

A hermeneutical critique of women in ecclesiastical office within the Reformed Churches in South Africa: A reformed missional lens in decoloniality



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The ordination of women to ecclesiastical office remains a contested issue within the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA). The most recent decision of the GKSA General Synod in 2026 to bar women from ordination as ministers and elders seems to have reached a tipping point and threatens a possible schism if churches that are pro-women's ordination fail to rescind their practice. Using a reformed missional hermeneutic in decoloniality, this article contends that the exclusion of women from office within this denomination is not merely a doctrinal matter but a hermeneutical problem shaped by literary reading of Pauline and related texts, entrenched patriarchal biases, and colonial and apartheid power matrices that prefer male headship. This article further argues that the GKSA decision misaligns with a missional imperative that calls for ongoing reformation grounded in the missional heart of the missionary God. Grounded in the *missio Dei* framework, this article proposes that a reformed missional lens in conversation with post-colonial womanist and Bosadi hermeneutics not only unmasks patriarchal hegemony in ecclesial praxis and distortions of Pauline texts but also resists synodical overreach in the Reformed church polity.

Contribution: The recentring of God's redemptive mission and drawing from Christ and Pauline missional praxes can help redefine the GKSA's position on women in ecclesiastical office.

Keywords: reformed churches in South Africa; women in office; hermeneutics; *missio Dei*; missional; decoloniality; reformed ecclesiology.

Introduction

The question of whether women should be ordained to ecclesiastical offices remains a thorny, contested, and divisive issue within the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA; Vorster 2016:33). However, with the most recent GKSA General Synod 2026 decision, this contestation seems to have taken another twist, approaching a breaking point that could lead to a possible schism within this denomination.

Previous research has identified hermeneutics as the underlying problem (Pieterse 2002; Van Deventer 2005:694). In addition, this article identifies missional and decolonial discourses as gaps that require urgent attention. It contends that the GKSA's position is not based on a neutral reading of Scripture but on a decision influenced and shaped by conservative patriarchal lenses rooted in biblical, Jewish, Graeco-Roman, Western, and African socio-cultural systems (Van Rensburg 2002:731–732; Wielenga 2010:707). This position is further reinforced by colonial and apartheid power matrices that privilege male headship and restrict women's roles to the kitchen and childbearing (Pieterse 2002:693).

Furthermore, the decision points to a missional misalignment not only with the *missio Dei*, Christ, and Paul's missional praxis regarding women's participation in leadership roles in the public but also with the current realities of a post-colonial and apartheid South Africa (Van Deventer 2005). In some black congregations within the GKSA, despite a lack of appetite to engage on the matter (Baloyi 2016:2), women already participate actively in leadership roles such as deacons, elders, teaching catechism, leading worship, and exercising pastoral influence in the absence of male leadership as well as during Easter services (Mudau & Khosa-Nkatini 2025:2).

Based on the foregoing, the overarching question this article seeks to investigate, is the following: How should a Reformed church discern and order its ecclesial praxis regarding women in office

in a way that is hermeneutically faithful, missionally coherent, confessionally reformed, and accountable to the imperative of decoloniality?

A missiological framework: Reading Scripture through the *missio Dei*

This study is undertaken from a broader reformed missiological framework, with special focus on a qualitative, hermeneutical-missiological research design (Bosch 1991:390; Wright 2006:45). To critique the current GKSA's decision to exclude women from ecclesiastical leadership and office, this article uses a reformed missional lens in decoloniality, as captured in Figure 1.

Missio Dei refers to the mission of God, and David Bosch, among others, is credited as a pioneer of this missional paradigm. This is a shift that seeks to rediscover the church's mission as primarily the work of God, while the church remains an instrument in advancing what God is doing in the world. Bosch (1991:390) opines: 'To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love.' It also reaffirms the sovereignty of God, who can work beyond the defined human parameters in any ecclesiastical praxis. Sanou (2018:301) asserts: 'The Bible not only reveals God as the prime initiator and mover of mission, but it also reveals him as creative in ways that sometimes seem unorthodox to his creatures.' The foregoing marks a radical shift from the theology of mission to a missional theology.

Missional theology refers to a biblical theology founded and grounded on the *missio Dei* (Sanou 2018:307). Sanou (2018:307–308) opines: '[T]his means that, for the sake of its own future, theology needs insights from missiology.' In this case, missiology does not only serve as a gadfly that causes unrest in the house of theology (Bosch 1991:496) but also helps unmask and overcome cultural barriers that obscure the full reception of the gospel (Sanou 2018:310).

This kind of missional theology seeks to rediscover the church's role in mission as a transformative agent of the

missio Dei. In this case, the church's agency, even when applied to the current discourse, is to stand where God stands concerning the truth, the unknown borders, those on the margins, and justice (Mashau 2018: 139–140). This understanding underscores the need to read Scripture through a reformed missional lens.

Missional hermeneutics is comprehensively defined and captured in the words of McKinzie (2024):

[M]issional hermeneutics is an approach to Scripture that begins with a theological commitment to the church's participation in God's mission. In this approach, the church reads the Bible as (1) a narrative rendition of God's mission; (2) a collection of case studies in missiological contextualization; (3) a source of equipping for participation in God's mission; and (4) an ongoing narrative that the church reads through the experience of participation in God's mission. (p. 218)

The lenses that biblical scholars must wear in reading Scripture must be biased towards the *missio Dei*. In this case, Wright (2006:40) speaks of 'mission as a focus of hermeneutical coherence'. Therefore, if mission is a coherent thrust in the biblical narrative, it should also guide biblical scholars in addressing complex issues related to church structures. The question of women in the ecclesiastical office must also be evaluated based on their participation in or the obstruction of God's redemptive historical footprint. Accordingly, Sanou (2018) says:

[M]issional hermeneutics seeks to recover biblical interpretation from a mere creedal and academic reading of the Bible and refocus it on *missio Dei* as both the central interest and unitive theme of the scriptural narrative. (p. 306)

In this article, a *decolonial missional lens*, or *decolonial missiology*, refers to the missiological application of the Scripture in the context of the previously colonised and oppressed people as in the case of apartheid South Africa. Niemandt (2019:3) declares: 'Decoloniality is the discovery of agency by theologians from Africa, South America and other emerging Christians.'

This brings in the liberation motif of the *missio Dei* as reflected in the following words of Wright (1996:45): '... a missional hermeneutic of Scripture must have a liberationist dimension'. Niemandt (2019) also asserted:

Mission studies are also characterised by a new appreciation of mission from the margins: liberation theology and the associated discourses on decoloniality, deep engagement in contextuality and the explosion of missional ecclesiology (missional church). (p. 1)

Decoloniality and African hermeneutical agency

Building on the works of decolonial scholars, decoloniality is used not only to unmask the colonial and apartheid patriarchal biases within ecclesiastical spaces but also to recentre marginalised voices, like those of women, in the efforts to reaffirm their agency. Decoloniality, therefore, is

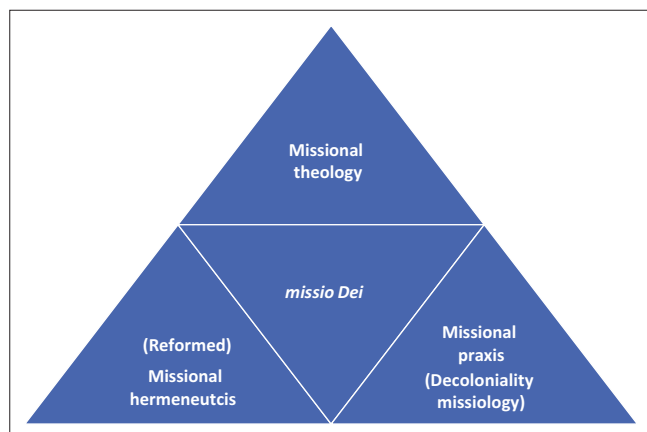


FIGURE 1: A reformed missional lens in decoloniality.

not only a political concept but one that should be applied in the context of both Christianity and African Christian theology (Podolecka 2025:157; Sakupapa 2018:406).

Accordingly, churches are also considered sites for the reproduction of coloniality that must also be decolonised (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:11). The intention is not merely to reverse colonially inherited practices but to critically reconstruct a liberative framework that seeks to dismantle the colonial-patriarchal and ecclesiastical structures that undermine and marginalise the role of women in ecclesiastical office in the case of the current discourse.

In their efforts to challenge and dismantle male normativity as a colonial, apartheid, and Western Christendom hangover and to critique the colonial-patriarchal biases embedded in biblical interpretations and ecclesial policies, African women theologians developed post-colonial feminist, womanist (Kobo 2018a; Naicker 2024:6), and *Bosadi* [Womanhood] biblical hermeneutics and theorisations (Masenya 1997:439; 2005:744). According to Masenya (2005):

The *Bosadi* approach is not simply a comparative analysis between the biblical text and the African culture. It critiques both cultures and texts not only in terms of gender concerns. It also includes issues of class, 'woman-as-strange' and 'Africans-as-strange' in their own territory. (p. 745)

In the efforts to address the plight, silencing, and liberation of African women, it is through these decolonial lenses that '... the Bible is read in terms of the metanarrative of the missional intention of God' (Van Aarde & Li-M 2017:5–6).

Background: Historical and ecclesial context of the Reformed Churches in South Africa

The history of the GKSA dates back to 1859 (Du Plooy 2003:485; Zgambo 2022:5). The church was formed as a protest against the alleged decay or rot within the Dutch Reformed Church, and as a result, became a breakaway movement. The GKSA with its roots in the Netherlands and a strong influence of Dutch Calvinism and Afrikaner nationalism, holds to the authority of the Scriptures, the Three Forms of Unity (the Canons of Dordt, the Belgic Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism), and the Church Order. Based on their hermeneutical approach and desire to be faithful to the Scripture and confessions, the GKSA opted for an ecclesiology and ecclesial praxis dominated by male leadership.

Accordingly, 'a woman's primary role and task are limited to the home where she has to be a wife to her husband and a mother to her children' (Pieterse 2002:691). This position extended to speak to their involvement in education and politics (Pieterse 2002:695). The literary approach to the reading and application of Pauline texts, such as 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14, is used to justify the exclusion and marginalisation of women regarding ecclesiastical leadership

and offices. It is concluded, 'This hermeneutical deficiency lies at the heart of the prohibition of women in offices of elder and minister' (Vorster 2016:33); hence, the practice of other churches in ordaining women as deacons and elders.

Reformed hermeneutical approach

Hermeneutics refers to the biblical interpretation of the Bible and its application to address social challenges of every generation, past, present, and future. Historically, the reformed churches, in the main, subscribe to a hermeneutical approach that seeks to honour the authority of the Scriptures and the Three Forms of Unity as set out in the Church Order of Dordt. This tradition has cultivated what some scholars identify as a biblical or proof-texting hermeneutic, frequently described as a literary approach (Nunes & Van Deventer 2009:756). Such an approach often employs Scripture to undergird particular doctrinal positions, while assuming the neutrality and universality of its own interpretive framework. The Bible is used to lend authority to a specific point of view (Snyman 2002:2), even though it subscribes to a particular political ideology. Snyman (2002:2) opines further: 'The reading that wins is the reading that is supported by the political power of the day.'

At a deeper level, the reason that led to the use of Pauline texts that restrict women from office, such as 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14, is their normative or prescriptive character. White (1994) opines:

[T]he Reformer's exegesis of historical narrative is based on a theological *a priori* which decisively governs his hermeneutics – namely that history is to be read in terms of God's normative will as revealed in the prescriptive utterances of Scripture. (p. 491)

This theological grounding coupled with the Reformed commitment to a grammatical-historical method of exegesis, results in an interpretive priority on textual meaning, the immediate literary context, and the authorial intent of biblical authors.

Furthermore, when contradictory positions arise in Scripture, Coetsee and Goede (2022:25) call for the application of '[O]ne of the most foundational principles of Reformed exposition of Scripture', namely that 'holy Scripture is for itself its own (best) interpreter [*sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*]'. However, this principle seems to be applied selectively, particularly when the exegete's judgement is clouded by a literary approach or other biases, such as the preferred headship of men in some cultures.

Therefore, while efforts are made to remain faithful to the authority of Scripture, the discourse around the Reformed hermeneutical approach remains a site of ongoing conversation about the roles of history, context, and power in biblical interpretation. Consequently, this article calls for a reformed missional lens for reading biblical texts that address women in ecclesiastical office. The reformed missional lens allows God, in his missionary endeavours, to move in an unorthodox way (Sanou 2018:301).

Reformed views on women in ecclesiastical leadership and office

Brief history of Synod decisions

The debate over women in office has been ongoing within this denomination. Recent history can be traced back to the Synod decision of 1988, which sought to reaffirm previous decisions excluding women in favour of men. However, in 2003, the Synod decided to allow women to serve as deacons (Van Deventer 2005:685). Despite previous studies not being as conclusive, with weighty evidence, findings, and conclusions in favour of both sides of the spectrum, subsequent Synods in 2003, 2015, and now 2026 made similar pronouncements.

2026 Synod decision

The latest Synod decision on women in ecclesiastical leadership and office was taken during the January 2026 General Synod meeting in Potchefstroom. This is the Synod that aimed to resolve the matter by taking a mandatory or binding decision, consisting of four elements, namely:

- Churches that ordain women are committing a gross sin of *disobedience to Christ*.
- These churches are given 12 months (until January 2027) to repent and rescind their decisions to ordain women in the office; failure to do so will be regarded as a voluntary withdrawal from the GKSA.
- Major ecclesiastical assemblies, such as the Classis and Regional Synod, are mandated to enforce this decision; failing which, the General Synod, through the Chair of the Modaramen, will ensure its implementation.
- Termination of ecumenical ties with churches ordaining women to offices.

Biblical justification for non-ordination of women in office

The decision to bar women from ecclesiastical office is based on interpretations of biblical texts that align with this position, creation-order theology, and Reformed confessional interpretation. While there are many Reformed complementarian scholars, this article will focus on discussing John Calvin's position, because his understanding and interpretation of Pauline texts on this subject have become a universal norm among Reformation scholars. It is asserted, 'what is problematic about Calvin's truncated reading and interpretation of the Bible, is how it becomes a universal way of reading and interpretation' (Kobo 2018b:4). The reflection on this interpretation is: *Paul's instruction not to permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man in 1 Timothy 2:11–15*.

This interpretation does not take away women's responsibility for instructing their family; it does, however, remove them from occupying the office of teaching and preaching in public because it is reserved for men only (Calvin 1999b:50). This instruction is tied to the instruction

to women not to exercise authority over men because women were formed to obey or subject themselves under the authority of men as in the punishment conveyed to a woman in Genesis 3:16; hence the reference to Eve to have been the one who sinned first. For Calvin (1999b:52), the issue of childbearing in 1 Timothy 2:15 offers women comfort, preventing them from despairing and keeping hope for their salvation, which still depends on their obedience to men. This argument contradicts the very Protestant teaching that human justification, including that of women, is by faith alone [*sola fide*].

The silencing of women in public worship or churches in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35

According to John Calvin (1999a:393; 1 Cor 14:40), this instruction was given to restore order after the abuse of the freedom that was accorded to women in a duly constituted and regulated church service. His discussion seems to assist in maintaining a harmonious relationship in the marriage context, which is why Paul instructed women not only to be silent but raise any matter of theological disputation with their husbands at home instead of engaging them publicly (Douglass 1984:161). Furthermore, in his conception, women, in their subjection, cannot hold a teaching position in the church because of its superior nature; something which is obviously a representation of the authority that men must exercise over their wives (Calvin 1999a:393).

Accordingly, this aligns with the natural law where, '... women have in all ages been excluded from the public management of affairs' (Calvin 1999a:394).

When the question arises of men who are not capable of teaching or responding to their women at home, Calvin opines that Paul does not restrict them from consulting the prophets directly. His interpretation seems to leave room for a missional context, as in the case of Priscilla, who taught Apollos in the home church started by Paul in Priscilla and Aquila's home. Calvin (1999a) remarked:

[I]n the meantime, it is the part of the prudent reader to consider that the things of which he here treats are intermediate and indifferent, in which there is nothing unlawful, but what is at variance with propriety and edification. (p. 394)

It is in the context where Calvin, despite his sexist and patriarchal views on women (Kobo 2018b:4), must be credited for acknowledging that God can work outside the scope of prescribed dogma.

As a result of the advanced arguments, male headship in the GKSA is presented as a biblically mandated norm, transcultural and not time-bound, as already stated above. Any view that contradicts this position is said to be undermining the authority of the Scripture and Reformed confessional integrity, and therefore disobedient to Christ, who is the head of the church as reflected in the decision of the 2026 GKSA General Assembly.

Non-ordination of women in office: A reformed critique

A critique on women in office is conducted in the spirit of the reformed popular dictum, *ecclesiae reformata semper reformanda* [the church reformed, always reforming], and *reformata secundum verbum Dei* [reforming according to the Word of God] (Koffeman 2015:3). It presupposes that the decision is based on a multidimensional hermeneutical problem arising from the intersectionality of the literary interpretation of Scripture, proof-texting, tradition, and underlying cultural norms and biases. The following challenges are identified:

A hermeneutical problem

The exercise of exegeting, interpreting, and applying Scripture is complex and subject to correct or incorrect interpretation (2 Pt 3:16). Therefore, there is always a need to use a hermeneutic of discernment by applying a reformed missional lens as applied to three established principles, in this case: (1) Scripture being its own interpreter; (2) the author's intent based on cultural challenges of his original audience, and therefore the socio-historical background of the text accounts for a responsible contextualisation of the message (Cornelius 2022:6); and (3) the missional intent of the *missio Dei*. In the application of these principles, this article records the following counterarguments to demonstrate the hermeneutical limitations and ambiguity regarding the selective reading of Scripture to justify non-ordination of women, namely *Missional coherence with canonical trajectories*.

When tracking God's missional footprint in the Old Testament, the decision to bar women does not align with recorded cases of women whom God used in leadership positions in Scripture.

The Old Testament recorded narratives, among others, of the likes of *Deborah*, a woman prophetess (a religious position), a military leader, and a female judge (political authority) (Jdg 4 and 5; Mayfield 2009:314); *Miriam*, who served as a prophetess and a worship leader in Exodus 15 (Grey 2024:38; Snyman 2025:4); and prophetess *Huldah*, whose contribution was acknowledged by King Josiah when the validation of the Book of Law was at stake (2 Ki 22:14–21).

In the New Testament, numerous biblical texts speak of women who have played critical leadership roles in both the temple and the missionary contexts, particularly those who are cited by Paul in Romans 16 to demonstrate that women added more value in various local missionary churches that he planted, including diaconal ministry and financial or material support to his ministry. Other examples include a distinguished elderly prophetess *Anna* (Lk 2:36–38) and Philip's daughters who served in the temple as prophetesses (Ac 21:8–9). This aligns with the prophecy in Joel 2:28–29 regarding the new pneumatological

dawn as quoted by the Apostle Peter in Acts 2:17–18. Women are also recorded as the first witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Mt 28:1–10), and therefore their agency cannot be silenced.

When the foregoing examples are mentioned as a counterargument to women in office, Reformed complementarians follow the same line of argument as Calvin (1999b:50), who concluded, 'extraordinary acts done by God do not overturn the ordinary rules of government, by which he intended that we should be bound'. The mere fact that God used women like Deborah as a prophet and judge, an extraordinary act as Calvin claimed, without doubt shows that God can work in an unorthodox manner within his missional-redemptive narrative.

This article argues that God can perform extraordinary acts, such as using women as leaders and in office if he so wishes, just as God used Balaam's donkey (Nm 22:28–30) and the stones that Jesus Christ referred to (Lk 19:40) to communicate his message and stir worship.

Ecclesiastical discernment requires assessing individuals' special gifts and callings, rather than silencing women on the basis of gender.

Textual exegetical limitations

A responsible Reformed reading, interpretation, and application of Pauline texts often used to restrict women from ecclesiastical office, namely 1 Timothy 2:8–15, 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36, and 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, must take the following considerations into account:

- **Genesis 1–3 in Paul's argument (1 Tm 2:8–15):** Paul's reference to the Genesis narrative in 1 Timothy 2:8–15, often used to silence women, must be read canonically alongside Genesis 1:26–28 and God's missional intent. In this passage, humanity – *male* and *female* – were created *imago Dei* [in the image of God] to co-manage (rule) and also to serve as stewards of God's ecosystem in the created order; therefore, no gender hierarchy was intended. Diversification of roles between Adam and Eve is a consequence of the fall and helps to resolve the broken marriage relationships in the main or 'domestic sphere' (Hugenberger 1992:358) and therefore should not be translated into ecclesial norms that exclude women from ecclesiastical offices.
- **The silencing of women in 1 Timothy 2:8–15:** This should canonically be read with other Pauline corpus where women pray, prophesy (1 Cor 11:5; 14:26) in public worship (Bowman 1992:198), teach, lead, and support apostolic missionary activities (Ac 18:26; Hugenberger 1992:344), and are commended as co-workers (Rm 16). It is opined by Keener (2001:83): 'these commendations may indicate his sensitivity to the opposition women undoubtedly faced for their ministry and are remarkable, given the prejudice against women's ministry that existed in Paul's culture'. Therefore, Paul does not seem to restrict

women's participation but provides situational or contextual correction of cultural challenges that sought to undermine men's headship in the context of married women (Westfall 2014:173).

- **Lexical use of the Greek word *authentein* in 1 Timothy 2:12:** According to Westfall (2014):

[T]here are two identifiable groups that take part in the dialogue: one that translates *αὐθεντέω* with a positive or neutral sense of 'exercise authority' or 'master'. This includes one that translates it with a negative or pejorative sense, such as 'usurp', '*domineer*', 'control', or 'initiate violence'. (p. 140)

Concerning the latter, Paul wrote to address the disruptive and domineering practices of untrained, wealthy women teachers in Ephesus (1 Tm 1:3 – 7; 2 Tm 3:6–7). Their teachings sought to encourage a culture of ungodly living while stirring a rebellion against male leaders, thereby undermining their marital status and the respect they should command in their households; hence the instruction to raise critical questions at home. This prompted Paul to instruct women to learn in quietness or in a submissive spirit, or to listen without interrupting so that harmony can be restored in their marriage settings, or in their male-female relationships (Foster 2016:6). This does not constitute a universal ban on women teaching.

- **Qualifications of women in office in 1 Timothy 3:1–12:** This text enumerates the requirements for both elders and deacons. As aligned to the patriarchal cultural milieu of the dominance of male leadership, the entire pericope seems to be addressing males alone. However, close attention to the use of 'likewise' in verse 11, which addresses women, indicates that the exact requirements should apply to women, with the addition of modesty in lifestyle and speech.

The foregoing suggests that gender diversity must not be weaponised by churches, including the GKSA, to exclude women in ecclesiastical office. Women can serve in missional contexts as deacons and teachers of the Word as long as it aligns with their calling and the gifts allotted to them by the same Spirit of God and the edification of the body of Christ (Eph 4:11–16).

A patriarchal problem

Pauline texts cited above appeal to the creation order and the fall of the first humanity, Adam and Eve, to justify why women cannot be ordained. It further suggests that all texts that address ordination for all three offices address males, not females; therefore, women cannot be considered. The preference is for the headship of males with zero tolerance for any possibility of a woman leading, even as a deacon. This approach has ultimately given birth to the hermeneutic of dominance or genderised dominance of one gender by another. Biblical patriarchy accounts for this, and it is described as follows (Van Deventer 2005):

[B]iblical texts were mostly, if not exclusively, written by men living in a patriarchal society, and therefore women do not feature prominently in these texts, particularly not outside the patriarchal frame of reference. (p. 696)

While the above-mentioned exclusionary approach builds on the literary and selective reading and interpretation of the Scripture, it ignores underlying issues around contextual and socio-historical aspects of the text(s). The cultural milieu of both the author, immediate recipients, and their context(s) is ignored, as in the case of Jewish, Graeco-Roman, Western, and African patriarchal systems that prefer male headship in favour of women's submission. Two references can be made to illustrate this: firstly, the disciples of Jesus came back from buying food in John 4:27, and they were shocked to find him talking to a woman in public; something which was culturally unthinkable in addition to the Jewish-Samaritan rivalry that would have rendered the conversation between the two impossible; and secondly, a woman was caught in adultery in John 8:1–11, and religious leaders brought her to Jesus and appealed for her death penalty based on the Mosaic law as a demonstration of conservative religious patriarchy and gender inequalities. The very leaders did not bring along or demand the same punitive measure against her accomplice to show their biased interpretation of the Scripture.

Jesus Christ, in both cases, was able to break human-created social, gender, religious, and cultural barriers in favour of equity and just relations and engagements in interpreting the Scriptures. His ministry praxis is a testament to the fact that he not only engaged women publicly but also allowed them to accompany him as disciples on his mission journeys. These women were not muted figures but played a significant public role, providing financial support for him and his disciples (Lk 8:1–3). As the Samaritan woman became a witness to the prophetic and saving powers of Jesus Christ, some of these women, like Mary Magdalene, served as key witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, as already noted. It is concluded, 'Women are followers of Jesus and are committed to his message, demonstrated by their exemplary service' (Lockard 2022:70).

A missional problem

The researcher was prompted to engage in this research to understand and discuss the logic of such a decision, and to question what the future holds for black churches within the GKSA. There seems to be less appetite from these churches to engage on this fundamental matter.

This constitutes not only a missiological problem but also a theological and ecclesial challenge that requires critical reflection and reform. They are not concerned about the pending schism. Although the issue of doctrinal alignment with the decision of the GKSA may be a factor, the dependency syndrome among black churches seems to account for this. Mudau and Khosa-Nkatini (2025) opine:

'[T]his dependence contributed to the current state of black reformed churches as the black church could not advocate for gender roles, as in the black communities, women were playing an important role'. (p. 2)

Kim (2019:7) locates this in the GKSA's mission policy and praxis, which have led to paternalism, dependency, and a loss of independence, and therefore a missiological problem.

Where independence is not fully realised because of the dependency syndrome, it also affects the issue of self-theologising churches. One's voice on critical matters, such as women in office and the GKSA's language policy, becomes muted. One cannot vote against a white church delegation that is paying for their salary. Consequently, the mindset of black churches that depended entirely on financial support from white churches is also to blame for the lack of a theological reflection on the exclusion and marginalisation of women in office.

A proposed reformed missional framework in decoloniality

Having discussed and unmasked that the underlying challenges of the GKSA are not merely hermeneutical in nature, but also patriarchal and missional, the following reformed missional framework is proposed:

- When Scripture is read from a *missional lens*, the church does not take centre stage but the *missio Dei* [mission of God]. This hermeneutic considers that God is building his church and therefore, '... the mission of the church is related to the mystery of God, revealed in Christ and through the Holy Spirit' (Koffeman 2015:4). In God's redemptive history, in both the Old and New Testament, there are clear cases of his sovereign providence where women were used in leadership, prophetic ministry, diaconal, and teaching responsibilities, as demonstrated in the examples cited above.
- A *Christological hermeneutic* that seeks to recentre the model of Christ's ministry in current discourse. Christ is the canon within a canon, 'consequently, everything in Scripture should be interpreted within the divine timeline of the promise of the coming of Christ, his coming and the promise of his return' (Coetsee & Goede 2022:27). Therefore, how he embraced women in ministry as demonstrated in John 4, John 8:1–11, and Luke 8:1–3 above, must be a model of what it means to be a church of Christ in a missional context. His missional mandate, the Great Commission (Mt 28:18–19), is not only given to men but to the entire church, including women, to go and disciple nations by teaching them to observe everything that Christ has taught. Based on this, a critical question is asked, 'If the work of discipling all nations does not exclude women, why should the work of leadership exclude them?' (Lagat 2016:6).
- Pneumatological hermeneutic, which seeks to rediscover the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The coming of the Holy Spirit ushers in a new dawn where prophecy is no longer limited to men but to all, including women (Jl 2:28–29; cf. Ac 2:16–21). This speaks to the basic tenet of the reformed faith, the priesthood of all believers, which affirms that

all believers are priests, prophets, and kings. With the coming of the Holy Spirit, both men and women are endowed with the *charismata* [gifts of the Holy Spirit] and capable of serving the *missio Dei* without reservation. Consequently, the coming of the Holy Spirit inaugurated a new dawn that acknowledges the gifts of the body of Christ beyond language, racial, cultural, gender, and economic barriers that humanity continues to build against each other; hence, Paul's assertion that these barriers have been abolished in favour of the unity of the body of Christ (Gl 3:28).

- The Reformed principle of Scripture being its own (best) interpreter, as captured by Coetsee and Goede (2022) above, should apply when dealing with the problematic and controversial Pauline texts, such as those on women in office. In this instance, we need to mediate the contradictory paradoxes of the silencing of women, dress codes, head-covering, and salvation through childbearing with Paul's intentional appreciation of the leadership roles women played during his missionary journeys and church planting.
- The socio-cultural context Paul was addressing in 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 must be unmasked to determine whether his instruction was time-bound or a universal message to be replicated everywhere a church is planted. In this case, 'The gospel functions as the interpretive matrix within which the received biblical tradition is brought into critical conversation with a particular human context' (Hunsberger 2011:317), as determination comprises its applicability in a particular cultural milieu.
- A decolonial hermeneutic must accompany the missional reading of the Scripture in the efforts to unmask and confront patriarchal power dynamics and injustices, both in the biblical, Jewish, Graeco-Roman, Western, and African cultural milieu that sought to dominate and exclude women's participation in ecclesial leadership and office.
- The GKSA should not avoid engaging in the discourse by silencing dissenting voices. The *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* must be the guiding principle to keep the church reforming through the Word of God. The Gamaliel hermeneutic (Ac 5:34–39), as applied to the women in office within the GKSA, should be encouraged. If women's ordination is of human origin, it will surely fail, but if it is from God, it cannot be destroyed.
- On the unity of the body of Christ, binding decision of ecclesiastical assemblies and ecumenical partnership, three elements must be taken into consideration, namely: (1) '... focus must be on the role of the church in the *missio Dei* and a clear understanding of the need for ecumenical cooperation is pivotal' (Koffeman 2015:5); (2) the local church is a decision-making institution, while ecclesiastical assemblies assume the advisory role on matters of common concern; and therefore (3) churches that differ on issues such as

women in office, where the matter is not conclusively settled, must not be banished, as suggested in Article 75 of the Church Polity of the GKSA. The imposition of the synodical authority is therefore unreformed; hence, Article 29 of the Church Order, which speaks of the binding nature of Synod decisions, must be revisited.

Conclusion

This article argued that the continued exclusion and marginalisation of women in ecclesiastical offices in the GKSA constitute a hermeneutical problem rooted in the selective reading of Pauline texts and missional misalignment with the *missio Dei*, while neglecting the broader canonical witness and Paul's missional praxis. A Reformed hermeneutic – grounded in *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, sensitivity to socio-historical context, and missional coherence of the biblical grand narrative – unmask that Pauline texts such as 1 Timothy 2:8–15 and 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 address disruptive contestations rooted in local challenges such as those of churches in Ephesus and Corinth, and therefore cannot constitute universal norms that apply in every generation. A renewed effort to make proper discernment is necessary in resolving the ongoing differences on women's ecclesiastical offices within the GKSA, which aligns with the *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei* slogan of the Reformation.

This is a result of clear canonical affirmations of the Pauline corpus pointing to women in the biblical texts who functioned as prophets, leaders, teachers, and co-workers in the preaching of the gospel and advancement of the Kingdom of God. Ultimately, a church that refuses to ordain women in ecclesiastical offices not only misreads Scripture but also risks silencing the Spirit of God and standing against the *missio Dei*. Therefore, a true and authentic Reformed church must be willing to reform when the Spirit of God unmasks blind spots that require correction.

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Data availability

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