

# AN APPLICATION OF ACTS OF THE APOSTLES CHAPTER 6: 1-5 TO THE PLIGHT AND NEGLIGENCE OF WIDOWS IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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## Abstract

*Widowhood has been a practice that is as old as the soil. It is observed that in virtually every culture, widows are victimized, subjugated and maltreated without much concern from the society. This paper examined the early Christian Church response to the plight of widows in Acts 6:1-5 where the Grecian widows were neglected in the daily distribution of food in favour of the Hebrew widows. This is not different with what is seen in our Christian churches today in Nigeria, where there is apparent neglect and unjust treatment of widows. In spite of the Christian teachings that emphasize love and caring especially towards the grieving and vulnerable widows, we still see disrespect and humiliation of women when death knocks at the door of their husbands. This disproportionate injustice against widows, cut across cultures as a form of gender-based violence against women and this forms the thrust of this research. Furthermore, considering the traditional socialization that entrench dependence and passivity for women, the question is, how can the Church overcome the sentiments of cultural differences and assist widows in their plight to ameliorate their sufferings? This paper used secondary data to explore the issues raised in this narrative and argues that the early Christian model of concerns for the needy provides an exemplary model for the Christian Church today in addressing the concerns of minority voices in the congregation. The paper therefore concludes that it is the expectation from the church and society to have special regard and privileges for the widows which will help in reducing their burden. It therefore recommends that there is the need for the church and other well-meaning religious organizations in Nigeria to champion the cause of protecting widows and orphans in our society. More so, it is expected of the Church to enlighten the populace on the estate of widowhood and the special care they deserve in living normal lives even after the demise of their spouses. In doing this, the Church should de-emphasize the power of customs and tradition. Finally, it presents the need for sustaining educational awareness and women empowerment which are seen as panacea for widow's neglect.*

**Keywords: Application, Plight, Negligence, Widows, Contemporary, Church.**

### **Introduction**

In the society of today, there seems to be an apparent, uncaring, disrespectful and unjust treatments of widows of which majority of these widows belong to conservative Christian Churches. In spite of the Christian teachings that emphasize on love and caring especially towards the grieving and vulnerable widows, we still see sufferings and humiliation of women when they lose their husbands by death. Injustices against widow cut across cultures and it is a form of gender-based abuse against women. Such was the case in Acts 6:1- 5 where the Grecian widows were discriminated against and the Hebrew widows favored in terms of daily distribution of food for their upkeep until the early church took a deliberate action to right the wrongs by electing leaders in the Church that took care of the widows. On the surface, the daily distribution of food may seem trivial but beneath the cause of this crisis is the great animosity that had existed between the Hebraic Jews and the Hellenistic Jews. The Hellenistic Jews otherwise referred to as the Grecian Jews were first mentioned in the Bible in Acts 6:1 thus, "In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic (Grecian) Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food".

In the words of Thurstone (2012), he opines that:

The believing Jews are here divided into two groups, the first were those who had remained in Judea, near Jerusalem, who used the Hebrew language, and who were appropriately called "Hebrews." The second group consisted of those who were scattered among the Gentiles, who spoke the Greek language and who used the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint. These were called "Hellenists," from a word meaning "Greek" or "Greek-speaking. (p. 88).

Dissensions arose between the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebraic Jews over the distribution of daily rations for the Grecian widows. The Hebrew group of widows were favoured over the Hellenist widows. Sadly, this animosity and strife between the two groups was not eliminated by their conversion to Christianity. However, the apostles recognized their concerns raised by one part of the Church as genuine. They reflected on it and brilliantly worked through the dispute by creating the office of deacons (Acts 6:2-6). Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. "Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of *good* reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; "but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch (Acts 6:1-5)

### **Widows in the Old Testament and later Jewish writings**

This section explores the background of widowhood in the biblical world by surveying the Old Testament material and later Jewish writings. In biblical and traditions, widow refers to a woman whose husband had died. However, Peggy (2000) argues that the term widow

(Hebrew *almanah*) in ancient Israel refers to a woman whose husband and father-in-law were both dead, and who had no son” (p. 102). In order to adapt this definition to biblical texts that talks about *almanah* having no son has been qualified as the lack of an adult son with the economic means to support his mother (2 Samuel 14:4-8; 1 Kings 17:8-24). Traditionally, many widows would fall into this category because of their husband's death, but others who could rely on the support of a new husband by levirate marriage, an adult son or father-in-law, would not. Thus, the widows as a class in Israelite society in biblical time were mostly considered as comprised not only of women whose husbands had died, but rather once-married women who no longer had means of financial support. Beginning with the Bible, Judaism has always recognized the special needs of the widow. A married woman whose husband has died often was considered someone helpless in the society. As much as scholars have dealt extensively with widowhood in the Jewish community, this section of the research will concentrate on God's passion for widows, the role of the community, the role of the family and the role of the widow herself as recorded in both the Old Testament and later Jewish writings.

### **God's concern for Widows**

Historically, the God of Israel is the helper and saviour of widows, including strangers, orphans and the poor (Exodus 22:21-24). Theologically, this passage reveals God's care, protection and passion for widows, warning that if Israel failed to care for the widows of others, their own people may become widows. Therefore, any wrong done to the unprotected widow and the orphan would call for wrathful Yahweh as their avenging relative. This instruction seeks to help the people recognize that they are called beyond keeping the basic rules for civil society to embodying the character of the Lord in caring for those who easily oppressed and even those who may be predisposed against them. Through the prophets, the Lord will repeatedly denounce the mistreatment of the widow and the fatherless in Israel and Judah (Exodus 22:22).

Thurston (2012) reports that:

In the law, the prophetic and the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, God is the defender of the legally defenseless, God will “hear their cry” (Exodus 22:23) and punish those who oppress them. In addition, God is the “protector of widows” (Psalm 68:5); God “tears down the house of the proud, but maintains the widow's boundaries” (Proverbs 15:25). Further, the Bible cautions, “You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan” (Exodus 22:21). However, Israel disobeyed God's commands as recorded in Zechariah 7:11, “But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears might not hear. (p. 45).

The above passages show that the community of Israel humiliated and failed to provide legal protection for needy widows in their community. The passages also help to illustrate God's love and mercy toward the needy.

### **The role of the Community**

With reference to the decree given in Proverbs 15:25, as quoted above, the people of Israel were expected to emulate God's passion for widows and take good care of them. As stated

earlier, the word of God made it known that the people of Israel were to be kind to orphans and widows and to stop oppressing them. For example, the holy writ posits thus, “uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow” (Isaiah 1:17). It indicates that justice was not prevailing in the life of the needy among the people of Israel. This emphasized that the cause of the widow was a special example of the poor and powerless (Malachi 3:5). Similarly, Isaiah and Jeremiah used the widow as a metaphor for Israel as lost in a powerless state without God (Isaiah 47:9; Jeremiah 22:3-10 cf. Rev. 18:7). Stressing further Thurston (2012) observes that the widow was an image of the remnant, the desolate few destined to receive God's promise (p. 66).

The Psalmist cries to God for punishment from the wicked, for they kill the widow and stranger, they murder the fatherless (Psalm 94:6-7). In addition, special legislation was enacted for their protection, since they represented the most vulnerable in the land (Deuteronomy 24:17). This implies that the blessings of the land are for the people as a whole to share. After receiving such instructions, the people of Israel should emulate and practice God's concern for the widows in their families and in the community as a whole. The first practical step for the people of Israel is that God instructed the Jews to allow widows to reap in their fields and to share in the tithes and meals at public festivals (Deuteronomy 14:28-29). An additional tithe every third year was for the benefit of the landless that were potentially poor. It was to be given to them within their towns and not in the sanctuary. The obligation to provide for the widow and orphan continues the biblical theme and the punishment of the one who mistreats a widow is pronounced in the extreme (Exodus 22:21). The second practical step was directed to the public, which was mandated to support the fatherless, the widow and the sojourner by giving food and clothing (Deuteronomy 10:18). These are the main categories of landless people in addition to the Levites (Deuteronomy 14:29). The purpose of this law is to recall Israel's experience in Egypt. The third practical step was that, historically, poverty-stricken widows and the provision for their help was specific, 'every three years the widow is to receive a portion of the tithe of produce, her garment is not to be taken in pledge' (Deuteronomy. 14:28-29; 24:17-18).

Widows and orphans were the most vulnerable in the land of Israel, as a result, the laws made provision for their support by Jewish society. Israel should understand that the blessings of the land were for the people as a whole. The third practical step regarding a widow was that, she is to be invited to meals at public festivals and she is allowed to glean in the vineyard and fields (Deuteronomy 16:11, 14; 26:19-24; cf. Ruth 2:17-18). The rule concerning the harvest is in tune with the generosity that God expected from the people on this occasion. God commands Israel not to forget the less fortunate during celebration of abundance. It implies God's care and kindness towards the needy among the people of Israel. Moreover, provision for the poor, sojourners, orphans and widows allowed them to gather standing grain corners or borders of fields, as well as dropped stalks and left-behind sheaves (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19). Through these instructions, Naomi empowered Ruth to go out and glean among the ears of grain after Boaz in whose sight Ruth found favour. After she had become a widow, Ruth had the opportunity to utilize these laws to glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers from early morning until now, except for a short rest (Ruth 2:7). The story of Naomi and Ruth helps us to understand that some of the Old Testament laws empower

widows in the Jewish community. At this point, the widow has opportunity to glean among the sheaves for her own benefit. Prior to that, the widow may not depend on anyone; rather, she can feed her children from gleaning. On the other hand, the plight of the widow was often miserable, as with Elijah's encounter with the starving widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-24). After her encounter with Elijah, the widow appeared to have been convinced of the truth of Elijah's religion by the demonstration of God's power in her life. Elijah concurred with her view about who is the ultimate cause, but he makes no comment in his prayer as to whether the widow's sin was the human cause.

This is an indication of a world where there is only one God; everything in the end lies in his power. This is the final illustration that only the Lord is God because it demonstrated when death faced the God of Israel, unlike Baal, does not need to submit (1 Kings 17:21). He can cross the border from Israel in Sidon to bring life out of death. The Lord cannot hide even from a place such as the underworld (Psalm 138:7-12). Truly speaking, our concern for widows could introduce the love of God to those who do not believe in him. After Elijah had raised her son, the widow believed that the God of Elijah was the only true God. She confessed thus, now I know that you are a man of God, and the word of the Lord in your mouth is true (1 Kings 17:24). Evidently, God used Elijah to provide social, emotional and spiritual needs for the widow. Moreover, to be a widow was the fate most feared and bewailed by women. A husband's death before old age considered retribution for his sins, and the wife apparently incurred this retribution. As Naomi lamented, why call her Naomi, when the Lord has testified against her and the Almighty has brought calamity upon her (Ruth 1:21b). This implies that the Lord brought destitution, childlessness and widowhood upon her. Again, Naomi sees her suffering as God's testimony, thus, as proof that God condemned her for some sin of which she was unaware. However, her troubles will provide the means to God's bounty, as Ruth stays with her and gleans in Boaz's field. We conclude that God's expectation is that the people of Israel be kind to the widows in the society so that Israel will be blessed.

### **The widow's responsibility**

Throughout the Old Testament and the later Jewish writings, care for widows was not only the burden of the community and the family members but rather, some of the responsibilities placed on the widow herself. Beside the community and family's role in the life of the widow, the widow was also responsibility for herself and her children as well. In the Old Testament period, a Jewish widow could choose to go back to her family only if her bride price was refunded to her husband's heirs. A childless widow could decide to be subject to levirate marriage in order to produce children to carry on her husband's name (Deuteronomy 25:5-7). However, the widow had to wait for the public refusal of a brother of her husband before she could remarry outside her husband's family (Deuteronomy 25:9). In addition, a childless widow could return to her father or mother's house until she could remarry (Genesis 38:11). Tamar is one example of this Deuteronomic law. After the death of her husband, Judah, her father-in-law asked that she return to her father's house, for Judah feared that his only remaining son would meet the fate of his two brothers. Though Judah actually failed to apply this family law, Tamar empowered herself as she tricked her father-in-law to have intercourse with her in order to receive her husband's property.

Chayin and Ben-Zion (2007) observe that

When Tamar realized Judah's deceitful decision preventing her from marrying to her son Shelah, she managed to deceive Judah by underhanded means for her own benefit. Unfortunately, Judah could not recognize her because of her veil, as a result, he became her customer. When he later learned that his daughter-in-law was pregnant, Judah at first commanded that she be burned (Genesis 38:24). Tamar, however, secretly proved to him that he fathered her child and he openly announced that not her, but he was at fault, since her conception through him was justified by failure to give her to Shelah (p. 109).

This story motivates widows deprived from their husband's property to fight for their right and discourages cheating and any form of mistreatment done the widow by the in-laws and the family of the deceased husband. We can also learn from the story of these two widows (Naomi and Ruth) that Naomi empowered Ruth to raise the family of Elimelech (the deceased husband of Naomi) through her intimate relationship with Boaz. Others, such as the widow of Zarephath, empowered herself through God's word spoken to her by Elijah, and therefore, her poverty was eliminated and her son too, was brought back to life. Some widows, especially the wealthy, did as they pleased, either to remarry a man of their choice or enter into levirate marriage, yet others returned to their family homes. For example, Abigail chose to follow David after the death of her husband, Nabal and later became David's wife (1 Samuel 25:42). After seven days of mourning Bathsheba, the widow of Uriah also became the wife of David, though the thing he did displeased the Lord (2 Samuel 11:27). The mourning was probably seven days (Genesis 50:10). In addition, the Jewish tradition allowed the wife to hold her own property during marriage and, when widowed, she kept part of her dowry. Although marriage is the source of income generating funds for the widow in Jewish family, some of them made good use of the Deuteronomic laws to support themselves and their families. We can infer from the findings that widows without children would be the most vulnerable in the Jewish society, since they are not capable of taking their deceased's husbands property. It could also be possible for the deceased husband to leave behind children by a different deceased woman since polygamy was permissible, therefore the widow may not share the property with the stepchildren. However, a childless widow would be more vulnerable after the death of her husband; hence, she might not have someone to depend on. With the exception of the issue of the childless widow, rules governing care for widows in both Old Testament and later Jewish writings help the present generation to be kind to widows among them. However, we should consider the disadvantages of women in the Jewish community, for instance, lack of women's education, since this might be the cause of the impoverished situation of widows in the ancient world. Marriage should not be the only source of income for both women in the Jewish world and women across board.

### **The Plights of Widows in Nigeria**

The plights of widows are the same in almost every part of the world. Ntozi (1997) corroborates the assertion when he says that widowhood all over the world is characterized by grief, bereavement, rituals, forced remarriages, harassment, rejection, loneliness, poverty and relatively high mortality (p. 34). However, the situation of widows and widowers largely depends on country, society, religion and economic systems. The ordeal of widows in Nigeria or any part of most countries of the world is not different from the experience of the widow of

one of the sons of the Prophets that has been considered above. For instance, Elliott (1999), while describing the ordeals of widows in China, is of the opinion that widows are economically vulnerable, ritually superfluous and at the same time socially destabilized and sexually threatened, they were archetypal liminal figures marginalized, caricatured, and feared (p. 78).

Ewelukwa (2002) in the same vein divided the experiences of Nigerian widows generally into two broad categories:

Disinheritance and deprivation of property and the mandatory observance of prescribed burial rituals, which however varies from one ethnic group to another, from state to state and most often from one town to another. The first culturally and ritually defined ordeal is the charge against widows as being their husbands' death by the extended members of the family of the deceased virtually in all cultures in Nigeria. However, this false accusation is not limited to Nigeria. In Taiwan for instance, many widows come under suspicion from their in-laws or neighbors as the potential cause of their husbands' "bad deaths"; even well-educated Taiwanese women may feel the burden of accusation that without them, their spouses would never have suffered from a bad life that included an early demise. For the rest of their lives, such women will face constant reminders of what traditional Chinese society considers incompleteness (p. 34).

Omoigui and Orebiyi (2001) documented some of the barbaric and dehumanizing widowhood rites that women are asked to pass through during the periods following the demise of their husbands in Nigeria thus:

Some are expected to cry from the day of their husbands' death to the last day of the funeral. Some are made to drink from the water used in bathing the deceased as a means of proving the innocence of the woman, while some especially among the Igbos are asked to shave the hair on their heads. Some are prevented from eating their choice food but those prescribed by custom and are restrained from attending any social gathering (p. 57).

Furthermore, Ewelukwa (2002) succinctly describes the widow's experience as exemplified in many cultures of the world, some of which are being practiced in Nigeria, especially among the Igbos in the Eastern part of the country, thus:

Upon the death of a husband, rituals for the surviving widow can be savage. The hair is cut or shaved off, in many cases leaving cuts in the scalp, so roughly is this carried out. The clothing and the jewelry the widow wore during her husband's lifetime are cast off, and rags or rough clothing put on. Alternatively, the widow may have to remain in dirty unwashed clothing for weeks, enclosed in one room, being given virtually nothing to eat and even in some cases having to drink the water with which her husband's corpse was cleaned. She becomes a focus of collective repudiation, seen as a bearer of bad luck, unclean, polluting and dangerous. She has to undergo rituals - many of them humiliating, and some life-threatening in these times of HIV/AIDS to symbolically 'cleanse' her, in order to safeguard the community from her impurity (p. 28).

After the mourning period in the traditional Yoruba society, some are even forced into levirate marriage, in many cases her husband's younger brother, who may be many years younger than

she is. However, in most localities in Nigeria, this practice has been totally abandoned and rejected especially among women of great economic means and high level of education. They are resisting the rationale for these socio-cultural practices which deny them access to decision-making processes, to productive resources and even to control over personal matters pertaining to whether they should be inherited once they become widowed. These burial and mourning rituals imposed on widows have been observed to inflict different kinds of losses on them such as the loss of personal dignity, the loss of health and sometimes the loss of life. Unlike her male counterpart, the widower who could re-marry any time after the mourning period without the raising of eyebrows. A widow is expected to stay for a longer time before she could start thinking of re-marrying.

Economically, the widow is made to suffer after her husband's death, especially if she is one who has the mentality of “me and my husband” when the husband was alive and has not been friendly with the members of the extended family of her husband. In cases where the husband's property is forcefully taken from the widow, this leads to the breakdown in the economic power of the widow especially if the widow had been a full-time house wife before her husband's death. The bulk of the financial and material responsibilities which had been shouldered by the husband are automatically transferred to her without any adequate preparation for it. This becomes rather worse if the widow in question is a young widow with small children to cater for. Ricketson (1991) also corroborates the fact that a young widow faces many problems that cannot even be alleviated if the husband left any property because the fact that the widow is young also indicates that the husband was also young at the point of death and would not have been able to amass or possess much property (p. 55). The situation is even worse if the husband left debts behind as in the case of the biblical widow considered above. Childless widows and widows with only female children are in worse situations and oftentimes face expulsion from their matrimonial home on the death of their spouse.

One of the reasons for this economic disempowerment of widows is not unconnected with the inability of many of them to inherit their husbands' property on his demise. The Yoruba culture frowns at this because they believe that the property belongs to the children and the family, and that the wife was also a property to be inherited. The wife would only indirectly benefit from the property that is given to her children. This situation often leads to economic disempowerment of widows, pauperization, impoverishment and marginalization in the society.

### **The Apostolic Church and Ministry to Widows**

Brown (1989) has this to say about widows in the apostolic era:

were in a very difficult position because there were few employment opportunities and few, if any, social services provided by the Roman government. Again the poor were left vulnerable. The believers at Jerusalem sold property and possessions in order to share with those who were in need (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-34). There was not a needy person among them (4:34). Acts 2:41-47 and 4:32-37 reveals that the unity and togetherness of early Christians enabled them to share whatever they had as a Christian community (p. 56).

The benevolent lifestyle of the early Church is well chronicled in the history of the Christian

Church. During the reign of the Roman Emperor Claudius, when a famine adversely affected the brethren in Judea, the disciples at Antioch determined to send a contribution for their relief (Acts 11:27-30). They sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. The primary work of elders and Deacons was to take care of the spiritual, social and physical needs of the church (Acts 20:28-29; 1 Pet 5:1-2). The elders knew which members of the congregation needed assistance and they responded accordingly. Again during the reign of Nero, the churches of Macedonia and Achaia sent a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-2; Rom 15:25-26; 2 Cor 8 - 9). This practice of the early Church in matters of taking care of the needy was imbedded in the gospel, which they preached (1 Cor 16:15-16; Gal 6:10; Eph 4:28; 1 Tim 6:18). In their endeavor to relieve the suffering of the needy, the Apostolic Church paid particular attention to the needs of widows. According to Towner (2006), the death of a husband in the Greco-Roman empire raised questions about the disposition of the dowry given by the wife's family to the husband for oversight (p. 88). The widow might find herself without support if the dowry, as part of the husband's property, were to pass directly to the children, if she were too old or otherwise unable to remarry. Sometimes there were neither dowries nor family to provide for her needs. This cultural practice led to an increase of destitute women.

The benevolent acts of grace and charity to the poor enabled widows to find a safe haven in the early Christian church. Act 6:1 shows that widows were taken care of from church coffers and freewill offerings from members. Such a kind gesture to the needy obviously led to the number of widows that embraced the Christian faith from other socio-cultural groups aside from the Hebrews and this circumstance created a huge problem hence the need to care for these widows became a glaring reality to the Church. Bacchiocchi (2000) observes that the apostles were made forcefully aware of such a need soon after Pentecost by the murmuring of the Hellenists over the apparent neglect of their widows (p. 10). To address the problem, seven men of good repute and full of the Spirit were appointed to serve in the welfare ministry of the church (Acts 6:3). The book of Acts also refers to a woman named Tabitha or Dorcas, who took care of widows and orphans (Acts 9:36-39). Bacchiocchi (2000) goes on to posit that the fact that widows attended her funeral in great numbers suggests that she herself was probably one of the widows of the local church (p.50). This further supports the benevolent nature of the New Testament Church in that even widows ministered to other widows. In James 1:27, true religion is defined as to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unspotted from the world. Such emphasis on practical godliness and practical religion gave power and tremendous influence to the early Christian Church. The Apostolic Church demonstrated timeless principles of managing church growth and responding to various calls of ministry in a holistic way. The Church did not only focus on spiritual matters but realized the closeness of physical, social and spiritual needs of its members. This kind of teaching is the core of the Gospel Commission. The Apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy explains that unbelievers are those who refuse to care for their own widows, not even those living with them in their own households (1 Timothy 5:8).

### **Christ's Ministry to Widows**

Christ paid special attention to widows in His ministry to suffering humanity. A significant aspect of Christ's ministry was His compassion (*splanchnizomai*) towards the suffering of

humanity (Mat 9:35,36; 14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 6:34; 8:2). Thomas (2013) observes that the use of the word '*splanchnizomai*' shows that Christ's ministry to suffering humanity was never motivated by a desire to display his power but rather to respond to perceived needs of the suffering people (p. 12). The ministry of Christ was characterized by His constant effort to minister to the physical, social, mental and spiritual needs of people. Reaching out to the whole person was the burden of His ministry. For this reason, Jesus defended the cause of the widows and orphans throughout his ministry. He rebuked Pharisees for devouring widows' houses (Luke 20:46, 47). The Greek word translated devour '*katesthio*' according to Bock (2008) has different shades of meanings but essentially refers to the act of plundering of properties. This act describes the unscrupulous acts of the temple leaders in dispossessing widows of their inheritance through all forms of injustice like charging usury, grabbing their property and stealing welfare money from the temple (p. 34). Bock suggests that the use of the word *katesthio* suggests that the temple authorities misused funds allocated to the support for the poor.

It is possible to assume that the scribes and the Pharisees took the poor people's homes for pledges, charged exorbitant fees for legal advice on matters of inheritance, gave themselves hefty fees for managing widow's estates and ignored the cry of the oppressed. White (1980) posits that the Jewish leaders gained the confidence of pious widows and then represented it as a duty for them to devote their property to religious purposes. Having secured control of their money, the wily schemers used it for their own benefit (p. 45). Thus, instead of the temple becoming a safe haven for the suffering, it was transformed into a place where the poor were plundered and disposed of the little that they had. Green (2005) points out that the Pharisees and Scribes knew God's law about inheritances, but they apparently devised legal mechanisms to circumvent the scriptures especially those that sort to defend the cause of the poor (p. 66). What is apparent is that these church leaders did not see widows as God sees them but saw only how they could take advantage of this low class of vulnerable women. They distanced themselves from the people at large by their concerns with public honor and their blatant neglect of the poor. Therefore, by rebuking those, Jesus sort to bring them back to the claims of the scriptures regarding the exercise of justice.

Furthermore, Bock (2008) posits that Christ's concern over the plight of widows provides the basis for the miracle of the resurrection of a widow's son at Nain as recorded in Luke 7:11-17 (p. 22). He describes the woman whose only son had died not only as a widow but also bereft of anyone to take care of her, making the funeral procession emotional and the situation desperate. Jesus took the initiative to address and comfort the widow (Luke 7:13). The word he used to comfort the widow in Greek is (*me-klaie*) which is translated 'don't cry'. This expressed a deep human empathy for the situation. Nolland (1989) points out that Jesus responded in compassion to the needs of the widow and demonstrated in practical terms the importance of compassionate ministry by attending the funeral and placing himself where he could be of help to the bewildered woman, Christ revealed the tenets of compassionate ministry (p. 99). Nichol (1980) further highlights that Jesus answered the unuttered prayer of the widow though she had not petitioned him verbally. Jesus touched the bearer, an act that would bring defilement according to the law (Num 19:11, 16) and commanded the dead to rise (p. 103). By this act of mercy towards the widow of Nain, Christ demonstrated his love and

care for even the bereaved. Again, Christ commended a widow who gave all she had to God (Luke 21: 1-4). This passage comes just after Christ had rebuked the teacher of the law for devouring widows (Luke 20:47). The connection between the passages presents a remarkable contrast of the spirit behind the teachers of the law and the poor widow. In support of this position, Nichol (1980) observes that Jesus intended the spirit of this widow to stand in bold contrast with the attitude of the Pharisees towards widows (p. 45). Her private action of giving all that she had to give resulted from her devotion to God in her heart. Ryken (2009) suggests that the word Jesus used to describe the widow's financial situation, '*hysterematos*' indicates extreme poverty (p. 21). Yet Jesus pointed out to them that her gift was the greatest because she had given all she had to God. By recognizing the gift offered by the widow, Bock (2008) observes that Jesus demonstrated that He valued the spirit of sacrifice not the largeness of the gift and by this gesture He elevated the whole-hearted contribution of poor widows in the church (p. 78). Christ elevated widows to their rightful position as God's children who are capable of rendering acceptable worship to the Lord. By commending the sacrifice of the widow, Jesus condemned the spirit of disregard upon the underprivileged. As a result of Christ's indisputable defense and ministry to the widows and orphans, White (1980) points out that widows and orphans exalted the name of Jesus for his works of mercy to them (p. 88).

### **Christ's Ministry to Widows on the Cross**

The most compelling example of Christ's concern for widows was shown as he hung on the cross. While hanging on the cross, Christ commended His mother a widow by then to John's care (John 19:25-27). Kostenberger and Andreas (2002) observe that Jesus gave the disciple He loved charge of His mother, perhaps because His own brothers still did not believe in him (p. 56). What is of paramount importance in this narrative is to note that Christ's command from the cross regarding the care for His mother, a widow remains a compelling principle to live by because many are neglecting widows even their own mothers. What Jesus Christ did for His mother while dying on the cross is characteristic of His love for widows. Pink (2005) writes, He was performing the mightiest work of all history, He was engaged in doing that which in comparison makes the creating of a world fade into utter significance, yet He forgets not to make provision for His mother (p. 181). By this act, Christ did not only reveal His empathy, compassion and love for widows and the underprivileged, but He demonstrated what true religion is all about. Jesus is the ultimate example of selflessness and sacrifice. Believers are mandated to be imitators of God and to live a life of love (Ephesians 5:1, 2), hence the challenge is to become like God in our character formation (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:36; 2 Peter 2:21). The poor disenfranchised, suffering and marginalized in society are precious to God (Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18; 6:20; 7:22). Jesus cared for the oppressed and the downtrodden (Luke 4:18, 19). God's overall view of caring with compassion for those who are suffering can be summed up in Galatians 6:10, thus, 'Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers.' Christ also demonstrated that the final judgment that separates the righteous from the wicked is based on how the weak and the suffering are treated (Mat 25:31-46).

### **Pauline Counsel on Ministering to Widows**

The growing number of widows as a result of the general numerical growth of the Apostolic Church brought some new challenges to the believers. This is why White (1980) observes that

the Church was continually enlarging and this growth in membership brought increasingly heavy burdens upon those in charge (p. 152). The needs and desires of those cared for needed some balancing with the resources that were available. Some of the challenges are reflected in Paul's first pastoral epistle to Timothy. Mounce (2000) points out that a serious problem developed in the Ephesians church because some widows who were enrolled on the charity list were not supposed to be enrolled probably because of their age, therefore Paul addressed the problem 1Timothy 5:3-16 (p. 109). Apostle Paul had earlier on exhorted the younger widows unable to exercise self-control to marry (1Cor 7:8, 9). In 1Corinthians 7:39, Paul declares that a woman whose husband has died is free to marry as long as she marries in the Lord. Johnson (2008) observes that by this statement, Paul recognized that not everyone has a gift of celibacy. He then proceeded to define the real widow (*ontoscherai*) that deserves to be included on the church's charity list (1Tim 5:3, 5, 9, 16) (p. 129). Towner (2006) observes that by adding a qualifier *ontos*, which means 'real, actual or genuine', Paul implied a need to redefine the meaning of *cherosin* view of the challenges the church was facing (p. 178). Church resources were stretched to the point that it was not possible to care for those who truly needed and deserved financial help. Paul plainly exhorts that a widow with children or grandchildren should be cared for by them. The parents have contributed immeasurably to their children and grandchildren's welfare. Now it is their turn to make some return (1Tim 5: 4) to their widowed mother or grandmother.

The apostle commended that such a practice is acceptable or pleasing in the sight of God (1Tim 5: 4). Young widows were to be removed from the list because by their inability to control themselves, they needed to marry and take care of their families (1Tim 5:11-15). Johnson (2008) observed that older widows made some kind of pledge to the Lord and to the church to the effect that they would remain single so as to devote the remaining part of their lives to serve the Lord (p. 120). If a younger widow made such a pledge, but then started wishing to marry again, she would thus go back on her pledge and incur the censure of the church. Paul is not condemning the natural desire of a younger widow to remarry. What is wrong is the breaking of a pledge. Paul emphasized that it was not proper for younger widows to stay on the enrolment list while indulging in a life of idleness (1Tim 5:13) that finds expression in their wandering from house to house and gossiping. Johnson (2008) alleges that the idea of having elders and deacons in the church supporting sexually interested young widows was and is still a socially offensive pattern of behaviour hence Apostle Paul determined to protect the public image of the Church by giving them the guideline of behaviour (p. 67). Paul's primary concern in this passage according to Mounce (2000) was to help Timothy distinguish between widows whom the church should support and those whom they should not (p. 78). 1Timothy 5:3-16 provides evidence not only of problems but also of measures taken to care for widows. Paul's concern is that the Ephesians church should take care of the widows who are truly in need.

Furthermore, Nichol (1980) identifies three categories of widows in 1Timothy 5:3-16 thus, those who could support themselves from their children or other relatives, those who are completely destitute of family support and those that lived in pleasure and receiving material support by other means other than their relatives or the church (p. 145). Paul pointed out that only the second category of widows was eligible for consistent support from the church. The implication of this passage is that the church had committed itself to support some young

widows who, because of their age, idleness and heresy had turned against the church and so these were supposed to be removed from the welfare register. According to Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 5:3-16, real widows were first those that were truly alone, without any family for support. This included those who were not contemplating marriage. Secondly, they were supposed to be godly women who demonstrated commitment to the Lord through their deeds of mercy and charity. A 'widow indeed' is a godly woman over sixty (1 Tim 5: 9) who has no one to help her. Paul emphasizes that a true widow is one who fixes her hope on God (1 Tim 5: 5) and is a woman of prayer. Because the problem in Ephesus involved young widows hence Paul advised Timothy to include only those who were sixty years of age and above. Excell (2009) argues that a woman over sixty in Asia Minor could no longer work for sustenance, therefore, they were to receive constant and generous support from the Church (p. 178). Mounce (2000) argues that this does not mean that the church could ignore widows who did not fit into this category. It simply means that the church was not supposed to enter into a formal, lifelong relationship with widows who did not fit into the special category specified (p. 115). Thus the obligation of the Church to take care of widows remains. In this passage, the apostle Paul was emphasizing the need for discernment in church governance.

### **Widowhood Practice in Nigeria and Implications for the Christian Church**

Bremmer and Bosch (1995) opine that,

Many cultures in Nigeria share similarities in widowhood practices with the ancient Jewish tradition such as shaving of the widow's hair and subjecting them to special dress code. Some of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria that practice this, are the Yorubas, Igbos and minority groups as the Tivs, Idomas, Urhobos, Isans and including those in Edo and Delta States. These cultures observe a mourning period that is intense at the demise of a husband. This may range from a few days to a year and during this period, the widow's appearance is distinct by the way she dresses either in black or white clothing with grieving expressions just as it were in the Canaanite culture were widows were required to shave their hair and put on mourning garments as soon as their husbands died, and were supposed to remain in that condition until they either remarry or died (p. 89).

This kind of dressing made them easily identifiable in the public thus making them targets of abuse. There are two other elements in widowhood practices that are widely shared, levirate marriage and disinheritance for the widow. After the mourning period, the widow in Yoruba, Igbo or Tiv ethnic group is expected to remarry to a relative of her late husband. Eweluka, (2002) observes this practice is on the decline in Nigeria due to civilization and Christian religious influence thus making levirate marriages unattractive and acceptable (p. 90). The crust of this paper is on how the Christian Church can intervene to ameliorate the sufferings of widows in our society just like the early Christian Church did in Acts 6:1-5. Widowhood is still a big issue in many cultures in Nigeria and affects women in conservative Christian Churches as well. Despite the fact that this status is becoming more common because of war, poverty and political instability, widowhood remains an issue people are hesitant to speak about and confront the traditional cultural practices that promote the sufferings of widows. This hesitancy is also present in conservative Christian Churches. First and foremost, many ministers are not trained on how to support women who have lost their husbands nor are they trained on how to confront cultural practices that discriminate against widows. It is observed

that sometimes, ministers often do not even see what is wrong with such cultural practices. Thus leaving widows unsupported in their time of need. Church leaders as it was demonstrated in Acts 6:2-6, have tremendous potential for educating and empowering communities to treat women in general and widows specifically with respect and dignity. It is worthy of note that God's displeasure on those who take advantage of widows, in the Jewish tradition is still applicable today in our modern society. God emphatically admonished us in the scripture thus, do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused and I will kill you with the sword, your wives will become widows and your children fatherless (Exod 22:22-24).

### **Conclusion**

The authors of this article have argued in this paper that the plight of widows in the early Christian Church is akin to the kind of widowhood practices that is seen in the Nigerian society today. The paper highlights that widows in Nigeria constitute a sizeable marginalized population in the society due to cultural factors on the estate of widowhood. While their numbers are exceedingly multiplying, their social economic condition deteriorates with painful experiences of war, neglect and poverty. The awareness of widows in our society ought to be in the front burner of the nation's economic policy and the Church too has a part to play in alleviating their plight. A proper understanding of compassionate ministry would require us not merely to meet the immediate needs of widows for food and clothing, but also their need for human relationships, companionship and even their desire to continue to contribute to the Church community in which ever way they can. Therefore, the need for ministry to widows and orphans should be the passion of every citizen in the Nigerian society irrespective of faith affiliation. There is no doubt that the needs of widows will continue to be on the increase as the world becomes increasingly impersonal with cultural inhibitions that are injurious to women's health and wellness.

### **Recommendations**

**Having carried out this research work, the authors make the following recommendations,**

There is the need for the church and other well-meaning religious organizations in Nigeria to champion the cause of protecting widows and orphans in our society.

There is need for education and sustained economic empowerment program for women geared towards helping widows to recover from the loss of their spouse. Widows who are able to work for sustenance should be encouraged to take on jobs that would provide them livelihood

More so, it is expected of the Church to enlighten the populace on the estate of widowhood and the special care they deserve in living normal lives even after the demise of their spouses. In doing this, the Church should de-emphasize the power of customs and tradition that dehumanizes widows.

Furthermore, girl-child education should be encouraged in places where they are being discountenanced in Nigeria. This will go a long way to equip women with their rights and privileges as to reject any traditional customs and practices that dehumanizes them,

Finally, the Church should encourage husbands and wives to make adequate provisions for their families by leaving behind a 'Living will' that could cater for the welfare of the surviving spouse and their children at the end of life. The lack of any written wills pertaining to property inheritance, places the surviving spouse and children at a disadvantage thus complicate the plight of widows.

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