

The ontology of men and women's relationships in contemporary African ecclesiology: Towards a theology of authority-submission in the church

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With the active involvement of women in the church and home, there is a need to study God's design for the relationship between men and women. In reaffirming the divine order of this relationship, discussing the biblical gendered roles has been one of the major contending issues. So emerging ecclesiologies in Africa are beginning to challenge the traditional understanding of male headship in the church. Therefore, the article argues that the ontology of men and women's relationship provides a better framework for understanding the nature of authority and submission in the church. This article states fairly the biblical foundation for the ontology of male and female relationship in the church from both the complementarian and egalitarian views. Also, this article presents the male and female relationship in contemporary African ecclesiology. Furthermore, the article contends that the application of the biblical foundation for the relationship between men and women provides a strong framework for authority and submission in the church, which reaffirms the male headship. The goal of the article is to use the biblical framework for the ontology of the relationships between men and women to propose a theology of authority and submission in the church without undermining the nature and worth of men and women, who are both created in the image and likeness of God. A qualitative methodology was used for this article, which integrates both primary and secondary sources to delineate the thesis of the study.

Contribution: This article contributes to the area of ecclesiology in Africa, which shows that the theology of the church is relevant for engaging cutting-edge issues, such as gender studies, human relations and personhood. It explains the influence and implications of the ontology of gender relationship on authority and submission in the church to affirm human dignity and equality in the church.

Keywords: ontology; relationship; Africa; ecclesiology; authority; submission; God; complementarianism; egalitarianism.

Introduction

Ontology (eds. Cross & Livingstone 2005) is:

[T]he branch of metaphysics [*that*] deals with being in general, rather than this or that being. It investigates the nature of existence and the sense in which different things can be said to be. 'Ontology' also sometimes signifies the underlying presumptions about the existence of any given worldview or conceptual scheme. (p. 1192)

Hence, the ontology of the relationship between men and women has to do with its nature or essence as grounded in creation. Peter and Stephen (2018:ch. 6) contend that 'binary sexuality, or duality of gender, is the basis for being fruitful, while the divine image is correlated with the command to rule as God's viceroy'.¹ The gender duality does not suggest that God has dual genders. Instead, it points to the distinctiveness, similarity and relationship between men and women.

Because ecclesiology is the doctrine or study of the church (Allison 2012:33),² it is important to understand the relationship between men and women in the church, both these groups

1. For more details on the nature of God's image in the male and female or gender duality, see Gentry and Wellum (2018) 24 in chapter 6.

2. In this article, the author uses African ecclesiologies or ecclesiology to show that there are different understandings of the nature, origin, mission and function of the church.

individually carry the *imago Dei*. Therefore, this article argues that the ontology of men and women's relationship provides a framework for understanding the nature of submission to authority in the church, which underscores how theologians, church leaders and members interpret and appropriate God's design for an ordered male and female relationship in the church. The method of the argument is a biblical-theological analysis. In the first section, the article explains the biblical-theological framework for the relationship between men and women in the church. In the second section, a brief discussion on the relationship between men and women in contemporary African ecclesiology is given. In the third section, the article applies the biblical foundation to argue that the biblical framework is still the better model for the relationship between men and women in the church. In the fourth section, the article proposes a framework for authority submission for addressing practical issues in the church.

The biblical-theological framework for the relationship between men and women in the church

The concept of relationship is 'the state or fact of being related; how two things are connected; a connection, an association' (Oxford English Dictionary 2022). The idea of a relationship is rooted in bringing two or more persons together for a particular purpose. For example, people may relate 'to business ventures, fame, social integrations, and fellowship. Whatever the reason for the connection, the issue is, there is a connection' (Ajiboye 2016:28). Accepting the relationship of men and women in the church is essential because it helps to comprehend the nature of the connection between men and women, leadership and order, and equality and roles relationship in the church. The central question in this section helps to see how the Bible discusses the nature of the relationship between men and women and how the church understands the biblical data.

Biblical data

The foundational biblical data for understanding the relationship between men and women is found in Genesis 1:26–29 and 2:21–25. The answer to the following questions gives a good framework for the relationship. Firstly, how and why does the author of Genesis use the words 'man' אָדָם ('ādām), 'male' זָכָר (zākār) and 'woman' אִשָּׁה ('iššā[h])? Secondly, how and why does the author use the words 'woman' אִשָּׁה ('iššā[h]) and 'female' נְקֵבָה (nēqē·bā[h]) (Wenham 1987:33)?³ These words demonstrate two aspects of the male–female relationship. Mathews (1996) comments on the nature of the man and woman thus:

[...] The equality of the two in terms of their essential constitution – man and woman share in the 'human' sameness that cannot be found elsewhere in creation among the beasts. In every way, the

3. The three clauses are in apposition. The first two are arranged chiasmically and emphasize the divine image in man, while the third specifies that women also bear the divine image. The midrashic suggestion "that man as first created was bisexual, and the sexes separated afterwards is far from the thought of this passage" (Skinner, 33). The expression "male and female" is most frequent in legal texts and highlights relationships not only the sexual distinctions within humanity and foreshadows the blessing of fertility to be announced in v 28.' (Wenham 1987:33)

woman shares the same features of personhood as does the man. In 1:26–28, this equality of the man and woman as image-bearers has priority over their differences in sexual roles, although both were crucial to realizing the intended blessing. (p. 2013)

Mathews (1996:13) provides two features of the male–female relationship. Firstly, man and woman share the same indispensable composition – equality of personhood as God's image-bearers. Secondly, the man and the woman are distinct in their sexual roles and function; God calls the woman a helper – this designation further explains that although they are equal, they differ in expressing their personhood. As Adam's helper, the woman holds an important role.⁴ The word helper refers to divine assistance, and this does not mean that she is equal with God; nevertheless, it explains that she is indispensable in God's design for humanity.

How do the New Testament authors recognise the relationship between man and woman in the church? All four gospels report how Jesus provides a theological framework for appreciating male and female relationships. This new perspective on women is rooted 'in the fulfilments of God's saving purposes in Christ' (Schreiner 2008:669). For example, right from the beginning of Luke 1–2, Luke highlights the influential role women played at the birth of Jesus. His discussion on women suggests the plausibility of women's involvement in ministry. They supported him financially (Lk 8:1–3) and received training from Jesus (10:38–42). They are the first to communicate the good news of his resurrection (24:1–12). Mathew includes women in his genealogy, which provides a new approach to writing and reading history (Mt 1:3, 5–6). The Gospel of John 'reveals that women and Samaritans are not outside his saving purpose (Jn 4:4–26)'.⁵ Jesus did not follow the paradigm of men and women's relationships in the ancient world and the Greco-Roman empire. His approach brought a new paradigm that treated both men and women in God's image. He did not treat men as superior to women.

Paul provides insight concerning the relationship between men and women domestically and in the church. The concern is to grasp how men and women associate in the church. In 1 Corinthians 11:8–12, he teaches that the man symbolises authority over the woman because she was created from the man and made for the man. However, in Christ, men and women are mutually dependent on each other (Gl 3:28). Although they are mutually dependent, Paul maintained that there is still an order. He acknowledged their personhood and equality as God's *image-bearers* and pointed out their differences functionally.

In 1 Timothy 2:11–15, Paul points to two reasons for the nature of the male–female relationship in the church; God

4. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 213. A functional difference exists between the man and woman. She is called Adam's 'helper' ('ēzer), which defines the woman's role. In what way would Eve become a 'helper' to the man? The term means 'help' in the sense of aid and support and is used for the Lord aiding his people in the face of enemies (Ps 20:2 [3]; 121:1–2; 124:8). Moses spoke of God as his 'helper' who delivered him from Pharaoh (Ex 18:4), and it is often associated with 'shield' in describing God's protective care of his people.

5. For further discussion on the women in the ministry of Jesus, see Schreiner (2008:772).

created man first, and Satan deceived the woman in the garden, not the man. The order of creation and deception limit the woman, not teaching or exercising authority over men in the church. Why did Paul decide to limit the ministry of teaching to qualified men?

Paul limits women from exercising authority and teaching in the church. However, he allows them to serve as deacons (1 Tm 3:11). Schreiner highlights that 'according to Paul, women can serve as deacons because a diaconate ministry is supportive and does not involve teaching or exercising authority over men' (Schreiner 2008:774). Because the diaconate is a supportive ministry, it is reasonable, for it is an affirmation of differences as spelled out in Genesis 2:18, which makes the woman a helper to the man.⁶ Paul provides good biblical examples for women in ministry. Tryphosa and Persis, Priscilla and Aquila (Rm 16:3, 6, 12), Euodia and Syntyche (Phlp 4:2-3) were fellow workers with Paul.

In his interaction with Pliny Letters 10.96, Shreiner proposes three reasons that show the possibility for women deacons. Firstly, the adverb 'likewise' connects verse 11 with verse 8-10. Secondly, the similarities of the qualifications of deacons are the same as the wives. Thirdly, because Paul did not mention elders' wives' qualifications, he is likely referring to a deaconess because there were female deacons in the early church (Pliny 10:960). So the above passages reveal that although there is equality in the male and female relationship, there are functional differences. The author agrees with Schreiner that 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 is one of the challenging passages in understanding the relationship between men and women in the church. Schreiner (2008) concludes that:

[A] more credible view is that women are banned from passing judgment on prophecies because such an activity would constitute leadership over men in the church, which Paul rules out in 1 Timothy 2:12. (p. 775)⁷

Therefore, Jesus and the apostles affirm the equality of personhood of men and women and the distinct functional role of men and women in God's community, the church. This agrees with Paul's assertion that the creation of man came first, before the woman.

Application

How does the church apply the above biblical data? How does knowing the differences and similarities between complementarianism and egalitarianism impact the understanding or application of male and female relationships

6.Schreiner states that 'According to Paul's writings, however, the equality between men and women does not cancel out the differences in function and role' (n.p.). For further discussion, see Schreiner's (2008) elaboration in *New Testament Theology*, 772-775.

7.The new age inaugurated by Jesus Christ clarifies that men and women are equal in Christ and that women become Abraham's children in the same way as do men: through faith in Christ Jesus (Gl 3:26-29). Jesus treated women with remarkable dignity and encouraged women to learn his word and become his disciples. Women were gifted as prophets, deacons and missionaries. They laboured in ministry along with men. Still, the new age in Christ did not signal an abolition of all role distinctions between men and women. Women did not function as pastors, elders and overseers. Women and men were considered equal, yet men maintained the responsibility of ruling in the church.

in the church today? In the discussion on male-female relationship in the church, one of the controversial issues has been the role of women in ministry. On the one hand, because women have the same capacity as men, they can teach or lead with authority in the church if given the opportunity. On the other hand, one must think about maintaining order in the church. Thinking and clarifying the biblical-theological framework of male-female relationships in the church will help fulfil the cultural and great commission mandates.

For many decades, the traditional view of women in ministry has been challenged with the rise of women's full participation in ministry. Women's participation points to the fact that one of the central issues in the debate is 'the scope of women's ministries in the church' (Allison 2021:131). Allison (2021:131) reports that the church uses biblical-theological, cultural and ecclesiological reasons to establish the traditional discussion on male and female relationships. Because the scope of women in ministry has two major spectrums, it is vital to highlight the basic understanding of the views.

The complementarian view advocates that teaching and leadership role in the church is limited to men (Allison 2012:227). God's design for humanity requires order, and Adam and Eve's fall distorted the order. There is no confusion on the default order. The fall blurs the order. Instead of it being a blessing, it becomes a curse. Allison (2012) notes that:

Paul does not seem to indicate that women are more likely to be deceived than men are; thus, he does not prohibit them from teaching and exercising authority in the church on the basis [*of the first sin committed by Eve*] ... rather he focuses on one sin, the first, and link women with that sin. (p. 227)

The creation order is the most credible argument on the matter. Holding on to the second argument makes women the cause of the fall alone to exonerate the man. So the first argument is more coherent; it shows that God, not human circumstances, ordained design for an order.

Paul grounds his argument on God's design instead of sin. Therefore, the human relationship in the home and church is rooted in creation. Vern Sheridan Poythress holds that 'the difference between men and women within the context of marriage and family carry over into differences in roles of men and women within the church' (Poythress 2006:233). Given Allison's and Poythress's explanation, it is logical to affirm that leadership in the church should be reflective of leadership in the home for consistency and harmony.

Paul appeals to the relationship between the Trinity as an analogy to the relationship between men and women (Allison 2012:229). These theological reasons look practical; however, it presents some theological concerns. For example, Allison (2012:229) observed that one of the issues is how one understands the Greek word *kephale*. Grudem (1985) notes that:

[A]nyone arguing for the meaning (*kephale*) as 'source' in the New Testament may hardly show that 'source' was a recognized

meaning of κεφαλή in the ancient world, then we must conclude that no such possible meaning would have come to the minds of Paul or his readers. (pp. 38–39)⁸

The suggestion for the meaning of *kephale* as the source is inconsistent with New Testament and Greek literature. It does not present a strong argument for the meaning. Grudem (1985) further argues that:

[S]ource, the origin is nowhere clearly attested as a legitimate meaning for κεφαλή, and that the meaning ‘ruler, authority over’ has sufficient attestation to establish it clearly as a legitimate sense for κεφαλή in Greek literature at the time of the New Testament. Indeed, it was a well-established and recognizable meaning, and it is the meaning that best suits the New Testament texts that speak of the relationship between men and women. (p. 39)

New Testament and Greek literature do not validate *kephale* as source or origin. Grudem claims that *kephale* means rule or have authority over in New Testament and Greek literature. It is logical to have a structured order when two people or more live together for a specific purpose. If Allison’s and Grudem’s views are correct, as the author thinks they are, there is a need to reassess the complementarian view of the role of relationships in the church and the popular egalitarian application of the concept of authority in discussing the relationship of men and women.

Allison (2021) argues that the complementarian view:

[R]oots Paul’s prohibition not on cultural reasons – for example, the lack of education for women in the early church – but in order of creation and the fall of Eve. These are the apostle’s transcultural reasons for his limitations on women teaching and leading in the church. (p. 138)

Allison’s position has important consequences for a better understanding of male and female relationships.

Conversely, the egalitarian proponent uses cultural reconstruction to root their view on the epistles’ cultural setting (Allison 2012:229). Belleville (2005) maintains that at the centre of the debate on the roles of men and women is 1 Timothy 2:11–15. She concludes that the cultural re-enactment’s interpretation fits the grammatical structure of 1 Timothy 2:8–15, where Paul aims to correct inappropriate behaviour on the part of women. He instructs them not to teach because they cannot teach in humility, but if they attempt to, it is to the disadvantage of the men (Belleville 2005:173). Allison examines the egalitarian variation’s consideration of 1 Timothy 2:11–15. He shows that the egalitarians could argue for the possibility of limited education as another reason why Paul prohibits women from teaching or leading with authority, because women did not have educational training like men in Paul’s time (Allison 2012:231). Keener (2004:169–170) argues that because women did not receive educational training like

men, they did not have the qualification to teach like men. Another reason is the correction of heretical teaching on creation order in Genesis, which women used to exert superiority over men. Allison’s (2012:231) summary of these variations explains that egalitarians contend that since Paul’s goal was to address anomalies which arise because of sin, when those problems are solved, ‘qualified women may teach in an appropriate manner; indeed, they may serve as pastors’. If 1 Timothy 2:11–15 is only applied to the roles of men and women in the church, there is the possibility of overlooking the place of ‘love, faith, holiness, and self-control’ in thinking about the relationship between men and women in the church.

Moving from roles relationship to equality relationship, the egalitarian advocates bring Paul’s letter to the Galatians 3:28 into the conversation. Groothuis (1997:2) asserts that Galatians 3:28 is an argument for equality in the church. Jewett advanced Groothuis’s argument to contend that the emphasis on male and female relationships in Galatians 3:28 contradicts other passages in the Bible that show the submission of women in the church (Allison 2012:232). Groothuis’s interpretation of F.F. Bruce’s comment on Galatians 3:28 leads her to see the status of men and women in Christ as a strong ground for equality of roles in the church (Allison 2012:233). Another argument summarised by Allison (2012:234–235) includes the nature of spiritual gifts and the ‘eschatological, trajectory approach’. While the egalitarian view on the biblical data challenges the traditional view of the passages, it is vital to understand the implications of the passages today, but it is evident that the matter is an ongoing discussion. Although discussing the nature of men and women’s relationship in the church is considered a secondary matter, it is crucial in today’s concern for ecclesiology.

In summary, the biblical data on the nature of male and female relationships in the church presented above is not exhaustive. For many years, the complementarian and the egalitarian interpretation or application have been the dominant spectrums. Like other parts of the world, this discussion is alive and ongoing in contemporary Africa. In the next section, the article describes how the church in Africa applies these passages as they think about the church as a community of God’s people.

The relationship between men and women in contemporary African ecclesiology

What is contemporary African ecclesiology? What is the nature of the African ecclesiology, and how is it similar or different from other ecclesiologies?

Many African theologians, like Kunhiyop who represents the protestant voice, have agreed that ‘[sub-Saharan] African theologians have not given as much scholarly attention to the theology of the church as they have to the theology of Christ and salvation’ (Kunhiyop 2012:197).

⁸The evidence given by the previously mentioned authors is as follows: Margaret Howe, Richard and Joyce Boldrey, and Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty cite no evidence from ancient literature or other scholars. F.F. Bruce and James Hurley cite no evidence from ancient literature, but both refer to an article by Stephen Bedale’ (Grudem 1985:38–59). Therefore, for more information see Bedale (1954:211–215).

Similarly, Orobator, a Roman Catholic theologian, raised a concern in 1996:

Is there systematically elaborated theological conception of its [*the church's*] origin, nature, mission, and meaning in terms which are peculiar to and expressive of the African way of being church? (p. 268)

Orobator's (2006:9) response to the questions reveals that many theologians affirm there is none. He contends that if there is any attempt, it is 'elementary', without 'depth, and amplitude to the ecclesiology of the western church'.⁹ The discussion on the church's doctrine is still ongoing in Africa.

Several researchers agreed that the gravity of Christianity has shifted from the Global North to the Global South. For example, in his book *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Jenkins shows how the centre of gravity of Christianity has shifted from the northern to the southern hemisphere as he states that 'by 2025, Africa and Latin America will vie for the title of the most Christian continent' (Jenkins 2006:9).¹⁰ A prominent scholar of African Christianity, Andrew Walls, contends that Christians' interaction with Greek philosophy, Roman law, Germanic and Slavic cultures shaped theology and ecclesiology for centuries. But since the 20th century, tribes in Africa, Latin America and Asia have been changing the landscape with a fresh perspective on theological engagement because 'more than half of the world's Christians live in Africa, Asia, Latin and Caribbean America, and Pacific' (Walls 2000:105). He added that:

The converse is equally true; anyone who wishes to undertake a serious study of Christianity these days needs to know something about Africa [...] must also consider Africa's part in the total story of the faith. (p. 106)

In contemporary African Christianity, one area that calls for attention is the nature of male and female relationships in the church.

Kunhiyop's analysis of the growth of the church in Africa points out a lacuna in the areas of ecclesiology. Engdahl (2000:9) affirms how John Mbiti, one of the early contemporary African theologians, 'rarely expressly elaborates on the nature of the church'.¹¹ Hence, ecclesiology in the African continent is still evolving. Evans (2011:129) observes that 'a new church is coming'.¹² So the church in Africa needs

9.Orobator engages the question of African ecclesiology using Sidibe Sempore's personification of the African church: 'Born about a hundred years ago, the African church resembles the Jesus of the Byzantine icons, whose child body has the face of a grown man. Its face would only rise its lines in the fountain of youth which is the future, passage through which implies death to a past of borrowing and a responsibility' (see Sempore 1977:11).

10.His predictions are fulfilled before 2025.

11.See Engdahl (2000:97). Mbiti believes that African traditional religions and philosophy are essential to the gospel message. He insisted the Bible mediate or act as a mediator between African traditional religions and philosophy and the gospel message. This implies there will not be a constructive ecclesiology that will meet the Christians' needs in Africa without considering how the Bible addresses issues from African traditional religions and philosophy and how the gospel message applies to Africans today.

12.See Evans (2011:129). Because Christianity is changing globally, it is evident that the people and the values of the new heartland of Christianity will help correlate how one thinks about it and how one applies ecclesiology in dealing with issues that concern the context that Christianity is growing faster in the world.

theologians who will commit themselves to discussing the nature of the church in Africa. This is crucial because of the dynamics of the African context. For instance, Chu Ilo, an American-based African scholar, says (Kärkkäinen 2021) that:

'One cannot define an African ecclesiology'; instead, what suffices is 'to describe the nature of churches in Africa and show how they are distinct from other forms of the church outside Africa'. Or, to put it another way: 'The emergence of systematic theologies of the Church in Africa is a very recent development, emerging especially since Vatican II; but the history of the Church in Africa is ancient. (p. 16)

Ilo's view reveals that the expression of contemporary African ecclesiology differs from ecclesiological expression in the West. Could this be because of the contextual issues surrounding the churches?

Mathew (2020:374), a Nigerian theologian, highlights four patterns that characterise contemporary African Christianity. The first pattern is missional. It focuses on evangelism and missionary activities. The second pattern is church planting. Here, the focus is on planting indigenous churches that understand the African worldview and context. The third pattern is Pentecostalism. This pattern emphasises emotional prayer, miracles, healing, prosperity and deliverance. The fourth pattern is the vision for ecumenism. Given the security situation and uniqueness of African society, churches seek to have one voice to address societal ills. These characteristics express the biblical nature of the church. However, some lead to syncretism and secularisation because of the influence of traditional worldviews and secularism in doing theology in some circles.

The discussion on the egalitarian and complementarian views on the scope of women in ministry is alive in Africa. Kunhiyop identifies the crucial contribution of women in contemporary African Christianity. For example, the names of prominent women leaders and leading pastors of megachurches in Africa are not a strange phenomenon in contemporary African Christianity. Because of the active leadership of these female pastors, many churches have grown. For example (Kunhiyop 2012):

This provides an insight into the nature of Ecclesiology in Africa. For example, women have played key roles in planting and leading churches worldwide. In Kenya, the Bishop Dr Margaret Wanjiru is the founder and presiding Bishop of the Jesus is alive Ministries (JI AM), headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya. It is one of the fastest-growing churches in Africa. For example, the family worship centre in Abuja is led by Pastor Sarah Omakwu. Bimbo Odukoya was a powerful female preacher; Margaret Idahosa, the presiding Bishop of the Church of God Mission International, manages more than 3000 churches worldwide; Nkechi Anayo Iputaife is the general overseer of the Victory Christian Church in Lagos, and Evangelist Ukpabio is the founder of Liberty Gospel Church. Churches in other parts of the continent have similar leadership. (pp. 269–270).

Also, the inauguration of the Evangelical Church Winning All Spiritual Mothers in Ministry (ESMIM) is another important dimension of women's ministry in the church, which has a significant impact on male and female relationships (Auta 2022). Even though 'only a few churches currently ordain women, the situation is likely to change in the years to come' (Kunhiyop 2012:269–270). Kunhiyop's insight is helpful because it sheds light on women's engagement in ministry in sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, Agadjanian shows how women's entry into religious leadership brought some dynamics that have been neglected in leadership roles across various religious traditions and denominations. 'The contribution of these women in sub-Saharan Africa needs to be studied [because of the] powerful and diverse religious expressions' (Agadjanian & Yabiku 2015a:982–1008).¹³

It appears that Agadjanian is sympathetic to the perspectives of both the egalitarian and complementarian views in Africa. Therefore, there is a need to critically engage the dynamic of women in ministry within sub-Saharan Africa.

Bakari (2021), a missiologist from Nigeria, observes that 'African women have always played a strong role in their communities and churches, but their efforts have been relegated to the background in the church'.¹⁴ She further argues that:

[W]hile women of SIM/ECWA [*Serving in Mission/Evangelical Church Winning All*] have made significant contributions to the mission of SIM/ECWA, their roles as women have not been fully recognized, and the freedom for women to exercise leadership in ministry has declined. (pp. 33–34)¹⁵

However, in response to the concern Bakari and many other women in SIM/ECWA raised, ECWA inaugurates ESMIM, which seeks to redeem the place of women in ministry because 'women are the backbone of church ministry', (Auta 2022). Kunhiyop's, Agadjanian's and Bakari's reports explain the nature of the scholarly and practical engagement on the scope of authority or leadership in many churches in Africa. In addition, Agadjanian highlights that 'research suggests that Apostolic, Pentecostal, and Zionist leaders generally promote these roles more assertively than leaders of Catholic and mainline Protestant congregations' (Agadjanian & Yabiku 2015b:465). This distinction reveals that the new wave of Christianity's movement in Africa opens more opportunities for women to enter the role of authority or leadership in the church.

A proposed framework for authority and submission in the church

The biblical data and contemporary ecclesiology in Africa help situate the proposal of authority and submission in

13. Agadjanian and Yabiku's (2015a:982–1008) research reveals how Protestant churches in sub-Saharan Africa provide a conducive platform for women's entrance into the authority and leadership roles in the church.

14. Lami Rikwe Ibrahim Bakari, *Women in Mission* (UK. Langham 2021), chapter 2. She affirms that ECWA adopts the complementarian view of Grudem and Piper. It is time for ECWA to engage the discussion from the biblical standard.

15. Bakari, *Women in Mission*, Chapter 1. For more detail on the discussion on the relationship of men and women in ECWA, see *Women in Mission*, 1923–2013.

context. The doctrine of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit and anthropology provide a framework that helps ground the thinking theologically, which guide the answers to the following questions: what is the nature of the relationship between men and women in the church? How should men see women, and how should women see men in the church?

The nature of God

The nature of God deals with the being, works and the relationship of the Triune God. For any theological discussion to be plausible, it must presuppose the existence of God. Therefore, the gospel is focal in understanding the relationship between God's nature and the church because it is 'by the heart of the gospel message that any ecclesiology [...] can and must be measured' (Webster 2001:192).

Allison's interaction with John Webster's proposal on order in the church reveals the important relationship between the doctrine of God and the doctrine of the church. He comments that 'Webster's argument for an order based on the gospel and the church in the economy of salvation is quite a welcome approach'.¹⁶

The proposal shows that order is central to the gospel, the locus of God's relationship with the elects, the relationship between the Christian community and the church's relationship with the world. Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 14:26–40 highlights that the purpose of the church's spiritual gifts and ministries is to provide order in the church. Allison affirms Webster's position, '[f]or God is not a God of confusion but peace' (v. 33). Because of this divine reality, he insisted that 'all things should be done decently and in order' (14:40; cf. Col 2:5), whether Paul refers to the divine being, the relationships between the three members of the Godhead and the works of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Allison 2012:252–253). When it comes to the question of the relationship between men and women in the church, theologians will rarely agree on a church without leadership.

The theological framework provided by their proposal on the relationship in the church is very helpful because ecclesiology is not a social or political study of the church; rather, it is a theological approach that seeks to understand how God sets order in the church. If men and women use the theological framework of order, it will help deal with some of the disagreements in the church. Because 'the ordered nature of the being/relationships/works of God is the ground of the order in the church' (pp. 252–253), God's orderliness is present right from the creation in Genesis. The entire redemptive history is grounded in the ordered nature of God. It is plausible to ground authority and submission in the church in God.

16. Allison, *Sojourners*, 252–253 (cf. Webster 2001:192).

Christ the Lord of the body

Christ as the Lord of the church provides a ground to argue that 'The Church of Jesus Christ is a divinely ordained institution,' gifted by God to function as he wills (White 2006:257–258). His promise to build his church and the amazing fact that he has chosen to demonstrate his manifold wisdom 'to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places' (Eph 3:10 NASB) through the church provides a compelling reason to believe that his design of the church itself is just as eternal, just as divinely wise and just as revealed (White 2006:257–258). As the owner of the church, Jesus Christ has an eternally ordained plan regarding the church's nature and function. Authority and submission are part of his ordered design of the church. The voice of Jesus Christ provides a coherent framework for understanding the internal working of the church. Therefore, 'Sola scriptura teaches us that the Scriptures are the sole infallible rule of faith for the church' (White 2006:257–258). Paul asserts that the relationship between Christ and the church explains the framework for male and female relationships in marriage and the church (Eph 1:19–23). Allison and Whites believe that Christ's Lordship over the church established order, consistency, and unity in the church. (Allison 2012:251). When submission and authority are grounded in the Lordship of Christ, the church functions as one body and the divide between authority and submission may shrink.

The *pneuma* dynamic nature of the church

The Holy Spirit is central to the nature and function of the church. He establishes leaders in the church (Ac 20:28). At least one of their responsibilities is to manage their congregations in an orderly manner (1 Tm 3:4–5; 5:17). Allison (2012:251) establishes that the Holy Spirit assigned leaders in the church and one of their responsibilities is to establish and grow an ordered congregation.

The Holy Spirit does not discriminate in the indwelling and giving of gifts. Allison (2012) reports how some egalitarians used spiritual gifts to discuss authority and submission in the church:

As the gender-inclusive Holy Spirit gives his gifts to both men and women, 'and thus potentially setting the whole body free for all the many parts to minister and in various ways to give leadership to the others'. (p. 235)¹⁷

The Holy Spirit's gift to all believers gives a new insight into the discussion of male and female relationships in the church. Grenz (1995) argues:

[T]his intimate connection between gifts and ministry suggests that the church must find a place for the giftedness of all persons, whether male or female. We must welcome men and women to serve together with whatever gifts the Spirit allows them. But the question remains: Does the Spirit endow women with the gifts essential for the ordained office? (pp. 591–595)

17. Allison, *Sojourners*, 235. (See Gordon Fee's comments on 1 Tm 2:11–11, 1 Cor 11:4–5; 14:23–33.) in the 'Priority of the Spirit Gifting for the Church Ministry', 247.

The gifts are given for the edification of the church. The gifts should serve as a unifying factor, not a point of faction. However, there is a need to push the discussion further to clearly understand how the ministry of the Spirit shapes the way men and women relate in the church.

Community of God's people

The idea of community has to do with a group of people with a common identity and purpose who live in a place. Gyeke (2002:58) in *Person and Community in African Thought* argues that the ontological primacy of the community, the natural sociality of the human person, the organic character of the relations between individual persons and all importance of the community for the total well-being or complete realisation of the nature of the person can certainly give rise to a hyperbolic and extreme view of the functional and normative status of the community. Gyeke agrees that in the first place, it is not plausible for a person to live in a society and yet claim self-sufficiency and independence without depending on other relations.

Secondly, a human being, male or female, is in crucial natural relationships with other humans. Thirdly, the moral question of an individual is guided first by the place of one's right. Fourthly, the status of duties, and third, one's existence and perspective of the well-being of all. However, Gyeke cautions that there is the possibility of two spectrums: the functional aspects that deal with the community's role in shaping an individual or the standard that shapes an individual by a community. Taking the concept of community as a moral lawgiver and judge pushes the concept too far. Although Gyeke rejects Menkiti's view that the community defines a person, he holds moderate communitarianism, accommodating communal values, values of an individual, social commitment and 'duties of self-attention'. Although Gyeke's approach seems promising, it needs some further grounding in the biblical–theological truth of community to give clarity to standards and ethos in a Christian community.

The creation of humanity in Genesis 1:26 and 2:18–24 reveals that '[c]ommunity is not a human invention. It finds its true and original meaning in God' (Kunhiyop 2012:203).

It is plausible to argue that the OT and NT give a clear sense of the nature of the church as a community of God's people. Allison (2012:123) shows that the idea of the church as covenantal explains the church people in a community with two aspects of the relationship, that is, the relationship with God and the relationship with other people, including Christians and non-Christians. It is important to note that Paul explains what (Rm 9–11, Gl 6:16) he teaches regarding life in God's people's community.

Kunhiyop (2012:2030) shows that although there is a distinction between the church and Israel, 'the general features of God's dealings with his people is as a community in the Old Testament', and there is continuity and discontinuity. Hence, God shapes individuals and puts

them in the community of his people to grow along with other believers. Because God invests in the church as community, its standard and function are the scriptures.

Given the nature of the biblical view of the church as a community, if the church in Africa and other places in the world adopt this, it would help to shape and sanctify the philosophical concept of a Christian community. The article will now turn to how the biblical concept of community applies to Africa.

Koinonia is the biblical truth that resonates with one of the African community values, which carries the idea of togetherness and places high emphasis on community life, not individualism. Omenyo (2012) observes that:

The concept of *koinonia* is fundamental in understanding the nature of the male and female relationship in African ecclesiology, mainly because the sense of community is the sine qua non in understanding African societies. Communal living is the way to promote and maintain the general wellbeing of the individual and society in general. (p. 204)

The church is not just considered an institution or a movement with a hierarchical structure of leadership, like in the society. It is a fellowship of people who have a covenantal relationship with God and one another; an excellent example from a contemporary African church is ECWA. It highlights some essential characteristics of a church covenant and demonstrates that the covenant has two dimensions: horizontal with God and vertical with one another (ECWA 1976:2).

Allison (2012:130) reminds us that the church community is unique because it is predicated on 'both the work of God and commitment of the members'. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's (1954:21) *Life Together* application, there are three crucial applications. Firstly, Christians need each other. Secondly, membership in Christian community is through Jesus Christ. Thirdly, all Christians are chosen, accepted and united together temporarily and for eternity by and in Christ.¹⁸ Kunhiyop (2012) observes that:

The idea of the church as a community resonates very well with Africans. Although we are all born as individuals, we grow up and live within communities. None live entirely by themselves. (p. 202)

In other words, Kunhiyop believes that the church as a community shapes the values, beliefs and childhood training. Kunhiyop (2012:202) explains that the church provides a platform for 'the deepest and most enduring relationships of life'. The scope of the church's community includes the dead and the living, and this resonates with Africans because Africans believe that the dead are still part of the community. Kunhiyop (2012) explains that the identity of these ancestors for the African Christian is the believing dead (Hebrew and Christian); their lives influence the Christians and:

18. See Bonhoeffer (1954:21) and Allison (2012:130) for more details on the three points highlighted by Allison.

[*Serve*] as examples and encouragements for us. Hebrews 12:1 talks of them when it speaks of the 'witnesses that surround us', referring to the heroes of the faith whose names are listed in Hebrews 11. (p. 204)

The church's feature as a community includes interdependence, unity and service to one another to the glory of God.

A key implication as a covenant community of God's people is that men and women are all equal members of this community. They all have the same membership status, privilege and responsibility. Although Allison, Kunhiyop and others did not say it directly, they believe that the male and female relationship is predicated on the work of Christ. Moreover, this community's nature does not discriminate based on one's sexuality. Many people assume that men are God's priority above women, but God's design in creation does not intend that one is superior and the other inferior. At the same time, Jesus Christ offers forgiveness and provides eternal salvation to both men and women. And the Holy Spirit empowers both men and women for the church's edification. Seeing the church as God's family and community of God's covenant people has a broader consequence for developing a framework for male and female relationships in the church.

Conclusion

Because many African theologians have pointed out a gap in the development of ecclesiology in sub-Saharan Africa, the study has argued that one of the areas that needs attention is the nature of male-female relationships in the church. The study used biblical data and contemporary conversation on men-women relationships to propose a framework for understanding the nature of authority and submission in the church. The framework helps to interpret and appropriate God's design for order in the church today. Therefore, it is possible to narrow the gap of competition, misunderstanding and discord between men and women. They explained how the Christians in non-African contexts interpret and apply some foundational biblical data on men and women. The second section highlights how Christians in Africa understand and apply these passages. The last section is an introductory discussion on a theology of authority submission framework. The structure has four sections, namely the nature of God, the church as Christ's body, the church *pneuma* dynamic and the churches as a community of God's people. However, this subject needs further development that will thoroughly account for the nature of authority and submission in the church.

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