Chapter 9

The Bible, gender equality and teaching theology in Malawi

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Introduction

For most Christians, the Bible is the central to their faith. Understood to be the inspired and living Word of God, often referred to as “Holy”, “Sacred” or “Divine”, the Bible is seen as both authoritative and unique in nature. As such, Christians over the centuries have turned to the Bible for guidance on diverse issues, many of which have sparked heated debates. Some of these issues and questions have remained unresolved and, in many parts of the world, one of these is the contentious issue of gender equality in church and society. What makes the issue even more complex is that proponents of different views all appeal to the Bible. Even among scholars, proposing different hermeneutical analyses of biblical passages that deal with gender, arguments can be found for or against gender equality.

Gender equality: Towards a redefinition of terms

Before reflecting in more detail on the relationship between gender, theological education and the Bible, it may be helpful to come to some conceptual clarity regarding the first of these terms.

Gender refers to the division of people into male and female with their accompanying socially constructed roles, rules of behaviour, activities and attributes. As a child grows, she/he learns these gender roles and how men or women in their societies are expected to behave. In this sense gender is not physiologically determined but socially constructed. It is extremely important since it also determines one’s rights, responsibilities and identity. Gender studies have often been understood as a discipline that focuses solely on the promotion of women. This, however, is a misconception. Even though the discipline usually concentrates on women as they mostly constitute the disadvantaged sex, its focus is rather on the promotion of gender equality. According to Pelle Billing, gender equality rests on the following five pillars, namely the recognition that:

- men and women have the same intrinsic value;
- men and women are equally valuable to society;
- men and women should have equal rights and responsibilities;
- the absence of discrimination on grounds of gender and

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the realisation that equality need not translate into sameness.4

In light the above one may ask whether and how these convictions are reflected in Malawian institutions of theological education.

Theological education in Malawi and Gender Studies: The current situation

Higher theological education in Malawi developed gradually and includes the founding of universities, colleges and the implementation of a theological education by extension programme. Since 1991, the University of Malawi, for example, offers a degree programme in theology. Until as recent as 2007, most participants in this programme came from the ranks of the clergy – most of whom were in the possession of a Diploma in Theology. The latter programme was approved in the country in 1975 as a result of negotiations between representatives from the University of Malawi, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church forming a Board for Theological Studies.5

The latter is a central body within theological education in Malawi. The Board consists of nine member colleges as well as the University of Malawi.6 However, there are also a good number of theological institutions in the country that are not members of the Board for Theological Studies.7

Returning to the issue under discussion in this essay one may ask whether these institutions are contributing to gender equality in the church and in society or whether they are, at least, geared towards making a contribution? One way of answering this question is to look at the curricula of these institutions. In the Diploma and Bachelor of Divinity programmes of the Board for Theological Studies and Bachelor of Theology programme offered by Theology and Religious Studies Department at Chancellor College, as recorded in Church, University and Theological Education in Malawi8 no gender studies course exists nor is there any mention made of gender in course descriptions. The syllabi cover only traditional theological courses (Old and New Testament, Church History, Theology, Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek, Christian Ethics, African Traditional Religions, Islam, Pastoral Counselling, Basic Pastoral Psychology, Missiology and Philosophy of Religion).9 At the level of the Bachelor of Divinity and Bachelor of Theology there are at least some themes that should touch on women studies/gender, such as Feminist African Theology, feminist readings of the Bible, the role of women in African Traditional Religions and the development of Christian women’s movement in Central and Southern Africa. However, if this indeed happens and students are at least exposed to gender issues in the different courses, it does not mean that these issues are studied in any great depth as would happen in a course dedicated to gender studies.

6 These are the Colleges: Baptist Theological Seminary, College of Christian Ministries, Evangelical Bible College, Josaphat Mwale Theological Institute, Leonard Kamungu Theological College, St. Peter’s Major Seminary, TEEM: Theological Education by Extension in Malawi, Zambezi College of Ministries and Zomba Theological College.
8 Kenneth Ross. (ed.) 1995. Church, University and Theological Education in Malawi. 35-57.
9 In most cases the language used is not even gender sensitive – one of the themes in Fundamental Moral Theology, Christian Anthropology focuses on “consideration of man as an individual and as community” page 26. One theme in African Traditional Religions is “Man and Ethics”. Page 28.
The challenge of the recognition of an own space for gender studies at these institutions is aggravated by the fact that many of them are church-owned and seminaries obliged to follow their respective theological traditions. For this reason, some member institutions of the Board for Theological Studies have very few or even no female students or female lecturers – this state of affairs also reflects the absence of women in many leadership positions in many churches in Malawi and, indeed, in much of Africa. This clearly begs the question of how this situation can be rectified. One suggestion is by allowing a separate space for the teaching of gender studies, especially gender equality, at these institutions. The latter not only serve as incubators of future generations of church leaders, but also for new theologies that need to be developed according to particular contexts and needs. Such teaching will not only have bearing on the way gender relations play out in churches, but also in broader society. Being theological institutions, this of course implies teaching gender equality with reference to the Bible. As was mentioned in the introduction above this creates a challenge in itself. As such, this essay also addresses the question of the challenges, promise and pitfalls of using the Bible in teaching gender in the Malawian context.

The Bible and the teaching of gender equality

Why is the participation of women in the leadership of churches – even in those traditions that accept the ordination of women – so limited even though in most countries and churches women constitute the greater part of the population and church membership? Some scholars refer to this “stained glass ceiling effect” that excludes women from top positions. One reason may lie in the way biblical texts on gender have been used or misused.

The Bible is a product of many authors, writing on various issues in diverse social-cultural settings centuries ago. This presents a challenge to any modern reader when interpreting its message. It is also true with regard to the interpretation of biblical passages on gender. Elisabeth Fiorenza rightly refers to a tension in the search for meaning in our contemporary context and the historical context of the biblical texts. Scholars have developed methods and techniques for interpreting the Bible in an attempt to overcome challenges such as these. The Holy Spirit also guides the reader to discern the meaning. Therefore, biblical interpretation is also influenced by personal experience. That being said, what follows is,


11 The findings in this paper does not only draw on, amongst others, my experience as a lecturer and a member of the Board for Theological Studies in Malawi for the past five years, but also on focus group discussions with a colleagues and students within recognised theological institutions in Zomba, Malawi. Four theological institutions are found in Zomba, namely the Leonard Kamungu Theological College, Zomba Theological College, St. Peters Major Seminary and Theology and Religious Studies Department within Chancellor College, University of Malawi.


firstly, a brief overview of gender in the Bible, and secondly, specific considerations and challenges in using the Bible in teaching gender.

**Gender equality in the Bible: A brief overview**

The Old Testament teaches that both men and women are created equally in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1-2) and, according to the Apostle Paul, all believers, men and women, are to conform to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:10-11; Gal. 4:19). Although the biblical story of salvation is mostly told from a male point of view and with reference to a male God, most theologians agree that God is neither male nor female. To speak of God as Father does not mean that God is a male person. The Bible only uses human language to say that the role of a father in ancient Israel gives us some insight into the nature of God. As an ontological category, gender is an attribute of the created order and is thus not attributable to God’s nature. Likewise, gender is only attributable to Christ’s human nature and not to his divine nature.

Spiritually speaking, authority is not grounded in maleness. Both men and women were given authority to rule over the earth. There is no biologically-based inequality in creational authority, personal agency or responsibilities. Despite the fact that gender traditionalists argue, for example, that the ministry of the prophet included some functions that excluded women, both men and women were recognised as prophets in ancient Israel – Huldah and Deborah (2 Kgs. 22:14-19; Chron. 34:23-27) being prime examples. There are also passages in the New Testament telling of women who were called and blessed in ministries that entailed teaching and leading assemblies of both men and women. In Romans (16:7), Paul refers to a male apostle Andronicus and a female apostle Junia as outstanding among the apostles. In Acts 21:9 four young women are referred to as prophetesses. Susan Rakoczy shows in her book that in the Bible women were not only apostles and prophets, but also preachers, deacons, evangelists and that they even presided over the Eucharist. Surely, if God had decreed that these positions are unsuitable for women because of their being women, these examples would not exist. This also goes to show that one must be extremely careful in interpreting at face value and without qualification and contextualisation passages to the contrary (e.g. 1 Tim. 2:12). To do so may amount to ignoring or contradicting other biblical passages.

Furthermore, there are instructions in the New Testament for all believers to relate to one another with humility, respect, to submit to each other as the other’s servants and not to be concerned with positions of status and authority. These passages urge believers to treat one another as they would like to be treated themselves (cf. Lk. 22:25-27; Matt. 7:12; 20:25-28; 23:8-12; Rom. 12:3,10; Phil. 2:2-5). In the new covenant, we are told, there is no longer any

15 Neither a hermeneutical analysis of specific biblical texts, nor an account of the history of the debates on gender equality in the church is offered here. Where a text is cited, it is done to illustrate what factors may affect one’s interpretation of gender in the Bible.


17 Rebecca Merrill, Groothuis. “The Bible and Gender Equality.” 1-2

18 Junia is a woman’s name though some editors have interpreted it as a man’s name, footnote in the Donald and John Collins. (ed.). 2006. Catholic Study Bible, second Edition. Oxford: Oxford University. 1515.


20 Such as 1Tim. 2:12 “I do not permit women to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent.” (See Chapter 10 deals with the interpretation of 1 Tim 2:12).
distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave and free person, a man and a woman (Gal. 3:26-28). Thus, every believer is an adopted child of God, an heir of God and co-heir with Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:15-17). Husbands and wives are equal heirs of all God’s gifts of life (1 Pet. 3:7). As equal heirs, men and women have equal rights and responsibilities, the same access to and right to represent the Father and both should obey his commands. All believers are filled with the Holy Spirit and blessed with its gifts without discrimination on grounds of age, race, social status or gender (Acts 2:17-18). Any believer who has received a gift is to use it for the sake of others, with responsibility and without restriction. With Christ as our High Priest (1 Tim. 2:5), we are also all called to be priests of God (1 Pet. 2:5, 9) and we all are representatives of God in the church and the world (2 Cor. 5:20). Every believer has been given the priestly ministry of representing Christ to the church and the world and is directly accountable to God. These examples from Scripture show that, in their dealings with human beings, God and Christ do not favour those of one gender above the other and, as a follower of Christ and child of God, one needs to do the same (Jas. 2:1-9; Acts. 10:34-35). All of this, however, does not mean that men and women are identical and undifferentiated, but that God designed men and women to complement and benefit each other. Unfortunately, all is not as uncomplicated as the following section will show.

Considerations when teaching gender with the use of the Bible

Insufficiency of biblical content on gender issues

Using the Bible to teach gender (equality) itself poses a challenge. As was shown above, the Bible has something to say about gender equality. This, however, is not enough. One may ask many questions regarding gender issues to which the Bible offers no straightforward answers. As has already been shown, there even exists some tension within Scripture regarding gender issues, passages, when taken at face value, may put women down rather than lift them up. Furthermore, there is no single section that reflects biblical teaching on gender in its entirety. Different texts need to be brought into conversation with each other. It is dangerous to ignore some patriarchal attitudes and practices simply because they seem to contradict one’s own views.

However, Jesus’ views about women are well known. He respected and cared for women, speaking freely with them in public at a time when men were not allowed to do so. Furthermore, his positive views on women are consistent throughout the New Testament and even include considering them worthy of being members of his inner circle. These texts should be considered alongside those reflecting seemingly unfair and discriminatory views of and against women. It may even be that the latter passages contain reports on the status quo that biblical authors did not necessarily approve of but reported nevertheless just like any other good news reporter would do. All of this does, however, not erase negative views of women in the Bible.

Negative presentations of women in the Bible

21 Cf Groothuis, 2011:1: Gifts and callings of the Holy Spirit are distributed without regard to gender and that believers in Christ stand on equal ground before God, and repudiates the notion that the Bible grants to men spiritual authority and other religious privileges that it denies to women.
22 Rebecca Merrill Groothuis. “The Bible and Gender equality.”
24 One only has to think of the stories of Martha and Mary (Lk. 10:38-42, Jn. 11: 20-33), of the woman who anointed Jesus (Matt. 26:6-13, Jn. 12: 1-8) and of the Samaritan woman in John 4:7-12.
A major problem to be considered when using the Bible to teach gender equality is that – besides the fact that there are not very many direct biblical texts one may use to this end – one finds ample texts that refer to women in very negative ways. The Genesis story has often been used as evidence for women’s propensity to sin and inferiority to men. Women are sometimes portrayed sexual predators (1 Kgs. 11; Jgs. 16; Gen. 19:30-36; 39:7-20), as deceitful and untrustworthy. These portrayals have damaging implications not just for women but for the whole church and, as David Halperin argues, such negative images have for centuries been instrumental in the subjection and humiliation of women. A woman reader is forced thereby to identify herself in negative terms and to accept her inferior status.

Feminist scholars offer two ways of dealing with such negative interpretations of Scripture. First, they reinterpret some of these well-known texts in positive ways. Second, they often highlight “forgotten” texts that present women in a completely different light. Within the rich variety of the biblical texts there are many examples of good and true men, but also of women who may serve as worthy role models of a life of faith: Sarah, mother of nations; Deborah, a judge; Jael, a hero for killing Sisera; Hannah, mother of Samuel; Huldah, the Hebrew prophetess; Rahab, the saviour of Joshua’s spies; Esther, the queen who risked her life for her people; Mary, the mother of Jesus and among the first women to establish Christ’s church; Lydia, a business person and Europe’s first convert; Priscilla, a leader in the New Testament Church; and Mary Magdalene and other women who first witnessed and preached about the resurrection of Jesus.

The challenge of Bible translation

The Bible is probably the most translated book in the world. This is a positive development that enabled the spread of Christianity and believers to understand and enjoy the Good News in their own language. However, due to the nature of translations it may enrich or impoverish understanding. Words, themes and ideas sometimes have different connotations in translation. The translation of Romans 16:1 serves as a case in point where Paul refers to Phoebe as a minister (diakonos) of the church at Cenchrea. Some translations calls Phoebe a deaconess; others downplay her position translating diakonos as “servant” or “helper”. The Bible also contains a variety of text patterns that results in challenges for translators, some of whom may even lack sufficient knowledge of the original language in which the Bible was written. Coupled with this is the fact that the New Testament, for example, was influenced to a great extent by Hellenistic culture and many seemingly unproblematic terms are thus

27 For example instead of looking at Eve as the mother of sin and death, she is the mother of humankind.
30 For a good example look at Table 14 on different translations of 1 Cor 14: 33-34.
31 James, Amanze. 2010. “Reading and Understanding the Bible as an African”. In Biblical Studies, Theology, Religion and Philosophy. 126.
laden with foreign philosophical and/or religious meaning. Language is also dynamic and changes, often making translations outdated and in need of revision. Besides these factors, we do not even have one original manuscript of the Bible, but several copies that are not even identical.

**Linguistic difficulties**

Connected to the above observation and the fact that the primary medium of human communication is language is that the meaning of language is often implicit and language as such only provides the starting point for interpretation. Morgan and Barton underscore the fact that biblical texts are both human communications to humans and divine communications to humans. This creates a wide scope of disagreement concerning the meaning of biblical texts and their message. The language one uses when speaking of gender equality may be highly ambiguous. Some words the Bible used in association with gender – for example, submission, dominion and helper – are problematic since they may imply more than what the original authors have intended. Does the word “helper”, for example, when used to refer to God helping Israel to defeat its enemies have the same meaning as “helper” when used in Genesis in reference to woman being the “helper” of – and thus weaker than – than man?

**Cultural differences**

As all people, theological students are born and raised in particular cultures that, amongst others, also have their own views on gender and gender equality. Mercy Oduyoye points out that the position of women in Africa is generally prescribed by male authorities based on what they think is beneficial to the welfare of the community. As a result the role of women is often limited and hemmed in a set of norms enshrined in culture. Students, therefore, come to class with a set of notions about gender equality shaped by culture. The impact of culture on understanding and interpreting biblical passages on gender equality in Malawi constitutes a major challenge. Especially in patrilineal cultures, such as those found in Malawi, negative cultural attitudes often exist towards gender equality at home, but also wider in the church and in society. Although the church has rejected some cultural practices that undermines gender equality, it has also imposed its own measures of gender oppression that still makes it difficult to achieve gender equality within its ranks.

The Bible too originated in a different culture, in a patriarchal world. Therefore, the picture of women painted in the Bible more often than not reflects patriarchal thinking. Dorcas Akintunde in her study of the biblical concept of women with reference to its Judaic, Hellenistic and Greco-Roman context, affirms that the environment in which the Bible was

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36 For example the traditional practices that dehumanises the widow like being in isolation for a period are discouragement by the church. Also look at Chapter 5.
written could not but influence its views on subordination of women. Reading the Bible within an equally patriarchal context may easily lead to simplistic application of the text to the African/Malawian context to the detriment of women. This should be guarded against.

The position of the churches

The way we read, interpret and understand the Bible is, of course, also influenced by our respective denominations and church traditions, also with regard to gender issues and the differences among these views. This should also be kept in mind when teaching gender equality in Africa and Malawi in particular. Among the merits of learning institutions comprising of students and lecturers from a variety of denominations and traditions is that it may broaden the students’ understanding of gender issues. The aim should be to produce graduates who move beyond both dogmatism and cynicism. As teachers, we are not only academics but also representatives of our denominations. As such we should be sensitive for the strengths and weaknesses of our denominational positions, also with regard to the issue of gender.

Ideological orientation

As human beings we all have certain ways of thinking. These affect the way we behave and relate with our environment. The conclusions that we draw on biblical gender equality is partly influenced by our ideological orientation. Though students go through intellectual, moral and faith development processes during their studies at theological institutions, it remains a challenge because they already have existing bodies of ideas and a set of beliefs, besides their faith convictions, that informs their orientation.

With regard to ideological orientation, there are, of course, views on gender equality that can be found within Christianity that may support either positions on the far right or the far left on the ideological continuum. The role of academic institutions is to critically evaluate the views from one end to the other of the ideological continuum, but to also take into account all available research done on gender from different disciplines. There is need for scholarship on Scripture to also be informed by gender scholarship in other disciplines, even if the latter seem to contradict its views. One should however also resist the exploitation of some sources and to disregard others purely to reinforce only one’s own dogmatic views. Consultation of other sources in our approach to teaching gender is also a way of empowering our students to deal with gender issues in their respective churches and work places. Such an approach will unquestioningly enhance the quality of education in our institutions.

Conclusion: Meaning of theological education

Finally, when teaching gender at a theological institution, one needs to consider what is really meant by theological education. This will guide our approach to gender issues not only in the Bible, but also in our institutions and the churches they serve. Theological education is part of the church’s mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God on earth. It is a particular kind of education connected with critical, creative, systematic reflection on our faith and its sources from the perspective of our diversity of gifts and ministries.

For quality theological education, our institutions should offer curricula open and sensitive to the needs of all believers, men and women. Curricula should also offer the opportunity for dialogue with socio-political and socio-cultural contexts. The challenge that theological education faces, especially at University level, is to demonstrate greater responsibility toward society by relating the content of theology to the practices, attitudes and paradigms that are part of that society. One aspect of this responsibility is towards addressing the lack of or promoting the existence of gender equality towards an abundant life for all. It is part of the mission of God and the task of God’s people and their institutions to develop and participate in liberating social practices that leads us to paths of greater equality, peace, love and justice. In this regard it is helpful to refer to Matthias Preiswerk’s seven factors that theological institutions need for quality theological education: democratic political participation; transparency and flexibility; a style of relations based on mutual trust and transforming professional commitment; empowerment of various actors; distribution of information; sustainability and solidarity efficiency. These factors call for positive gender relations in theological institutions and eventually the fruit of this will flow from our churches to society. In this way quality theological institutions and quality theological education may help in the formation of solid human resources for the church and society.

Bibliography


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40 Therefore, I also share Preiswerk’s conviction that quality management of the institutional life of any place of theological education should be measured by its levels of learning, security, welfare, mutual trust, gender equity and diversity (Matthias Preiswerk and others. 2008. Manifesto of Quality Theological Education in Latin America, 51).

41 Matthias Preiswerk and others. 2008. Manifesto of Quality Theological Education in Latin America, 51


