A Different Perspective: Examining Obstacles Faced By Black Clergywomen Through The Lenses of Critical Race Feminism

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Abstract

The influence of Black women leaders in this country and throughout the world in corporate, political, educational, and religious settings has existed for years (Allen & Lewis, 2016). The most recent election of both Joe Biden and Kamala Harris is a testament to that as their wins have been largely attributed to the leadership, efforts, and mobilization of Black women. Yet, Black women's leadership challenges and experiences have remained largely ignored as studies of leadership have typically centered on whites and males (Allen & Lewis, 2016). Further, despite their contributions, Black women have remained underrepresented in most key leadership positions in all segments of society. Nowhere is this seen more than in the Black church where leadership is male dominated (Barnes, 2006). Though women comprise much of the congregation, they hold very few leadership positions. This forces the question that must be asked, if she is called, then why can't she come? This paper seeks to examine these ongoing issues through the lenses of Critical Race Feminism (CRF) and to provide recommendations that aim to further leadership advancement for Black clergywomen. This paper argues that Critical Race Feminism provides a viewpoint that focuses on feminism, race, and power to understand the multiplicity of leadership inequality in the Black church by extending the discussion of Black women leadership challenges in the church beyond race to gender subordination.

Introduction

Though women comprise much of the congregation, they hold very few leadership positions. According to data released in the State of Clergywomen in the U.S.: A Statistical Update, 2018, women account for 50 to 75 percent of the Black church membership, yet only comprise 10% of leadership roles in the church and less than 1 percent of the senior pastor roles.

The preacher announces that "the doors of the church are open" after each sermon. Many Christians believe that the call to accept Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Savior is an invitation to salvation for worshipers. It serves as an invitation to accept Christ's grace. Yet, even though it is advertised as a warm invitation for everyone to attend, it appears that it might contain certain restrictions. Will a woman who wants to preach be accepted by the Christian-based Church? Does it treat her with admiration or disdain? Is her gender the reason she is being rejected? If the church's doors were truly open, there would be a higher number of women pastors in the Black church than there are today.

Further, they face numerous barriers and challenges based on perceptions of incompetency that limit their opportunities to lead and places constraints on leadership mobility. Cook and Glass (2014) refer to this as the "glass cliff." Also, their leadership effectiveness is often measured through the eyes of Black males, which are tainted by old age stereotypes, and antiquated thoughts of leadership incapability (McKenzie, 1996; Hobson, 2013). This

perception of inferiority among clergywomen is a primary reason why there is a lower number of women in ministry leadership roles (Newkirk & Copper, 2013). Though it has been over 100 years since the first Black woman was ordained, women are still not ordained nor allowed to lead at the level of their Black male counterparts. Their experiences are either rarely seen or only defined through those of white males (Allen & Lewis, 2016). Yet, it is essential that the challenges and experiences of Black clergywomen be identified and discussed to give a resounding voice to their concerns and unique experiences (Cummings & Latta, 2010; Leslie, 2013).

According to Miles and Preschold-Bell (2012), African American women will continue to encounter prejudice and hostility until their experiences with the challenges they face are studied. It may be possible to get fresh insights into how to better prepare and train clergy for developing impartiality in ministry leadership by reexamining the unique behaviors related to the experiences of Black clergywomen. The effectiveness of Black women pastors leading the church can be increased with their support and nurturing (Newkirk & Cooper, 2013). This prompts the question that must be asked: if she is called, then why can't she come? As such, Black women face both white and Black male masculinity challenges (Allen & Lewis, 2016). While this is not a new phenomenon, this paper examines these ongoing issues through the lenses of Critical Race Feminism (CRF).

Critical Race Feminism is important to understanding issues faced by Black women clergy because it provides a viewpoint that focuses on feminism, race, and power to understand the multiplicity of leadership inequality in the Black church (Allen & Lewis, 2016). It provides a feminist critique that extends the discussion of Black women leadership challenges beyond race to gender subordination specifically related to the Church. Through CRF, Black women clergy are no longer invisible in their struggle, but gain a voice that can help increase their leadership roles and help develop strategies that can overcome stereotypes and barriers.

Women and the Black Church

The Black church is a term that replaces the Negro Church terminology that was formerly used by scholars. It is comprised of multiple and diverse denominations of independent churches founded after the Free African Society of 1787 (Bragg, 2011). In the Black community, the church has remained a mainstay and an integral part of daily life. This can be dated back to the time of slavery, when slaves who clung tenaciously to the spiritual ideals of ultimate freedom and justice found in God's Word, were sustained by Christianity and religion. Women make up the majority of members in the Black church congregation, comprising 50 to 75 percent (Campbell-Reed, 2018). Women are also active members in the church, typically volunteering, consistently tithing, leading various committees, and frequently participating on boards when allowed.

Traditionally, the Black church has functioned as a place and space for spiritual growth, community connections, and religious education. It has afforded African American women opportunities to develop strong value systems and strengthen relationships. It is through these relationships that Black women have found support, love, encouragement, and nurturing to develop their gifts and even calling (Higginbotham, 1993). Yet, while the Black church supports and encourages the Black woman, it also disenfranchises her by creating barriers and challenges that limit her growth and leadership.

Obstacles Faced by Clergywomen

Undoubtedly the challenges faced by Black women clergy are many, yet in the Black church they appear to center around gender. Gender disparity is a significant obstacle that has persisted for centuries (Thomas, 2013; Truman, 2011; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Regardless of "her" contributions to the church, she is weighed down by negative perceptions and stereotypes that make it difficult for her to rise. Taylor (2019) found in her dissertation that these negative views and stereotypes limit women's advancement in the Church.

Women face a perception of inferiority which is considered to be a reason why there is a deficiency in leadership roles for women (Frame & Shehan, 2005; Newkirk &Cooper, 2013). Women also still deal with a variety of obstacles and hardships that their male coworkers do not face. They include limitations on religious obligations (Alexander, 2012). Others in ministry leadership lack guidance and mentoring (Leslie, 2013). Because of this, some female pastors feel underappreciated in their positions. Furthermore, compared to their male colleagues, women pastors receive different preparation and training for crucial leadership roles (Leslie, 2013). Several female ministers comment that they typically learn about ministry and prepare for it through observation rather than through instruction (Barnes, 2006; Johns & Watson, 2006). In their study on gender and race, Smarr, Disbennett-Lee, & Hakim (2018) found that eight barriers emerged as a result of presenting the real experiences of Black women as church leaders: misuse of authority, discrimination, family relationships, jealously, a lack of financial assistance, restrictions based on conventional beliefs, and self-worth.

Even though more women are heeding the call to preach, the ministry is still a vocation that is primarily held by men in the Black church. About 20.7% of clergy in the United States are women (Campbell-Reed, 2018). Yet, especially in Black churches, the bulk of the congregations are still made up of women. According to the Status of Clergywomen in the U.S.: A Statistical Update Report (Campbell-Reed, 2018), women make up between 50 and 75 percent of the congregational membership in Black Baptist churches, but less than 10 percent of church leaders and less than 1 percent of pastors are female. Thomas (2013) also discovers that although there has been an increase in the number of Black women graduating from seminary, they are least likely to be church leaders and lack the opportunity to do so.

While women are being ordained in higher numbers than in the past, there remains opposition. According to Banbury (2014), popular arguments are that women just keep silent; scripture forbids women from preaching and women should remain subordinate to men. It is this prejudice that creates misogyny. Bragg (2011) argues that Black clergywomen continue to have little opportunities to lead congregations, few chances to be hired, and few opportunities to progress in ministry leadership. Due to their gender and color, Black clergywomen are prevented from moving higher in the ministry due to this "stained glass ceiling." The dominance to govern uses gender and race as techniques of subjugation, and clergymen hold that supremacy.

Theoretical Framework

It is necessary to view the plight and obstacles of Black women clergy from the perspective of women researchers and feminist theories that are able to highlight the subjugation, disenfranchisement, and exclusion of women from religious leadership.

Biblical Grounding

The basis of any study undertaken by a Christian leader must be first considered from a interpreted biblical viewpoint. One need look no further than what many Christians consider as the Word of God to cement the importance and necessity for women to be involved in spreading the Gospel and the teachings of Jesus Christ. Both Old and New Testament bear witness to how women have been used in God's kingdom plan.

The basis of this article is grounded in the fundamental tenants of justice and equality for both men and women promoted in the account of creation found in Genesis. Genesis 1: 27 is clear that God created both the male and female in His image; thus, both share in His likeness and attributes. Though the man was created first and the woman from his rib, she is not loved less by her Creator and impartial God who delights in all of His creations. This is affirmed throughout the Bible where God empowers, anoints, and uses women in His teachings such as Miriam, Deborah, Ester, Anna, Abigail, Rachel, and others. While Isaac was the seed of the covenant that God made with Abraham, it was his wife Rebekah who God spoke to about the warring sons in her belly and the plan for Jacob's life. There can be no argument that in Matthew 28: 5-7, the women were the first to be told to proclaim the good news of the Gospel, carrying forth the message of salvation, hope and victory that "He is risen"!

Still, feminist, and African women theologians question why women have historically been viewed as "outsiders" in the church on a global scale (Sprong, 2011). According to Sprong (2011), God's original plan was for men and women to rule as equals in their dominion over creation. It is upon this foundation that women of the clergy stand. Oduyoye (2001) asserts that African women's theology is a theology of relationships that substitutes mutuality for hierarchies.

The irony of the argument against women preaching is that the one source that affirms their leadership responsibilities, value, promise, and unconditional love of Christ is also the very source that is used to reject them. Women yielded influence and were leaders throughout the world. Can the Bible support and reject women in leadership concomitantly if, as James 3:11 states, clean and dirty water cannot flow from the same spring? A woman's viewpoint on Scripture, as well as her firsthand experiences of her role in history and other key accomplishments, are necessary because of the persistent uncertainty, disparate interpretations of scripture that marginalize women, and the "man's" perspective.

Critical Race Feminism

The struggle of women to gain equal rights in all segments of society, access, respect, and even to vote is well documented. Women of all races and diversity have sacrificed themselves as "the first" in male-dominated industries that have subjected them to sexism, assault, humiliation, and ageism. But because of this, gains have been made in leadership roles for women and the feminist perspective has gained momentum. This means that the voice of women has increased from a whimper and whisper to be heard so that their experiences and strategies have been shared in leadership research and literature. However, these have remained largely centered on white women and white males so that the voices of Black women have remained muffled or muted, despite their contributions to a variety of societal spheres and the necessity of their presence in them (Allen & Lewis, 2016). Even when race has been explored as a variable in leadership, it has been from the vantage point of Black males. Thus, Allen & Lewis (2016) argue that the Black woman's view of herself in leadership has been greatly distorted.

Critical Race Feminism focuses on feminism and race. It complements the perspective of Black women while navigating the complexities of being a Black woman experiencing the realities of sexism and racism that cause subordination (Crenshaw, 2009). Critical Race Feminism is based on the same tenants of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Like CRT, Critical Race Feminism's aim is social justice by exploring how class, race, gender, and sexual orientation overlap in society to create systems of injustices for women. CRF is rooted in the fact that Black women's racial and gender subjugation is invisible because it is either denied, downplayed, or not taken seriously (Allen & Lewis, 2016).

By supporting Black women's voices in the fight against racism and sexism in a world dominated by men, CRF reintroduces the issue of race into feminist debate (Wing, 2000). Several African American feminists have criticized traditional feminist rhetoric for being overwhelmingly White and not reflecting the realities of Black American feminism (Allen & Lewis, 2016). They seek to refute the conventional wisdom that White people make up the majority of women's voices and that there is just one voice for women. CRF offers a story about many racial and gender roles, among many other things, making Black women's experiences in the world apparent.

Womanist Theology
Even though women had positions of authority and leadership throughout the Bible, there are still misconceptions regarding their capacity for leadership. With regard to presence in the pulpit, this is most obvious. Many justifications are frequently presented as to why women should not have positions of leadership. Despite sexism, classism, and misogyny, the deeds of Eve in the Book of Genesis that led to the fall of man are frequently cited as a main justification for why women should not hold leadership positions. Then there are the forceful declarations made by the Apostle Paul in the book of 1 Timothy, which are frequently cited as proof positive that women should not preach.

One of the main driving forces for the establishment of Womanist Theory was the necessity to give voice to the distinct experiences, especially the difficulties faced by women of color. This theological viewpoint specifically developed as a result of Black theologians' failure to address important concerns affecting Black women. They include the sexism and classism that women of color frequently experience. Furthermore, Black men cannot effectively relate to the experiences of Black women due to their differences, despite their best intentions. There are also others who maintain that Black women's difficulties are too complex to be fully addressed by either feminist theory or Black religion (Mitchem, 2008; Townes, 2003).

Laughinghouse (2017) argues that a more inclusive theological framework was needed, and this created the catalyst for this unique theology. Historically, the voices of women and more notably Black women, have been muted or silenced with little regard to their importance, significance, and contributions to many aspects of society. The biblical representations of women that are viewed as being unfair and unjust are destroyed by womanist theology. It is helpful in encouraging positive portrayals of women and understanding their roles in the Bible. The Womanist Theology's ability to consider Black women's experiences not just in the United States but around the world is one of its many advantages. The first African American woman to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church, Katie Cannon, a co-founder of Womanist Theology, called the concept of womanism "a milestone event" for women and religious intellectuals (Mitchem, 2002, p. 56). She argues that the importance of the Womanist Theory lies in its

capacity to highlight the problems associated with racism, sexism, and classism in the lives of women of color (Kirk-Duggan, 1998). Womanist theology challenges forces intended to maintain the inferior status of women, thus taking seriously church doctrines and allusions to forebears (churchwomen) whose personal examples and experiences as "behavioral feminists" influenced the spirituality and ethics of Black churches (Gilkes 2001) and serves as a source for learning.

Conclusion

If there is one word that can be used to characterize the experiences of Black women, it is struggle. Most Black women will most likely acknowledge the uphill battles faced simply based on the color of their skin. The word sufficiently captures the lived experiences of Black women and especially clergywomen. Canon (1985) notes that the battle for survival in two opposing worlds — one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressive — has been a defining feature of the Black woman's struggle throughout US history. Black clergy women often become trapped in a loop of internalized blame for their career stagnation as a result of racial and gender disparities. This feeds a cycle of self-worth erosion that keeps systemic sexism hidden from women and replaces it with a story of personal weakness. It takes away the motivation to work toward institutional, structural, and policy change, as well as to engage in structural reform of the racialized and gendered patriarchal status quo.

This paper has sought to argue that Critical Race Feminism provides a viewpoint that focuses on feminism, race, and power to understand the multiplicity of leadership inequality in the Black church. As such, it is necessary that the topic of Black clergywomen and their leadership challenges related to the Black church be continuously discussed because Black women leadership in the church is severely lacking. Yet the challenges that Black women face originate and are perpetuated in the very place that they should find comfort. Mupangwa & Chirongoma (2020) contend that women should feel accepted as who they are in the church because it should be a safe place. The church as a moral institution, espousing the values and principles of God must be fair and honor its obligation to address any structure that perpetuates inequality (Bragg, 2011). This paper is based on the feminist ecclesiology approach that serves as a theology that promotes equality and safety in church (Mupangwa & Chirongoma, 2020). Unfortunately, this is not the case for Black clergywomen, leading to a simple conclusion. The Black Church is, itself, the problem. When Black women are marginalized, the church misses out on the whole spectrum of gifts and ministry effectiveness.

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