narrative-theological approach, allowing the Gospel stories to speak within their historical contexts while also engaging contemporary questions facing the church. The study explores the implications of Jesus' treatment of women for present-day women's ministry. It argues that women's

ministry should not be understood merely as a separate or auxiliary space within the church but as an integral expression of discipleship and mission. Therefore, the church is called upon to re-imagine women's ministry in light of Jesus' inclusive and transformative practice. This will provide a sound grounding in contemporary ministry models in the ministry of Jesus himself for the church and the women's group in the church to move toward more faithful, holistic, and life-giving forms of women's ministry through participation of women in its worship, leadership, and witness.

Keywords: Reexamination, Women, Role, Jesus's Ministry, Women's Ministry

Introduction

In the beginning, when God created the earth, he created man and then created the woman because she was the suitable help meet for man. God was intentional about human beings (Women) as his representatives on earth. The woman was neither less than a man nor above the man. But as time goes on, there is a shift in God's plan for humanity. Some cultures classify women as property or place them in a house, chaos, and a child production machine. Christianity came along with the culture of the missionaries. And if care is not taken, it will be difficult to differentiate between Christianity and the culture of the person who brought the gospel.

Today, in some denominations, women are not allowed to carry out ecclesiastical functions in the church; they are graciously allowed to be in the singing group, or even if they are elected to the elders council, they cook and serve food during breaks at the meeting. But the contradiction is that, in some of these denominations, women are denied ordination, but they are allowed to lecture men in their seminary who will be later ordained to pastor churches. But studies have shown that there are women who have contributed so well in the ministry today and have discipled and nurtured lives for Christ. Oyeniyi (2023,

120) gave practical steps on how one can disciple gospel ministers for Christ. “Spiritual leaders are not elected, appointed or created by synods or the church in conference, nor by convention-in-session.

Most of the time, they misinterpreted Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church (1Cor 14: 34-35). One of the reasons Paul wrote that letter was to address the report he received about the misconduct of the Corinthian church, in which he addresses so many issues. Paul was addressing some lousy behaviors of some women, talking without control and being disrespectful in the gathering of believer. Secondly, Women have been emotionally downplayed by men or even women themselves; some elderly ones (both male and female) have wrongly defined the role of a woman in the church.

The paper will be looking at the place of women in Bible and in the ministry of Jesus in the New Testament, and some women who made an impact in the Bible, through historical analysis. Therefore, God’s salvation plan from creation includes Men, women, and children. There is no cultural barrier to the role of women in ministry. Secondly, Redefining the position of women in modern society from a Christian perspective.

Women in The Old Testament

The Old Testament presents a complex and multifaceted view of women. While the cultural world of ancient Israel was patriarchal, the Old Testament also preserves narratives, laws, and poetic texts that highlight women’s dignity, agency, wisdom, and spiritual significance. The Old Testament’s portrayal of women must therefore be understood within both its ancient Near Eastern context and its theological mission (Meyers, 2013, 5-7).

Ancient Israel functioned as a patriarchal society in which lineage, inheritance, and authority were largely determined through men. However, women were not invisible or passive.

They were central to family life, economic production, religious practice, and cultural continuity.

Women played essential roles as wives, mothers, agricultural workers, artisans, and household managers (Kensky, 2002, 3-4). Women were covenant bearers in the Old Testament. A dominant Old Testament theme is the theological importance of women in the continuation of God's covenant promises (Trible, 1984, 33). Matriarchs such as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah are not merely biological mothers but active participants in God's redemptive plan; their experiences of barrenness, divine visitation, and childbirth are often linked to major covenantal developments [Gen 12-35] (Ackerman, 1998, 145-147). Women played roles in religion, judicial, and political leadership in ancient Israel.

The Old Testament includes strong examples of women in leadership roles: Deborah, a prophetess and judge (Judg. 4-5), acts as a national leader. Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20) is consulted by King Josiah's high officials, indicating her recognized prophetic authority. Miriam (Exod. 15:20) leads worship and is remembered as a guide of Israel [Mic. 6:4] (Camp, 2000, 19-21). The Old Testament also portrays a woman as an embodiment of wisdom and household authority. The wisdom literature of the OT highlights women as teachers of moral life and managers of households. Proverbs 31 portrays the ideal woman as industrious, wise, entrepreneurial, and dignified. The repeated invocation of a mother's instruction (Prov. 1:8; 6:20) shows that mothers held respected teaching roles (Brueggemann, 1997, 410-412). The writer of Proverbs presents wisdom as a woman using the pronoun "she." (Pro 3:15-18). But note that the Old Testament protects women against oppression and violence.

Some texts reflect the vulnerability of women within a patriarchal society particularly widows, barren women, and foreign women. The Torah frequently commands Israel to protect widows (Exod. 22:22-23; Deut. 24:17-21), showing

God's special concern for women on the margins. Narratives such as Ruth reveal God's care for vulnerable women through divine providence and communal solidarity (Athalya Brenner, 1994, 52–55).

The Old Testament often presents women as courageous agents who act decisively to preserve life or advance God's purposes. Rehab protects Israel's spies (Josh. 2). Abigail prevents bloodshed and demonstrates spiritual insight (1 Sam. 25). The Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, defy Pharaoh's command and save Hebrew children (Exod. 1:15-22). These stories demonstrate that women could subvert unjust systems with wisdom and bravery (Sakenfeld, 2003, 8–10). Christians cannot give a blind eye to this historic move of God and his place for women in the Old Testament. Theologically, women in the Old Testament, embody themes of covenant continuity, model faithfulness (e.g., Hannah's prayer, 1 Sam. 1-2), demonstrate God's concern for the oppressed and marginalized, and foreshadow the equal dignity of male and female in creation (Gen. 1:27). The Old Testament both reflects its cultural environment and provides glimpses of God's redemptive vision that challenges patriarchal norms (Sakenfeld, 2003, 8–10).

Women in The New Testament

In the New Testament, a woman's participation was recognized. But before any further discussion, it will be proper to look at the women in the Greco-Roman period. Women in the Greco-Roman world lived within a social structure deeply shaped by patriarchy, household hierarchy, and civic limitations. In both Greek and Roman societies, a woman's primary identity was connected to her oikos (household) or domus, where she was expected to manage domestic affairs, bear legitimate children, and uphold family honor (Pomeroy, 1975, 17–18). While women differed in rights and opportunities depending on region, class, and period, they generally possessed fewer legal, political, and economic freedoms compared to men.

In classical Greek culture, especially in Athens, women were legally under the guardianship (*kyrios*) of a male relative, first their father, then their husband, or another male if widowed (Pomeroy, 1975, 64-65). Respectable Athenian women rarely appeared in public life; their ideal was seclusion, modesty, and silence (Lefkowitz & Fant, 1992, 92–93). Spartan women, however, enjoyed greater freedom, including property ownership and public presence, due to the militaristic nature of Spartan society and the frequent absence of men (Gardner, 1986, 28–30). Hellenistic Greek society relaxed some of these restrictions, granting elite women greater levels of education and public visibility.

In the Roman world, women likewise did not participate in formal politics, but they exercised influence through family networks and patronage. Roman women were legally classified under the *patria potestas* of the emperor or family patriarch, though the *manus* marriage system where a woman became her husband's legal property had largely declined by the first century CE (Treggiari, 1991, 115). As a result, many Roman women remained under their father's legal control even after marriage, allowing some to own property independently (Lefkowitz & Fant, 156–158). This gave elite women significant economic power, which they often used to sponsor public buildings, religious activities, and charitable causes.

Education for women varied widely: Greek women were generally taught household skills, while Roman elite women received broader training in literacy, rhetoric, and philosophy (Kraemer, 1992, 22–25). Women played prominent roles in religion as priestesses, prophetesses, temple workers, and participants in public festivals. Cults such as those of Isis, Dionysus, and Cybele welcomed women and sometimes elevated them to positions of ritual authority (Osiek & MacDonald, 2006, 34-36).

The Jewish Women's roles were shaped by the Torah, Jewish oral traditions, and, to some extent, the influence of

surrounding Greco-Roman culture. Social expectations emphasized modesty, obedience, and devotion to family and God**. Domestic Roles and Household Identity.** Women's primary sphere was the home (*oikos*), where they were responsible for domestic management, childbearing, and child-rearing. The **Proverbs 31 woman** exemplifies the ideal: industrious, wise, and devoted to family welfare (Pomeroy, 1975, 92-94. Household management was not only a personal duty but a marker of family honor and social respectability.

Marriage, Family, and Legal Status: Marriage was central to a woman's social identity. Women were typically under the authority of their fathers until marriage, after which the husband assumed guardianship. Marriage contracts (*ketubah*) protected women's financial rights in case of divorce or widowhood (Neusner, 1982, 45-47). Women could rarely initiate divorce, though men had the legal prerogative to dissolve marriages (Deut. 24:1). Jewish law emphasized marital fidelity and the production of legitimate heirs, connecting women's roles directly to family continuity and social stability (Lefkowitz & Fant, 1992, 102–104).

Social Separation and Public Conduct: Jewish society encouraged **modesty** and limited women's public visibility. Women were generally excluded from political life and official religious leadership, and public behavior reflected directly on family honor (Ackerman, 1998, 18–21). While daily market activities or social interactions occurred, women's public movement was expected to be restrained, and they were discouraged from asserting public authority (Osiek & MacDonald, 2006, 34–36).

Religious Participation: Women actively participated in household religious practices, Sabbath observance, festival preparation, and dietary regulations. However, synagogue leadership and formal Torah study were largely reserved for men (Kraemer, 1989, 55–57). Despite restrictions, Jewish women demonstrated religious devotion: **Anna the prophetess**

(Luke 2:36-38) served in the Temple, while others supported prophetic and religious ministries. The New Testament emphasizes women's piety, indicating that religious engagement was a valued avenue for women's social contribution (Kraemer, 62–63). From the background, the author outlines some of the roles women have played in the past and how culture has placed women in society. It will be proper if this paper considers some African writers and their views about women in African society. Africa has its own way of life that differs from one ethnic group to another, from one community to another. Africa is a union in diversity.

According to John Mbiti, women emerge in Africa as a result of their contribution to the family, kinship, lineage, and clan. In many societies, women's sense of personhood is intertwined with their roles as daughters, wives, mothers, and community members (Mbiti, 1990, 106–107). Idowu Bolaji sees women from the African traditional Religion. African women often view life through a spiritual lens where they see that and unseen realms are interconnected. Indigenous African cosmology emphasizes ancestors, spirits, and the Supreme Being as active participants in human affairs. Women traditionally serve as: custodians of rituals, intermediaries in rites of passage, keepers of household shrines, practitioners of herbal and spiritual healing (Idowu, 1973, 142–144). While Philomina Okeke looks at women from the motherhood perspective. Motherhood is a powerful lens through which many African women understand their place in the world. Bearing and nurturing children symbolize life, continuity, and blessing. In many cultures, a woman's dignity increases with motherhood (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2004, 55–56). This emphasis on motherhood is both empowering. It situates women as life givers and challenging, because it can place pressure on women whose identity becomes limited to domestic or reproductive roles.

Oyewumi (1997: 67-70) presents it from another realistic view, claiming that while many African cultures acknowledge the relational and spiritual strength of women, patriarchal

structures often limit women's autonomy in leadership, education, marriage, property rights, and religious authority. African women, therefore, view life through dual lenses: the richness of cultural identity and belonging. The awareness of gendered limitations and the struggle for agency. She was not silent on some limitations placed on women, which some cannot clearly justify why these limitations were created.

Impact of Women on The Ministry of Jesus and Women's Ministry

The impact of women in the New Testament is seen in the events that took place in the Bible during their time. One of the most significant impacts of women in the New Testament is seen in their role as primary witnesses to critical events in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Women such as Mary, Elizabeth**,** and Anna are central to Luke's infancy narrative, offering prophetic insight into the identity and mission of the Messiah (Luke 1-2). Mary is regarded as one of the most theologically profound hymns of divine justice in Scripture (Gaventa, 2013, 45–60).

Women also remained at the crucifixion when many male disciples fled (Matt. 27:55-56). Most notably, the first witnesses of the resurrection were Mary Magdalene and other women, a historical detail widely accepted by scholars as authentic because it would have been culturally counterintuitive to invent female witnesses in a male-dominated society (Wright, 2003, 607–611; Levine, 2018, 421–437). Their role as the first to testify about the resurrection elevated the reliability of women's testimony and marked them as the first evangelists of the risen Christ.

Contrary to popular assumptions, women were among Jesus' committed disciples. Luke explicitly states that women followed Jesus, learned from Him, and supported His ministry "out of their means" (Luke 8:1–3). Figures like Joanna, connected to the royal court, illustrate the influence and resources women brought to the movement. In the Pauline mission, women

served as co-workers, hosts of house churches, and financial patrons. Phoebe, described as a *diakonos* and *prostatis* (patron/leader), played a crucial role in the church and likely delivered Paul's letter to the Romans (MacDonald, 2015, 112–118). Priscilla, alongside Aquila, taught the eloquent preacher Apollos, demonstrating women's involvement in doctrinal formation (Acts 18:26).

The New Testament further portrays women exercising diverse forms of leadership and spiritual authority. Junia in Romans 16:7 is widely regarded by contemporary scholarship as a female "apostle," or at minimum, a prominent missionary (Epp, 2005, 72–93). Philip's four daughters served as prophets (Acts 21:9), affirming women's participation in authoritative Spirit-inspired ministries. House churches, key centers of early Christian worship, were often hosted or led by women such as Lydia of Philippi (Acts 16:14-15, 40) and Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11). These examples reveal that the domestic spaces where Christianity flourished were frequently managed by spiritually influential women. Recent African scholarship emphasizes that such leadership parallels women's significant social and religious influence in African communal structures today, making the New Testament portrayal culturally resonant (Musa, 2014, 33–45).

Jesus' interactions with women reconfigured social expectations. His dialogue with the Samaritan woman in John 4 positions a woman as a theological interlocutor and a missionary to her community. Jesus affirmed women's intellectual and spiritual agency, as seen in His defense of Mary of Bethany's role as a disciple learning at His feet [Luke 10:38-42] (Keener, 2019, 182–206). Paul's theological declaration in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus". Provided a spiritual foundation for gender equality in salvation and participation in Christ's body. This verse profoundly shaped early Christian identity and continues to influence theological debates on women's roles in church ministry.

During the reformation in church history, some women played key roles, for example, Martin Luther's wife Katharina von Bora, who managed households that functioned as theological seminaries, hosted students and reformers, advised Luther on pastoral matters, and modeled the Protestant ideal of the pastor's wife as a spiritually active, educated, and economically capable partner (Yvonne, 2020, 78–102). Similarly, Idelette de Bure wife of John Calvin, provided emotional and domestic stability that enabled his work in Geneva (Spierling, 2005, 26–27).

Implications for Women's Ministry in the Church

Women's Ministry Should Emphasize Discipleship and Theological Education. Jesus invited women to learn from him as disciples, disrupting cultural norms that limited women's access to teaching and study. Contemporary ministries should likewise equip women theologically and spiritually, rather than confining them to "support roles." Thompson (2023) opines that A pastor who is not focused on the discipleship of women in his church is committing a kind of pastoral malpractice. A football coach is not effective if they only focus on one aspect of the game, either offense or defense. And a pastor is not effective if he is not tuned in to over half of his congregation.

According to Scholer (2025), in Jesus' day, responsible teachers were not supposed to teach women. Nevertheless, Jesus taught women and included them in his group of committed disciples. He taught Mary of Bethany and commended her learning to her sister, who was carrying out the traditional tasks (Luke 10:38-42). It was to the Samaritan woman that Jesus made his most explicit affirmation that he was the Messiah, and he shared with her his basic mission (John 4:4–42). According to Luke 8:1–3, many women were in Jesus's band of traveling disciples. These same women were present at the crucifixion and burial and on resurrection morning (Luke 23:49, 55–56; 24:1). Where women are taught deeply, they grow confidently into ministry and mission.

In addition, women's voices should be encouraged and heard in leadership and teaching. Jesus respected and listened to women's testimonies (e.g., the Samaritan woman's witness in John 4). Despite women's involvement in church history, their role in this area has never been free from controversy. Today, most church bodies are discussing the place of women in their ministries Scholer, 2025). Women's ministries today should cultivate spaces where women teach, testify, and lead dialogues about faith, both to other women and in the broader church context. Women's mission societies, community outreach programs, hospital visits, school ministries, and advocacy initiatives where women respond to real human needs.

Furthermore, women's ministry is missional and strategic, not auxiliary. Jesus' female followers supported his ministry materially and missionally (e.g., Joanna, Susanna). There are many women leaders identified and commended in Scripture: Miriam, Deborah, Esther, Phoebe, Junia, Priscilla, Eudia, and Syntyche, to name a few. This observation does bring up the question, "If Paul does not believe women should lead, why does he so clearly commend many specific women for their leadership in the church, their preaching of the Gospel, and their teaching of men?"(Reality Church, 2001). The implication for today is that women's ministry is mission-oriented, equipped to participate in evangelism, community outreach, and discipleship broadly, not just in isolated "women's programs."

Moreover, women's ministry should provide healing and support spaces. Jesus encountered women in broken places, marginalized, sick, and disenfranchised, demonstrating ministry that honors dignity, healing, and restoration. Women's ministries, therefore, should include holistic care: mentoring, counseling, support groups, and safe communities. Thompson (2023) states that Women have a deep need for relationships with other women. The reality is that women go where they can connect to other women. If a church does not provide this,

women will go to events and ministries at larger churches and parachurch organizations to find it.

Scholer (2025) attests that Jesus reached out to women who were rejected. Despite the laws regarding uncleanness, Jesus allowed a woman with a twelve-year menstrual problem to touch him, and he commended her faith (Mark 5:25–34). Jesus permitted a sinful woman to anoint and kiss his feet (Luke 7:36–50). Jesus challenged religious leaders by saying: "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Matt 21:31). He also offered salvation directly to women who were known as adulteresses (John 4:4–42; 8:1–11). Counseling centers, support groups for widows, single mothers, abused women, and trauma survivors within the church community.

Lastly, women's ministry should recognize historical and contemporary women leaders. Recognizing how women have served historically and today strengthens confidence in women's ministry roles. Examples include theological educators, pioneers, and leaders who broke barriers, modeling faithful service and leadership. Women serving as ministry coordinators, educators, administrators, mentors, and pastoral caregivers in churches and faith-based organizations.

One of such women was Mgbeke George Okore, the first ordained female minister in the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, who inspires women's leadership in African church contexts (Okore, 2005).

Conclusion

Re-examining the role of women in Jesus' ministry leads to practical, contextually verifiable implications for women's ministry today. Women's engagement in theological formation, public teaching, mission, healing work, and leadership is not merely a contemporary trend; it is deeply rooted in the Gospel witness, affirmed by Christian tradition, and observable in real-

life ministry contexts. These sources provide helpful online touchpoints you can reference to ground your analysis in broader church practice and conversations.

The role of women cannot be given a blind eye, from the findings and interaction with the scholars the role of women is as important as that of the men from creation. Some of the promise would have not been fulfilled without the women at the background. The birth of prophets like Moses, Samuel, John the Baptist, Jesus and many others, God used the women through child delivery to nurture lives that will be useful to his service. Though the culture and traditions of the people try to cast shadow on women in general but God has his divine plan for women.

Secondly, women were part of Jesus' disciples who play important roles of supporting Him and the other disciples. Women can serve as missionaries, Pastors, Teachers, Evangelist etc. they can serve at every aspect of ministry as far as God's calling is upon them. If you are a married person and you want to successful in life create a happy environment for your wife, love her as Christ love the church, protect her, pray for her wash her with the word and she will give you a heaven on earth and make you excel in your purse of life.

A New Testament study of Jesus' ministry reveals that women were central, not marginal. Jesus affirmed their dignity, welcomed their discipleship, and entrusted them with crucial roles including the foundational witness of the resurrection. The ministry of Jesus thus presents a model of inclusiveness and empowerment that continues to shape Christian understanding of gender and ministry today. A careful reading of the Gospels, informed by recent scholarship, shows that women were central participants in Jesus' ministry: they were disciples, patrons, learners, models of faith, recipients of healing, and the first to announce the resurrection. Rather than being incidental figures, women in the Gospels function as primary witnesses and agents of the Jesus movement.

Contemporary scholarship, both social historical and feminist, helps recover and clarify those roles, demonstrating that Jesus' treatment of women was both countercultural and foundational for the early church.

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