

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH OF CENTRAL AFRICA, PRESBYTERIAN¹

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Abstract

This article forms part of a joint research project that reflects on the use of the Bible in the legitimisation of certain social issues. One of the case studies of this project specifically focuses on women participation in the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian in Malawi (CCAP). The General Synod of the CCAP comprises the Synods of Livingstonia in the North, Nkhoma in the Centre and Blantyre in the South of Malawi respectively. There are other member Synods in Zambia and Zimbabwe too. The Malawian synods all come from a reformed background, although with different missionary origins. The different origins of these synods have been influential in their respective views on women participation in social transformation processes in the church. The approach in the first part of this paper is mainly descriptive of the extent of women participation within these synods respectively. We have tried to consider some of the factors that might have influenced decisions either favouring their full or partial involvement. In the course of our discussions we have cited some data found in Synod Executive minutes and other related sources on women's issues from Livingstonia, Nkhoma and Blantyre Synods indicative of some of the views they have held regarding this issue. In the second part of the article (section 6) the question is asked how biblical interpretation influences the process of women involvement in the Malawian church. It is shown how certain texts have been used in the argumentation, and how the understanding of these texts interacts with socio-cultural factors.

1. Introduction

Decisions by churches on social issues are often strongly influenced by their histories of origin. Biblical references are often used in their argumentation without being aware of the fact their interpretation of the Bible has also been influenced by their tradition of interpretation, as well as the broader processes of social transformation in society.

This article forms part of a research project that investigates the interaction between social transformation and Biblical interpretation. The results of one of the case studies, namely on women participation in the CCAP of Malawi, are presented here. The first part of the article focuses on the history of origin of the three CCAP synods. The objective in this article is to show how their diverse missionary and cultural backgrounds have influenced directly or indirectly the making of resolutions regarding the issue of women participation in the church.

The second part of the article (section 6) will focus more directly on the use of the Bible in ecclesial decision-making on the issue of women participation in this context.

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2. Beginnings of the Livingstonia Missionary Enterprise: 1875

The origin of the protestant church in the country now known as Malawi, dates back to 1874 when one of the co-founders of Lovedale Mission Station in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, Dr James Stewart, was in Scotland on furlough. It was while he stood in the company of well-wishers and mourners to witness the laying to rest of Dr David Livingstone's remains in Westminster Abbey in 1873 that Stewart felt strongly that launching a mission in Central Africa in memory of that great man was imperative. It was on 18 April 1874 that such an indelible impression had caught fire in Stewart's mind. He had been wrestling with the view that some day the Free Church of Scotland should extend its mission field to Central Africa in memory of Dr David Livingstone. After a long period of debates and discussions regarding the validity of such a venture, the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland before whom he had presented his plans in May 1874, finally accepted his proposals and appealed for sponsorship (Shepperd 1971:39; Thompson 1975:3).

By May 1875, a pioneer party under the able leadership of Edward D. Young, a veteran sailor who had been to the area of Lake Malawi (then called Nyasaland) left for Africa. Members of that party included Dr Robert Laws, a medical officer that was second in command to Young, John McFadyen and Allan Simpson who were engineers, George Johnston, a carpenter, and William Baker, a seaman. The group was also accompanied by Henry Henderson who had been sent by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to find a suitable site for establishing a mission station (Thompson 1975:3). However, Dr Stewart preceded the expedition to Africa in order that from Lovedale as the centre, he would make arrangements for a schooner to convey the members from Cape Town to the Zambezi. On their northbound journey the party had travelled via Lovedale where they were joined by Dr Stewart who had recruited four Africans for serving as teachers and evangelists. They were Shadrach Mngunana, William Koy, Isaac Wauchope and Mapassa Ntintili. After some difficult travelling up the Zambezi River and at times on land, the party managed to reach the upper Shire River in the country of their destination and on 12 October they sailed onto the Lake itself singing a psalm of praise to the Lord their God. They eventually came to drop anchor near Cape Maclear (Sheperd 1971:40). While Young and his party settled at the new site, Henderson and his group from the Church of Scotland set out in the direction of the Michiru Hills in search of a site for their new mission station that would eventually become the centre for Christian mission, education, the hub of commerce etc. The newly established mission station was named Blantyre after the birthplace of Dr David Livingstone. The weather of that surrounding area was ideal and reminiscent of Scotland. This mission site would develop under the Church of Scotland with a tradition almost in line with the high kirk, but reformed in the tradition of John Knox.

3. Early mission life and its challenges: 1875-1880

The Livingstonia party originally under Edward Young sought a mission site to establish a church following the Free Church of Scotland polity. The central objective in the missionary enterprise was to evangelise the indigenous people. They also wanted to establish healthy trade and commerce instead of the slave trade which was the speciality of the Muslim Arabs. Their strategy was to introduce schools to combat illiteracy in order to enable the Africans to read the Bible on their own. In this enterprise both young girls and boys were recruited, but the boys naturally were in the majority since the girls were normally busy helping their women folk with domestic chores.

The missionaries chose Cape Maclear on the southern tip of Lake Malawi as their first site. The place later proved to be a deathtrap for the newcomers because it was unhealthy and had no fresh water, apart from the climate being inhospitable. A new site had to be sought if the

objectives of the mission were to be realized. Bandawe to the northern part of the lake among the Atonga tribesmen was identified as the second best site to move to, but it was not until 1881 and after three more deaths that the move was finally confirmed (Thompson 1975:4).

The Mission's first attempts at evangelising had proved to be fruitful (despite the setback of the deaths of Dr William Black and Shadrach Mngunana from the first party) in that a convert was made in the person of Albert Namalambe who was baptized on 25 March 1881 shortly after the move to and settlement at Bandawe, Makuzi. While the choice of Bandawe proved to be not the ideal site either, it however became a useful port for the steamship *Ilala* to land supplies for the mission station. This site also proved to be just as unhealthy as Cape Maclear. Besides, the political position of the Atonga was precarious as they constantly suffered attacks from the Angoni raiders who had originally come from Southern Africa. However, the first Atonga converts were baptised here in 1889. In the mean time, evangelism, education and medical work expanded and it convinced Dr Laws who had become the one in charge of the Mission that it would be necessary to seek a more suitable and healthier site where they could "... set up an institution for the training of native agents as artists, teachers, evangelists and pastors to assist the missionary in his work" (Thompson 1975:6). That new site was at Kondowe, a grass covered plateau about 3,000 feet above sea level. It was established on 12 October 1894. The new Mission site was named "Livingstonia".

From that new environment the Free Church of Scotland Mission continued to widen its scope of influence within the country, which was then known as Nyasaland (a part of the British Protectorate of Central Africa). The church not only expanded among the Atonga of the lakeshore, but also among the Angoni in Mzimba District, the Tumbuka, Aphoka-Nkhamanga, the Ngonde of Karonga and Chitipa in the northern part of the country. The first church elders were elected at Bandawe in 1895 - a mark of the first attempts of the Mission at indigenisation. Further elections of elders were done in the Kirk Sessions at Loudon, Ekwendeni and Livingstonia. On 15 November 1899 the North Livingstonia Presbytery of (what was then known as) the Presbyterian Church of Central Africa met for the first time. Such a move marked the first step the local church was taking towards self-sufficiency (Thompson 1975:7).

In order to meet the need for well-trained local church leaders a Theological Department was established in 1896, and in 1900 the first two theological students completed their training. They were Charles Domingo and Yakobi Msusa Muwamba. Msusa unfortunately died shortly afterwards and although the other one was a highly competent teacher apart from his theological training, he was not quickly ordained. As a result he left the Mission to form his own church afterwards. It was not until 18 May 1914 that the first African ministers were ordained - exactly 14 years after the first indigenous Christian leaders finished their training. Those who were ordained then were Hezekiah Tweya, Jonathan Chirwa and Yesaya Zerenji Mwasi. With such a move another step in the development of the local church had been taken.

4. The birth of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian: 1924

Early in the 1900's negotiations were conducted regarding the union of the Presbyteries of Blantyre and Livingstonia. These presbyteries were established as a result of the missionary endeavours of the Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland respectively. The two Presbyteries had already decided in favour of the union at the Third Mission Council, which took place at Mvera DRC Mission in 1910. However, plans and discussions regarding such a move were postponed indefinitely until 1924 after the end of the World War I when they were eventually carried through. In September 1924 the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian was officially instituted when Blantyre and Livingstonia presbyteries came together. Two years later Nkhoma Presbytery, which at first had some reservations about the scheme, finally joined the CCAP. The formation of the CCAP was symbolic of the gradual shift from Mission to

Church which has continued ever since.

Between 1925 and 1935 almost all of the pioneer missionaries had retired and their places had been taken by a new generation of European and indigenous ministers and teachers (Thompson 1975:9). Some of the indigenous leadership of note between 1929 and 1935 included Yafet Mkandawire, Yesayah Zerenji Mwasi and Charles Chidongo Chinula who, because of various misunderstandings with the missionaries, had broken away to establish their own congregations - some of which are still thriving to this day. These breakaways mainly occurred within the Synod of Livingstonia in the north of the country. One positive aspect of such an event was that it was an indication that the indigenous people were capable of leading the flock independently from missionary tutelage. That spirit came to be reflected later in some of the church resolutions that women be ordained to the diaconate and eldership, as well as the eventual formation of the Umanyano (Women's Guild) and their participation in social change and church development within the CCAP. As in the case of Livingstonia, this trend regarding the participation of women in social change and church development took place quite early. The missionaries envisioned that the African girls be well educated and well trained with regard to domestic skills so that they are capable companions to their husbands in the church and in society. However, such training was very basic and it was not with the view that they might be recognised as equal partners and capable of handling the responsibilities reserved for men. Their function was basically that of housewives, and in exceptional cases, professionals such as teachers, nurses, hospital warders, secretaries etc.

5. The formation of the Women's Guild and its impact within the CCAP Synods

The ordination of women to the diaconate and eldership within the church in Livingstonia Synod resulted from the fact that a large number of men had gone to join the First and the Second World Wars (1914-1918 and 1939-1945). Others had gone to work in the mines and farms either in Tanganyika, the North- and South-Rhodesia (Zambia and Zimbabwe) and South Africa. Such an exodus had resulted in a vast drain of men so that the number of women in relation to that of men in the church became quite large. In order to keep the church running some areas sought permission to have some capable women identified and ordained as deacons and others as elders because of the leadership crisis that had resulted from the shortage of men. There seems to have been no theological motivation behind such a move, but it was out of expediency and in response to the leadership vacuum that had inadvertently been created because of the war situation. Ordination of women to these church offices has continued ever since. The participation of women in other capacities of leadership in the church was actually the outcome of an earlier factor. It resulted from the formation of the women's guilds popularly known as Mvano (in Blantyre Synod), Chigwirizano (in Nkhoma Synod) and Umanyano (in Livingstonia Synod). It was initially begun, organized and run by the wives of the white missionaries and those who were unmarried. They instructed the indigenous women in simple Bible study methods, child welfare and basic health care, house keeping and preaching. At a later period these groups were involved in taking care of the sick, the destitute and orphans, and they offered condolences and material help to the bereaved, and helped local churches in evangelism outreach. The organization of women into such groups proved to be an invaluable asset to all the Synods. However, the degree of participation varied according to the traditional and cultural backgrounds of the individual synods. This point of view can be illustrated through extracts from some Executive Church minutes from the individual Synods as shown below.

Nkhoma Synod deserves the credit to have taken the initiative to train the first woman theologian, compared to her sister synods. It took place in 1968. She was Miss Mary Chinkhwita. However, according to Isabel Apawo Phiri (1994:1), the issue of her being admitted to theological college raised other pertinent questions, which hitherto had not been contemplated. It was an

unprecedented move, viewed as a daring step that called for caution. What would she do after completion of her course? Would she eventually seek ordination or not? These questions were asked because her admission to theological college was like treading on virgin soil for the synod of Nkhoma.

A historic move such as this would obviously have aroused mixed feelings within the Church. For instance, *Kuunika*, the Synod magazine, had hailed her as someone who would possibly be the first woman minister in that Church. However, these speculations provoked strong reaction from some conservative members, some of which are reflected in the minutes of Nkhoma synod:

Synod emphasizes that there is no lady minister in our synod but the one who is at the theological college is being trained to help her fellow women. The mistake was even put in *Kuunika* but it is not so. After the course, she will not be ordained as a minister, not at all (quoted by Phiri 1994:2).

Since the General Synod of the CCAP seemed to have a keen interest in the same issue, Nkhoma Synod instituted a commission of enquiry in 1967 whose recommendations were released in 1969. The recommendations were:

- a) According to the Bible, women cannot be allowed to the office of elder (overseer) because they do not have ruling power. This also applies to the ministry.
- b) It appears that the Bible is not against women becoming deacons, as deacon is not a ruling office.
- c) Although women cannot hold offices in the church, they must be urged to serve the Lord in the church through the office of all believers (quoted by Phiri 1994:2).

The unfortunate part of the story is that even after completion of her theological training, terms for the specific role of Miss Chinkhwita had not yet been determined. After quite some time of wrangling back and forth regarding this issue, the matter ended in stalemate. Miss Chinkhwita finally resigned and told her Synod that she no longer was willing to work under the conditions she found herself in. Her case, according to Phiri, was cited as the possible reason why the Synod of Nkhoma seemed reluctant to involve itself in the training of women for the ministry again because "its first attempt to educate and involve a woman in leadership positions had failed" (Minutes of Nkhoma synod quoted in Phiri 1994:2).

The second attempt at involving women came from Blantyre Synod. The first female student, Miss Getrude Kapuma, was sent to Kapeni Theological College, Blantyre. After completing her course, it was envisioned that she would work among women at Chigodi Women's Centre in Blantyre. Since then three more women have had theological training. One of them attained a BA Theology degree from the University of Malawi. Another one received a Diploma in the Theology of Development, whereas the third one holds a Diploma in Theology. Miss Kapuma furthered her studies in obtaining a MTh Degree from the University of Fort Hare, South Africa. None of them have as yet been considered for the ordained ministry. However, they are actively involved in organisations indirectly related to synod.

At the time of writing there happens to be another female theological student in her second year of training. The question of her ordination has not been tackled as yet.

Despite the fact that Synod has ordained women ministers from the Presbyterian Churches in Canada and Ghana respectively, the issue of ordination has not been addressed seriously. However, it has become a serious issue for the Church after women had staged a peaceful march to the Synod offices recently to present their grievances. As a result of this, very important resolutions have been passed at an emergency meeting of the Synod's Executive. The following are excerpts from a report entitled *Women's Issues* that was drawn up by the

Executive:

We have prioritized the Women's issues raised in the Petition as follows:

Partnership:

For the Church to achieve development there has to be partnership between men and women. The results of equal participation of both men and women in any development endeavour are rich and fulfilling. In the light of the above, the following issues are brought for your action.

- a) We would like the Synod to lay down the Conditions of Service, which take into account, the Pension, Housing and Medical Schemes for all its employees, considering their educational qualifications, training and position regardless of gender.
- b) There should be equal opportunities for both men and women to go for post-graduate studies, training for leadership and more women to study theology.
- c) Women should be included in decision-making committees of the Church at all levels and should have voting powers.

Leadership role:

The Church should recognize and encourage the gifts and talents of women for ministry and provide those gifted women chances and room to exercise their call. Those women who are capable, should be considered for the following positions: Session Clerks, Treasurers, Parish Chairpersons, Education Secretary/Agency, Conveners of Presbytery and Synod Committees, Presbyterian Youth Directors, Schools/ Hospital Chaplains, Music Directors on congregational Presbyterian levels etc.

Some of the resolutions have so far been implemented - especially those related to congregational responsibilities. However, the question of women ordination still stands to be addressed.

In the Synod of Livingstonia, where the involvement of women in decision making committees began as early as World War I (as indicated earlier), it took the Church more than sixty years (1977) before it considered recommending a young woman (Miss Mnthali) to go for theological training. In her case Synod again stipulated that she would work among women as a women's worker upon completion of her course. Another women who has completed her theological training (with certificates from Selly Oak Birmingham, UK, and a Licenciate in Theology from a Theological School) was employed as a women's worker. She held positions of influence in the Church but according to her status it would be fair to state that she was regarded as lesser than the ordained pastors with whom she was trained. The following extracts from the Synod minutes of August 1992 are revealing:

Synod Umanyano Workers request that their Conditions of Service be reviewed to match those of Ministers and Evangelists:

A request was presented that conditions of service for Umanyano workers be reviewed seeing that the service they rendered to their womenfolk was like that done by ministers and evangelists (*to their flocks*).

The Committee accepted the request but recommended that the committee which was to deal with the *Provision of Broken Service* should also work on condition of service for the lay workers.

In relation to the question of the ordination of women to the holy ministry, there have been a lot of feet dragging among the clergy in this Synod. The response of one of the senior ministers in a questionnaire that was sent out by Isabel Phiri to ministers in 1990 reflected some of the general sentiments shared by a good number of them:

While I do not have reasons to deny women's ordination, there is no one who has so far felt the call to the Holy Ministry. In the fullness of time women will be ordained.

A response such as this presupposed according to Phiri that the church had advertised and no woman had responded. However, the constitution of the church was still explicit in its views against women being ordained. Phiri argues that those views must have represented the pastor's individual sentiments and not those of the General Synod of the CCAP as such (Phiri 1994:4).

A bold move, however, was made by one of the Synod Umanyano Workers who had had full theological training, not only in Malawi, but also abroad. She requested Synod to consider her for ordination. In fact, this request was a sentiment expressed on behalf of those of similar qualification who have hitherto not been considered for ordination by the Church. The extract from the Synod minutes of August 18-23 reads as follows:

Mrs. C. Phiri - Synod Umanyano Worker request for ordination:

Mrs. Phiri made a request that she be considered for ordination. She completed her theological training in 1985 and works as Synod Umanyano Women's Worker. The Committee noted that up to now Synod had not yet opened ordination for women and that General Synod agreed that ordination of women be effected when other members of the General Synod eventually reach a general consensus about this.

With regard to that request "the fullness of time" had not yet been realized. However, no theological reasons were cited as cause for the indecision with regard to this issue on the part of Synod either.

However, further developments were noted in the report from an ad hoc committee during the same Synod proceedings:

29/92 Ordination of Women

The Committee acknowledged the recommendation from the Minister's Conference regarding the ordination of women to the holy ministry. It felt that the time for Livingstonia Synod to take action had finally come ...

They did not specify why there had been delays all along. The proposal was adopted in accordance with the General Synod's constitution section 46/90.

Mrs. Martha Mwale, a recent graduate, has since then been licensed and allocated to a congregation. Should it happen that she eventually gets ordained, she might be the first female pastor within the Synod of Livingstonia and in the General Synod of the CCAP in Malawi.

6. Biblical interpretation regarding women involvement

In the previous sections of this article it has been shown that the issue of women ordination has become the crux according to which the commitment of the synods to this issue can be measure. The accusation of "feet-dragging" has been heard from many sides already. Chingota (1999) in his research attempts to provide reasons for this "feet-dragging":

That Blantyre Synod has progressed very well on the issue of involving women in Church life is not disputed. Women are on the payroll; ... they are represented as full voting members on almost all decision making bodies; some women do hold responsible positions in the church as church clerks; ... (they) participate fully at the eucharistic ceremonies. ... With these developments, the ground seems to be well prepared for the next step - ordaining women to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments. However Synod was

reluctant to take that step in 1991 and 1994. What are the reasons for this? (Chingota 1999:4).

Chingota then advances the following possible reasons:

The question of power-relations

From the point of view of human relations, power implies exercising superiority over another - whether openly or indirectly. The Very Rev Dr SS Ncozana was cited as having said that male dominance in the Church is traditional, but has no place in the kingdom of God. It is not part of God's plan, but of human making. In an article written by Klaus Fiedler entitled "Even in Church the Exercise of Power is accountable to God" (quoted by Chingota 1999), it is argued that the sacraments have become the nucleus around which power in the Churches is organized. Some of the reasons Fiedler points out are: a) that mainline Churches are in agreement that the sacraments are necessary for a healthy Christian life and growth, and b) that all denominations agree that a full Christian life is also a sacramental life. Each member therefore expects to participate in the sacraments whenever they are offered. From that perspective, Chingota argues, the sacraments become closely related to the issue of power, because the administration of the sacraments is linked to ordination. The administration of the sacraments therefore comes to be regarded as a status symbol, a position of power.

This might be perceived as the possible reason why there has been a good deal of feet-dragging with regard to the issue of women ordination. The question at stake is rather why men should share power with those (from a cultural point of view) who are inferior (Chingota 1999:5). However, this explanation does not have biblical support. It rather seems to express possible cultural influence and doctrinal idiosyncrasies regarding the male attitude towards females. The point has, however, direct relevance to the understanding of the Bible on the issue of (sexual) cleanliness and holiness.

The issue of cleanliness and holiness - a bird's eye view

According to Chingota (1999) there are some factors in relation to the African attitude towards (sexual) purity that have to be considered when dealing with women ordination and the sacraments. These factors not only affect the behaviour of ordinary Christians, but also of the clergy. Chingota's conclusions derived from his observation of the dwindling attendance at Holy Communion. A considerable number of members would not take part for various reasons. When asked, some stated reasons such as that they were under discipline; that they have not yet been confirmed or have not been baptised yet, etc. However, apart from these reasons, it also became apparent that some people stayed away for reasons related to sexuality. Chingota conducted a seminar for married couples, and in their studies of Biblical passages such as Lev. 12 and 15 on ritual cleanliness and how it impinges upon the question of sexuality and the holy, it became clear that the understanding of these passages kept them from taking part in the Holy Communion. After discussions of these texts at the seminar, Chingota noticed a dramatic increase in the attendance at the ceremony of the Lord's Table. His suspicion was confirmed by further results from interviews with a number of Women's Guild members from all the three regions of the country. In the interviews it has been affirmed that issues of sexuality did influence church members' participation at the Lord's Supper.

Phiri (1997:39) reports about a women's conference that dealt *inter alia* with the contexts in which African women live. Contributions from women from across the African continent showed clearly that women regard themselves as not being accepted by society as whole persons seeing that they are surrounded by rituals of impurity owing to their status of womanhood. Chingota has confirmed this in his research, but has indicated that this is not only

true of African women:

...the notion of women's sexual process being impure is widespread and persistent, that the magical fear of menstrual blood is particularly intense, and that this menstrual anxiety is so deeply ingrained in the male psyche that it is found not only in ancient or primitive cultures but in folk traditions as well (Chingota 1999:6).

From the Malawian cultural perspective, regardless of tribal affiliations, there are taboos associated with menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. Traditionally a woman is prohibited from seasoning her relish with salt during her menstrual periods, and she is not allowed to have normal sexual relations with any other man apart from her husband. The husband is also required to refrain from committing adultery because that might incur *mdulo* (lit. "a cut"), which is some form of divine vengeance experienced through the cutting sensation in the culprit's stomach. According to Chingota (1999:7) there are observably three kinds of *mdulo*: that of a child (illness associated with pregnancy and childbirth); that of a young girl (illness associated with puberty and initiation rites) and that of an adult (illness associated with death). Each one of these has its own prohibitions – normally characterised by abstinence from sexual intimacy on the part of those closely related until the danger period is past. These rites are regarded as so sacred that extreme caution is needed in handling them. During the ritual avoidance of *mdulo* the Holy Supper is regarded as a taboo, because the ritual status of the ones concerned is viewed to be incompatible to that of the Holy Supper (Chingota 1999:9).

Biblical Interpretation in relation to purity

According to Chingota, the Malawian attitude towards the Lord's Supper stems from the Church's doctrine of God as being pure and holy. The fear therefore exists that those who should dare to approach the Holy Table unworthily might fall sick and die. As a result, anything as abhorrent as menstrual blood would be deemed as rendering one as unworthy and sinful. According to the traditional point of view, women in their periods would be regarded as unclean. Sexual intercourse with a partner in that state would also be regarded as bringing dirt on oneself, and thus immoral.

From this perspective Chingota argues that the Church's understanding of God in interaction with the traditional religious heritage, influences the interpretation of some biblical passages greatly. Biblical passages such as Lev. 12 and 15 are, for example, used at puberty initiation rites of passage. The following quotation from Lev. 12 (NIV) illustrates the point:

¹ The Lord said to Moses, ² "Say to the Israelites: A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. ... ⁴ Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. ⁵ If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified from her bleeding.

⁶ "When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. ⁷ He shall offer them before the LORD to make atonement for her, and then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood.

"These are the regulations for the woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl..."

The instructresses of the initiation rites normally emphasise the ritual opposition between a

place of worship and the status of women during their periods or after childbirth. Whereas they are ritually unclean then, the place of worship is sacred and holy. A woman should therefore not come into contact with the sacred and holy during this time.

It is from this premise then that it is argued that both those who have just given birth and those who are in their periods may not touch or handle the elements at the Lord's Supper (Chingota 1999:10). Their biological situation would render them ritually (and implicitly morally) unclean. Some couples would even go to such an extent as to abstaining from sexual intercourse prior to their participation in the Holy Communion in order to enhance their state of purity. Not keeping to these prohibition evokes feelings of guilt.

Because of their sense of great awe and deep reverence for the mysterious and the holy, ordinary Malawians do regard the Holy Table with such deep respect. Its holiness derives from the Deity. The sacraments are therefore also regarded as having transcendental theological status, and they should therefore be approached and handled with great respect.

Chingota (1999) argues that this understanding of the Bible, and particularly the interaction between traditional socio-cultural views and certain biblical passages, may be one of the reasons why men in the Malawian church do not want to allow women to be ordained. Although the cultural and theological conditions during the time of origin of the Bible were quite different from the Malawian, these biblical texts are interpreted fairly literally in order to protect the power domain of men.

This example of biblical interpretation in the Malawian context has shown that many factors are involved in the issue of women involvement in the CCAP. Power relations and socio-cultural customs deeply influence the interpretation of the Bible with regard to the status and role of women in the church.

7. Conclusion

In this article an overview of the history of origin of the different synods of the CCAP has been provided. From this description it has become clear that many factors have influenced the social structures within this church. This also applies to the role women are allowed to play in the different synodical areas. Although an openness towards the involvement of women in different leadership spheres in the CCAP has developed, the issue of the ordination of women as ministers seems to be the crux of the matter. As long as this matter is not resolved there will always be questions about the commitment of the synods to listen to the Word of God.

With regard to the role Biblical interpretation plays in this matter, it has been indicated that it is particularly texts on ritual purity (e.g. Lev 12 and 15) that have been used in the argumentation. Observably, the biblical texts on sexual purity seem to have been used as a pretext to cover some hidden fear of power sharing at the topmost levels in the Body of Christ. The question of purity and spiritual acceptability before the Holy One of Israel ultimately does not depend upon self-imposed purity. It comes from the Holy God himself. However, the question of the call to fulltime ministry is still a burning issue, which has not gained uniform acceptance from the three synods of the CCAP. Hence - *aruta continua* - the struggle continues.

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