

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE NKHOMA SYNOD (MALAWI)¹

Part I

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Abstract

Since its establishment in 1889, Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian (CCAP) has actively been involved in various religio-social transformation activities in Malawi. In these activities women in Nkhoma Synod have either participated fully and/or minimally, or not at all in some social transformation activities. Women are allowed to be involved in activities such as education and health services but they are forbidden to preach before men and to be elected as members of decision making structures or leadership roles of the Church. This article describes various forms of active and non-active women participation in social transformation in Nkhoma Synod. It also critically analyses and evaluates the factors which have influenced the phenomenon. Analysis of the Biblical attitude towards women has been the basis for the interpretation of the texts which have been used to bar women from participating in some social transformation activities.

1. Introduction

Women in Nkhoma Synod have participated significantly in areas such as evangelism, social services and in some leadership roles. However, most of the participation has been minimal in the sense that the focus has mainly been on serving mainly the women folk. It is in very few cases that women have ventured to participate fully together with men. For example, women are not allowed to preach to men. Evangelism is mainly done among women themselves. Furthermore, women are not allowed to take leadership roles together with men. There are no deaconesses, women church elders, and no woman has been ordained as a minister.

Both the active and minimal women participation in social transformation have been influenced by some cultural beliefs, political factors, formal education, exposure and Biblical interpretation. In this article I intend to describe how women have actively and inactively participated in the social transformation processes in Nkhoma Synod. I will also highlight some of the factors that have influenced the active and inactive women participation in the social transformation in Nkhoma Synod. Since we are dealing with the issue of the influence of different contexts of social transformation on Biblical interpretation much of the discussion is on the interpretation of the Biblical texts on

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women participation in social transformation from the Nkhoma Synod context. The paper ends with some recommendations on the steps the church may take in dealing with the problem.

2. Brief historical background of Nkhoma Synod

Nkhoma Synod is one of the five Synods that form the General Synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian (CCAP). The other Synods are Livingstonia Synod which was established by the Free Church of Scotland missionaries in 1875 (Johnson 1925) and Blantyre Synod established by the Church of Scotland missionaries in 1876 (Pachai 1972). Nkhoma Synod was established in 1889 by the Dutch Reformed Church missionaries from South Africa (Pauw 1980). In 1924 Livingstonia Synod and Blantyre Synod joined and formed one church which they called Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). Nkhoma Synod joined the CCAP in 1926 (Pauw 1980). Nkhoma Synod extended its work to Zimbabwe where Harare Synod was established. This synod joined the CCAP as the fourth member. Livingstonia also extended its work to Zambia where Lundazi Synod was established that later joined the CCAP as the fifth Synod of the General Synod of CCAP.

Nkhoma Synod has participated fully in the social transformation of the Malawian society through various activities such as evangelism, education, health services and leadership roles. The Synod has over 700 primary and secondary schools and several clinics. Some of the leading personalities in the country went through some of the Nkhoma Synod schools. In these social transformation processes women have played major roles through the Chilangizi (instruction courses for girls) to the youth and families and through the Chigwirizano (women's guild) organisation. Chilangizi was established in 1930 (Phiri 1992: 109-110). Chigwirizano was established in 1940 (Phiri 1992: 143).

3. A survey of women participation in social transformation in Nkhoma Synod

In this section we discuss how the women in Nkhoma Synod have either participated fully, or have not participated at all, in the social transformation of the Malawian society. When we talk of social transformation we refer to those activities which have enabled the Malawian society to change in social and economic life of the people for the better.

a. Active participation

Women in Nkhoma Synod have actively participated in some activities of the social transformation in Malawi through various religious activities. Among these activities are evangelism, pastoral care and counseling.

Evangelism

Nkhoma Synod has a membership of over half a million people. These members are in more than 100 congregations which form thirteen presbyteries. To obtain these members Nkhoma Synod has embarked upon a vigorous evangelistic campaign through powerful Sunday and Wednesday services and regular revival meetings in all the congregations. These campaigns have resulted in many people leaving their evil practices by becoming good people. In other words, these evangelistic campaigns have transformed many people who have become active Christians at home, in their communities and at their places of work or business.

On their part women have played a very important role in these evangelist campaigns. Although women are not allowed to preach as we shall see below, women have played the role of consolidation of Christian faith among the Christians. Women do this through the Chigwirizano organisation. The Chigwirizano women meet twice a month to do Bible Study. In these meetings women preach to their fellow women. However, although the Synod does not allow women to preach before men, the Chigwirizano women do door to door visits where they do personal evangelism. Some of the people they meet are men and some of them become converted. They also visit the backsliders who may be either women and/or men. Some of the members of the Chigwirizano are Sunday school and catechumen teachers (Phiri 1992:176-177; Mthenga 1937:25).

Furthermore, the Chigwirizano women organise annual conferences in each presbytery where thousands of women meet to hear the word of God. Although the main speakers at such a gathering are male ministers, some women take some services and share their Christian experiences. In addition, women organise an annual women's day of prayer (Phiri 1992:146). At such meetings and conferences the women are strengthened spiritually and morally. As a result, the Church in Nkhoma Synod is growing and remains very strong because the women in their evangelistic outreach have helped many Christians to keep their faith. In other words, women have assisted to maintain the religio-social transformation of the people in Nkhoma Synod. This is because many women have helped their husbands to accept Christ as their Lord. These Christian women have also been instrumental and influential in teaching their own children the Word of God since most of their time the children are with their mothers.

Pastoral care and counseling

Christians experience various physical, spiritual and psychological problems. Although the church elders and deacons have the responsibility to handle these problems, women also play a significant role in maintaining the faith of the Christians who face these problems. In Nkhoma Synod, the Women's Guild are actively involved in providing pastoral care to these people. In their Chigwirizano programmes women raise funds, food and other materials which they give to the poor or the needy in the communities (Phiri 1992:143, 169-170). Furthermore, the Women's Guild visit and counsel the sick and the family of deceased. Those who have family problems are counselled by the members of Chigwirizano and Alangizi (instructresses). This implies that women assist in the social transformation in Nkhoma Synod by consolidating and maintaining marriages in the Malawian society.

Education

Nkhoma Synod has played a significant role in educational development. Education is the main transformation agent in Malawi. Nkhoma Synod has over 700 primary and secondary schools (Kawale 1999:3). Millions of Malawians have attained education in these schools. Many of them have found jobs, some run businesses and are well known politicians. Nkhoma Synod is proud that the first president of Malawi had his formative education in Nkhoma Synod schools (Kawale 1990:7). In the current government some of the ministers and the vice-president had their education in Nkhoma Synod schools.

Women have actively participated in this transformation agent. Many women are teachers in these schools. Some of them are head teachers. At one time a lady member of Nkhoma Synod became Minister of Education. Furthermore, some of the members of the Chigwirizano conduct home economics and adult literacy courses in their communities

(Phiri 1992:146; Mthenga 1939:19). The fact that these women have played important roles in the consolidation of family ties cannot be emphasised enough. In order to enhance leadership skills among women, Nkhoma Synod established three girls secondary schools and one women training school (Kawale 1999:3; 1998b:2; 1990:5).

Health

Apart from participating in the transformation of the intellectual and spiritual life of the people, Nkhoma Synod has also been involved in physical transformation. In this regard, Nkhoma Synod established hospitals and clinics (Kawale 1990:4; Pauw 1980:184-190). Many people receive curative and preventive treatment from these hospitals. Both men and women are involved in these services. Some women are nurses, midwives and matrons. Others are teachers at the school of nursing. There are also some women members of Nkhoma Synod who serve in these capacities at governmental and non- governmental hospitals and clinics. This means that women play an important role in Nkhoma Synod in transforming peoples' physical lives.

Leadership

Leadership is another agent of social transformation. Good leadership is instrumental in planning and executing social transformation. Good leadership has vision and is not afraid of trying new avenues of social transformation. Nkhoma Synod has played a significant role in providing leadership in both the church and secular world. Nkhoma Synod is run by indignant leadership. As noted above many of the political leaders are members of Nkhoma Synod or were educated in Nkhoma Synod schools. There are many members of Nkhoma Synod who have excelled in business and other secular roles.

As shall be noted below, women in Nkhoma Synod are at the moment (2001) not allowed to take leadership roles in the Synod's decision making structures such as being deacons and church elders. However, women have taken some leadership roles especially in education and among themselves. We noted above that some women are teachers and head teachers in the schools. Some hold important leadership roles in government, government institutions, NGOs and other secular organisations.

In the Church, women take leadership roles among themselves. We noted above that some women are instructresses. The main women leadership role is played in the Chigwirizano organisation. The Chigwirizano (which means "unity in service") organisational structure has provided important leadership roles at its local, congregational, presbytery and Synod levels. At each level there is a chair-lady, secretary, treasurer and committee members. Leadership courses are conducted soon after the elections.

The Chigwirizano leaders lead the bi-monthly Bible study meetings at each local branch. The leadership at presbytery level organise annual Women's Guild conferences. Women from all the congregations within the presbytery attend the conferences. Thousands of women attend these conferences and it requires efficient leadership skills to plan these meetings. These conferences have always been very successful. Within Chigwirizano, women choose deaconesses who assist the local leaders to collect and distribute alms to the poor.

b. Influencing factors

There are many factors that may have influenced women in Nkhoma Synod to participate in the social transformation as outlined above. Here we shall mention a few of them.

Adaptation of cultural practices

Nkhoma Synod has adapted some cultural practices which have enabled women to participate in the social transformation. These cultural practices are the formation of Chilangizi and Chigwirizano.

- Chilangizi (girls and boys initiation rite)

Among the Chewa, there is the practice of girls initiation ceremony known as *Chinamwali*. In this rite the girls who have reached puberty are given sex education by the elderly women called *Alangizi* (instructresses). The sex education is also carried on when the girls are engaged, on the day of marriage and when the wife is pregnant (Phiri 1992:73, 107-114). Similar instructions are given to the boys.

When the DRC missionaries evangelised the Chewa people, they regarded the Chewa culture as fully erroneous and barbaric and they were determined to replace it with the Christian culture (Chingota 1995:8-9; Kaspin 1993:37; Kawale 1981:20; Schoffeleers 1975:25; Schoffeleers and Linden 1972:260). In this regard, several restrictions, banning the Chewa cultural practices were made (Zolamulira 1970:131-133). However, in the course of time some missionaries realised that the Chewa Christian women practised *chinamwali* secretly. After studying the practices some missionaries noted that *chinamwali* as a theory of giving instructions to the girls was bad. They decided to adapt it and modified *chinamwali* by replacing the Chewa instructions with Christian instructions. The practice was no longer to be called *chinamwali* (initiation rite) but would now be called *chilangizi* (instruction class). The leaders of this practice were no longer to be called *anamkungwi* (advisors) but would now be called *alangizi* (instructresses). They would no longer be appointed by the traditional leaders but would be appointed by the church elders (Nkhoma Presbytery minutes 1929:4-6; 1931:4; 1936: 5; 1942:7; 1943:16-18).

- Chigwirizano (unity in service)

In the Chewa culture, women play an important role in choosing chiefs, at the installation of the chiefs and at the funeral ceremonies of the chiefs and other important persons in the communities. Since the missionaries banned all the Chewa cultural practices as noted above, the formation of Chigwirizano was an adaptation of the role of women in the Chewa culture. The Chewa Christian women play similar roles in the Church. Women are not allowed to be members of the Kirk session which calls ministers in a congregation. However, women play an important role in this process. The women are responsible for the preparation of food for the occasion of ordaining and/or inducting the minister. They organise themselves and collect funds with which they buy various gifts to the new minister and his wife. When a minister is being ordained the wife of the minister puts the gown on the minister (her husband). This practice may not be too far from the Chewa tradition where, as a matrilineal society, it is the women who appoint the traditional chief. At the funeral of a minister and church elder the Chigwirizano women wear their white and black uniform surrounding the coffin and lay wreath at the grave.

Therefore, the adaptation of Chewa traditional practices in the form of Chilangizi and Chigwirizano has been an important factor which has influenced the women in Nkhoma Synod to participate in the social transformation as outlined above.

External forces

Women participation in social transformation in Nkhoma Synod has been influenced by some external forces. Among these forces are politics and ecumenism.

- **Politics**

The politicians in Malawi have used women members in their campaign rallies. The women dance for them as they sing songs of praise. Some of the women hold senior positions in the parties. Some party leaders have formed women organisations in which women run businesses or lead very important NGOs. Some of these women are members of Nkhoma Synod or members of Chigwirizano. It is likely that these women learn quite a lot as they interact with other women in these organisations or as they lead the organisations. This interaction and participation in politics directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously influence the women to participate in social transformation in Nkhoma Synod.

- **Ecumenism**

Some of the women in Nkhoma Synod attend or are involved in ecumenical conferences and movements. Some women attend conferences organised by the Malawian Council of Churches which comprises of all the Protestant churches in Malawi. The Christian Service Committee (CSC) also organises meetings for women. The CSC was formed by the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches in Malawi. At such meetings women from Nkhoma Synod interact and learn what other women do in their churches. For example, in Livingstonia and Blantyre Synods women are ordained as elders and deacons. Recently, Livingstonia Synod has ordained a woman minister. Some women from Nkhoma Synod attended the Pan African Christian Women's Alliance conferences which were held in Nairobi in 1989 and at Zomba, Malawi in 1991 (Phiri 1992:250-259). At these meetings the Nkhoma Synod women met with women church ministers from other churches in Africa and abroad.

Biblical interpretation

Biblical interpretation has played a significant role in influencing women in Nkhoma Synod to participate in social transformation activities. Women have used Exodus 35:25-26 as the Biblical basis for the establishment of Chigwirizano. The text says that when the Israelite men were making the Tent for the Lord in the desert the women got together and used their skills to serve the Lord (Phiri 1992:142). Phiri has referred to Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Peter 4:10 as texts which women may use as they use their different gifts to serve one another (Phiri 1992:143).

When Chigwirizano was established the women were very excited. Some of the women justified the establishment of Chigwirizano by referring to some biblical texts. In justifying their evangelistic work one woman referred to John 4:39-42 where the Samaritan woman told the people of her village about Jesus (Phiri 1992:145,178; Mthenga 1937:20). Another woman gained self-confidence when she read Acts 2:17 which says that in the last days God shall pour His Holy Spirit on sons and daughters, then she exclaimed: "Who are the daughters? Are we not the ones?" (Phiri 1992:148).

c. No participation

There are two important areas in which Nkhoma Synod does not yet allow women to participate fully. In Nkhoma Synod women are not allowed to preach before men. The evangelism discussed above is done among women only. Furthermore, women are not allowed to be elected to any position in the Church decision making structures. Women are not allowed to be elected as deacons and as Church elders. The leadership roles which have been described above are executed among themselves only.

No woman preacher

We noted above that women in Nkhoma Synod participate in social transformation through evangelism. However, this evangelism is done among women themselves only. At the 1991 Synod meeting the question of women being given chance to preach in the church on Sunday and the mid-week Wednesday prayer meeting was debated. After a long debate Synod maintained its stand that women should not preach in the church or at any evangelistic rally (Phiri 1992:103; NS 1991:1035; NS 1991:1041; NS 1991:1042; Zolamulira 1970:208). Therefore, all the Sunday and mid-week Wednesday services are taken by men only.

It may also be noted that at the annual presbytery conferences and at the Synodical General meetings of the Chigwirizano, it is the male minister who leads the worship and the Bible study sessions. Although Miss Mary Chimkwita was the first woman to attend and complete her theological training she was never allowed to preach. Her duties was to do evangelism among women and girls in the schools (Phiri 1992:98-106). Therefore, in Nkhoma Synod preaching is the prerogative of men only. No woman can preach in Sunday or mid-week services. This is in spite of her having attained theological training or having the gift of preaching.

No woman church leader

In Nkhoma Synod women are not allowed to take leadership position in the decision making structures. In this regard there are no deaconesses and women church elders in Nkhoma Synod.

This is unlike Livingstonia Synod and in Blantyre Synod where there are deaconesses and women church elders. In Livingstonia Synod there were 270 women church elders and 316 deaconesses in 1951 already (Phiri 1992:96). On 17 December 2000 the Livingstonia Synod of the CCAP ordained the first woman minister in the country. Blantyre Synod ordained yet another lady minister on 7 January 2001, thus becoming the second woman Presbyterian minister in Malawi (Weekend Nation 13-14 January 2001:11). However, Nkhoma Synod is still debating the issue of whether or not women can take church leadership roles as elders and deaconesses.

No woman deacon

On the issue of women becoming deaconesses the Synod has given two responses. The first response is that women can become deaconesses (NS 1970:564), but no one was elected which may imply that no one took the issue seriously. The second response was that Synod disagrees that women should be elected as deaconesses, but since the matter continues to be debated theologians should investigate the matter (NS 1997:2060).

No woman elder

At the Synod meetings in 1966, 1970, 1984, 1985, 1987, and 1997 the issue of women becoming church elders was discussed. This debate was as a result of the questions which came from some ministers and congregations requesting if time is now ripe for women to take leadership positions in the church (Phiri 1992:96-106). The Synod has so far given three responses to the questions. First, the Synod responded to the question by saying that the issue should be investigated (NS 1966:238; 1967:409; 1967:414). Secondly, at another Synod meeting, after investigations were reported, Synod decided that women cannot be allowed to be elders (NS 1970:565). Thirdly, another Synod meeting discussed the issue and decided that it was a good thing for women to become church elders, but time was not yet ripe (NS 1985:1865,1867).

No woman minister

The ordination of women has been rejected outright. In 1966 Nkhoma Synod decided that the issue of the ordination of women as ministers be investigated (NS 1966:238). In 1967 it was decided that women may be admitted to theological training but only to work for women and not with the expectation to be ordained (NS 1987: 828). That is why Miss Mary Chinkwita was not ordained when she completed her theological studies as noted above (Phiri 1992:98- 99).

d. Influencing factors

The following factors have influenced the rejection of women to participate in the social transformation in Nkhoma Synod on the levels discussed in the previous section.

Influence of patriarchal ethnic groups

In Malawi some ethnic groups are matrilineal. These include the Chewa and the Yao (Chakanza 1995:3; K Phiri 1995:5; Lamburn 1991:32-34; Mwale 1981:2). The Ngoni is the main patrilineal ethnic group in Malawi (Vail and White 1989:153; Tew 1950:107). These emigrated from South Africa between 1835 and 1870 (D Phiri 1982:91; K Phiri 1984:167; Rau 1979:131,138). The Ngoni conquered the some Tumbuka chiefs in the north and some Chewa chiefs in the centre and the south of Malawi (D Phiri 1982:91; Pauw 1980:9-10; Rau 1979:131,138; Pachai 1973:22-40). However, some of the Tumbuka and Chewa chiefs were not conquered by the Ngoni. These chiefs still maintain their chiefdoms and matrilineal practices.

Nevertheless, although the Ngonis conquered some Chewa and Tumbuka chiefs, the Ngonis lost their language. They do not speak it. They have adopted the languages of the people they conquered. In the north they speak Chitumbuka. In the centre and south they speak Chichewa. This is because the Ngoni did not come with their wives or women. As they settled in Malawi they married the women of the conquered tribes. The children born in these marriages had to speak the mother's language. The end result was that the following generations never spoke Chingoni but spoke Chitumbuka or Chichewa which were the languages of the women in Malawi who were married to them (Mwale 1981:5; Linden 1975:35; 1974:2,130-131,191; Vail and White 1989:173). Therefore, the Tumbuka and the Chewa are likely to boast that they had defeated the Ngoni not by war, but with their women (Lwanda 1993:146).

This implies that although the Chewa and the Ngoni speak one language, there are two traditions influencing one another. The Ngoni still regard themselves as patrilineal. In the

patrilineal ethnic groups women are not allowed to take leadership positions. Chiefdom is inherited through the patrilineal system. The matrilineal Chewa still inherit the chiefdoms through their maternal uncles (WL Brown 1995:6; Mwale 1981:5; R Stuart 1980:51; Linden 1974:130-131). People from the two traditions have joined the Christian Church. Some of them are Church leaders. When it comes to issues in the church which touch their traditions, it is clear that they cannot agree.

Each one would like to retain their tradition. It is, therefore, likely that the members from the patrilineal Ngoni ethnic group may not allow women taking leadership roles in the Church. This is because it is against their culture. They may not explicitly say that allowing women to take leadership is against their culture but their culture may consciously or unconsciously influence their thinking. It is likely that this cultural learning may influence the decisions on women participation in social transformation in the church. This may be the reason why Nkhoma Synod which comprises the patrilineal Ngoni and the matrilineal Chewa cannot agree on whether women should take leadership roles in the Church.

However, there is still a very big question mark in Nkhoma Synod on why the church cannot allow women to take leadership roles. Although it has taken a long time, the Ngonis and Tumbukas of Livingstonia Synod in the north and in the Ngoni and Chewas (*also known as Amang'anja*) of Blantyre Synod in the south have accepted the ordination of women as deacons, church elders and even ministers. Why, then, are the Ngonis and the Chewas of Nkhoma Synod not allowing women to take leadership roles in the church? This question is dealt with below.

Rejection of Chewa traditional religion

In Chewa religion women played an important part. As a matrilineal society women could become chiefs. The women chiefs were mediums. As mediums the women were rainmakers (Kawale 1998a:36). As noted above, the early missionaries rejected and prohibited any form of Chewa traditional religious practices such as offering sacrifices to the ancestor spirits, Nyau secret dances, and many other practices. In these Chewa traditional religious practices women played a central role. They were the mediums (Phiri 1992:93). Rejecting these religious practices meant that the Chewa women who became Christians could not take part in the church leadership structures.

This attitude of the missionaries who banned the African religions was influenced by the pietism whereby the emphasis was on winning the souls of the people. Those to be won had to be relieved from their religious practices (Pauw 1980:53). Although this could have been the end result of the conversions, the problem was that the converts were forced to stop their religious practices. This was contrary to the ideals of the DRC mission policy. According to Pauw (1980:50), the DRC mission policy stipulates that the missionaries are not to oppose or hamper the natural aspiration of the people, but to lead them in the right direction, guiding and supporting them through counseling. Pauw (1980:50) asserts that mission or evangelisation does not mean denationalisation, nor does it rob the people their culture. Rather, the function of Christianity is that it permeates and purifies nationalism. Therefore, as Pauw (1980:50) says "traditional customs which do not specifically go against the Gospel should not be condemned but rather be retained and purified". However, rather than purifying the Chewa traditional practices, the missionaries condemned them.

Nevertheless, as noted above, two Chewa traditional practices, Chinamwali or Chilangizi and Chigwirizano were retained. Had this trend of evangelism continued many

Chewa traditional practices, including the notorious Nyau, a secret male dance, could have been purified. This purification could not have been imposed on the people, rather the people themselves could be evaluating their practices in line with the Biblical teachings. Note that we say *Biblical teachings* not *Christian teachings*, because sometimes Christianity is permeated with the cultures of the people who practice it. The purification could imply change of attitude and of some evil practices and not change of personnel. The retention of traditional customs which were not against the Gospel would also imply retention of the personnel who officiate those practices. These would include some women. Therefore, the issue of women participation would not have been an issue in Nkhoma Synod. This is because the majority of Nkhoma Synod membership and church leadership come from the matrilineal Chewa ethnic group.

Tradition established by the DRC missionaries

Among the DRC missionaries who established the Nkhoma Synod in 1889 none of the women missionaries were ministers, church elders or deaconesses. This is because there were no women ministers, elders and deaconesses in the home church at that time. In the DRC women were ordained as deaconesses in 1982 and as church elders in 1990 (Phiri 1992:93). A decision was made to ordain women in the DRC in 1990, but ten years later, in 2000, there were only 6 ordained lady ministers (REC 2000c:1-2). As a result the DRC missionaries who evangelised in Malawi established a tradition in which women could not become leaders in the church decision making structures. Although the DRC still sends missionaries to Malawi, it has not influenced Nkhoma Synod in any way. The same tradition of sending lay women missionaries continues. Only male missionaries are chosen as deacons or church elders in Nkhoma Synod. It could greatly influence the Malawian church if some women ministers could be sent as missionaries to Nkhoma Synod and if some of the women missionaries could be chosen as deaconesses in the Malawian church. As noted above, the DRC is still conservative on the issue of women participation in church leadership. If the move still receives some resistance within the church in South Africa, they cannot exert influence in the mission field.

Influence of reformed theology

The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, which evangelised and established what we now call Nkhoma Synod in Malawi, is a member of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) (REC 2000a:2; 2000b:1). The RES had its own theology which barred women from holding leadership positions in the Church. It is reported that in 1972 the RES met in Australia. In Item 12 of the meeting it is said that Synod removed from its membership all the member churches who allowed women to the ministry. It was stated that allowing women to ministry was “deviating from Reformed doctrines”. Nkhoma Synod quoted this minute when they discussed the issue of ordaining women (Phiri 1992:103; NS 1972:4066). This implies that the issue of barring women to participate in church leadership was shared by other members within the reformed traditions.

Biblical (mis)interpretation

The denial of women to participate in the church was based on the literal interpretation of Genesis 2 and some of the letters of Paul. Genesis 2:16 and 1 Corinthians 11:7-20; 14:34-35 were interpreted as saying that women were created from men, and for men’s advantage. In this regard subordination of women was thought to be divinely sanctioned

(Phiri 1992:94). 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14 were used as the basis for barring women from preaching.

This last discussion on the (mis)interpretation of the Biblical texts brings as to yet another important area of our research. The theme of our research is: *the influence of different contexts of social transformation on Biblical interpretation*. We need to investigate the biblical evidence on women participation in social transformation. The decision to exclude women from preaching and holding roles in the Church is said to be validated by 1 Corinthians 14:34-37 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14. Paul, the author of the epistles to the church in Corinth and to his friend Timothy was a Jew, a Pharisee. He had the Old Testament as his Scripture. We need to investigate the general Biblical attitude towards women. We need to know the religious background of Paul in so far as the issue of women participation in social transformation is concerned. We also need to know Paul's attitude towards women as described in his other letters. This treatment of the matter will enable us to a better understanding and interpretation of the texts which have been used to bar women from participating in the social transformation processes in Nkhoma Synod.

The investigation of the biblical evidence on the role of women will be done in a second article in this series ("Women, social transformation and the Bible in Nkhoma Synod"). In that article certain conclusions will be made, and certain recommendations will be formulated.

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