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Theological Education of Seventh-day Adventist Women in Nigeria

Introduction

The theme of women¹ has been a predominantly disputed topic in contemporary political, theological, and social debate for centuries (Daniel 2010:127). Although many efforts have been made in times past to demonstrate that women are as gifted as men (Madu 2014:123), there still appears to be a prevalent and tenacious belief that women are inferior to men (Amoah, Safo, and Amoah 2015:12). In fact, according to Petties and Beach Va, the issue of their religious roles/participation in leadership position has been a major debate in most Christian churches (2008:1-9). Similarly, the theological education of women that would allow for effective mission has being a neglected phenomenon. This article therefore focuses on the theological education of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) women for effective mission in Nigeria.

Women in Ministry: A New Testament Account

From biblical times, women have been equipping themselves for God's service and have been active in personal evangelism (Patterson 2014:65). In the Gospels, one can read of many women who listened raptly to Christ's word and believed him to be the anointed Messiah (John 11:27). Mary of Bethany sat at Jesus' feet to learn deep truths of Scripture (Luke 10:38-42) just as Paul was educated "at the feet of Gamaliel" in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3). She became the first propagator of the empty tomb account (John 20:18). The Samaritan woman, within a short period of learning from Christ at the well, became the greatest female evangelist (John 4:5-30).

After Jesus' ascension, women like Lydia, Euodia, and Syntyche played an important role in the spread of the gospel (Acts 16:14-15; Phil 4:2-3). Some others (e.g., Phoebe and Nympha) used their homes as fellowship centers (Rom 10:1-2; Col 4:15). Priscilla and her husband Aquila worked together in God's mission (Acts 18:1-4, 24-26). Paul further commended Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis for their hard work in the Lord (Rom 16:6, 12).

During the period of the Early Church, women like Felicitas, Perpetua, Cecilia, Donatila, Theodota, and many more were martyred because of their active involvement in spreading the gospel (Page 2012:556). From the late Middle Ages through the eighteenth century, women joined their husbands on missionary journeys to unentered areas. Records showed that women comprised two-third of the international missions force as of 1999 (Page 2012:557). But unfortunately, despite the New Testament precedents of women's involvement in mission, in many contexts today, women's participation in theological education in order to become relevant in the church's mission is not encouraged or even welcomed.

According to Cecilia Madu, women constitute over half of the world's population (2014:123). In Nigeria, as in many societies, they make up 75 to 90 percent of the active membership and sustaining force in almost every congregation, including SDA churches (Vine 1984:21). Scholars have pointed out the pivotal role of women in the propagation of the gospel. Early missionaries to Africa recognized that reaching women and improving their status would lead to the transformation of whole communities (Ayanga 2017:11). While both men and women are gifted for God's service (1 Cor 12) and are called to be Christ's witnesses (Matt 28:18-20), yet only a small minority of women are in the Adventist theological institutions in Nigeria. Thus, women who feel called to the ministry are faced with a number of challenges that hinder them from fulfilling their vocation.

Biblical Perspectives of Women and Theological Education

While some scholars contend that the Old and New Testaments stipulate that all women are to be under the authority of all men, others insist that this is not the case (Madu 2014:124). Thus, it becomes necessary to closely investigate the evidence of Scripture on such claims.

In first-century Judaism, both boys and girls had access to informal education (teaching and training at home and in daily life). Women were taught a little more than the domestic arts by their mothers. These mothers probably learned to read and write and were given enough elementary religious instruction so they could pass on biblical knowledge to their children (Gladson 1984:40). However, only the boys were offered formal

education in synagogue schools where rabbis taught the Torah to them at different stages in life, beginning at age five or six (Oluikpe 2015:118).

Instructing women in the Torah was not considered obligatory and was even seen in part as improper (Daniel 2010:127). For example, Rabbi Eliezer wrote that “whoever teaches his daughter Torah is like one who teaches her lasciviousness” (Davidson 1998:168). Women were also excluded from essential religious tasks and were thought unworthy of participating in most of the religious feasts. They were instructed in accordance with the Torah for the proper regulation of their lives but were not permitted to touch it (West 1999:137). However, Rabbi Meir suggested that if women would study the Torah, they too would merit many things like Deborah and Hulda (cited in Zohar 2015:40, 41).

The experience of the five daughters of Zelophehad (Num 26:33) showed that education in the law was not forbidden to females by Moses. Their actions in claiming their rights in relation to genealogy and inheritance revealed that they were female expounders of the law (Bushnell 1943:218). In spite of females’ lack of formal opportunity for an education, there were women who somehow acquired considerable knowledge in the Torah. There are records of some rabbis who had wives learned in the law just as Timothy’s mother and grandmother had enough knowledge to give him a solid grounding in the Scriptures (Gladson 1984:40).

Jesus who was recognized as an exceptional Rabbi, taught both male and female disciples (Oluikpe 2015:127). He commended Mary’s choice to be at his feet rather than in the kitchen (John 11:23-27). Mary has always been perceived as an earnest student of the Messiah, which was not a conventional choice for Jewish women. She sat at the feet of Jesus and was listening to “his word” (Davidson 1998:179). “To sit at someone’s feet” was an idiomatic way of saying “to study under someone” (Specht 1984:72). Although women were not allowed the formal privilege of studying under a rabbi, Jesus clearly admitted Mary as one of his students. She had the privilege of being sent by Christ to announce his resurrection to the apostles (John 20:18). Other women disciples also ministered to Christ and his disciples out of their means (Olujide 2013:28). Some of those women were probably present when the Holy Spirit descended on the 120 at Pentecost (Acts 1:12-14, 12-14, 2:22-47). Therefore, one can say that women shared with men in the witness of the gospel proclamation and were visible and active not only in the ministry of Jesus, but also in the life of the apostolic church (Acts 1:14; Addison 1995:108-121).

Furthermore, the Samaritan woman who came into contact with Christ immediately practiced what she learned by mobilizing others to listen to Jesus (Mautsa and van Rensburg 2018:31). She had to overcome drawbacks such as gender (Sim 2015:4), nationality, her low moral standing

(John 2005:97), religious bias, and cultural convention (Davidson 2006:228) to become a model witness who is listed in the Gospel of John among the seven witnesses of Christ.

Christ's resurrection and ascension set the stage for a new order, which began at Pentecost for women and men alike. Women are explicitly included from the beginning as key players in the unfolding drama. Peter proclaims that the Spirit of God is now being poured out on all people, men and women, old and young, free and slave, enabling them to prophecy (Acts 2:17-18; cf. Joel 2:28 ff.) and the Spirit equips "all flesh" with spiritual gifts, empowering them to be fruitful ministers of the gospel.

To the church in Ephesus, to which 1 Timothy was written, there was a danger of untrained women promoting false teaching that could undercut both the gospel and the church's foundation. Paul temporarily limited the role of women as church teachers and leaders until they were properly trained (Pokrifka 1989:18). Also, the woman Paul described in 1 Tim 2:13-14 is a paradigm of anyone in danger of deception due to lack of proper education. Paul therefore recommended that the unlearned woman of Ephesus learn in silence and submission. In a way, that served as a significant redemptive improvement on the Jewish traditions that completely barred women from participating in the religious life of their communities. This text thus lays down a wise ground rule through which properly trained and educated women teachers such as Pricilla can be produced (Pokrifka 1989:21). Though the ministry of women in the New Testament as Christian wives and mothers in the home was vital to the progress on the church, their ministry did not end there. Because Christ also called them, the church empowered them as much as they could and released them to serve as workers in a more direct sense (Birney 1971:17). The same is needed today.

Women and Theological Education in Africa

The cultural and gender barriers which women are confronted by in many African contexts is entrenched in the history of their communities. The birth of a female child does not bring the same excitement to a home as that of a male child (Adetunji 2001:106). As a result, they are not given the same educational training because of the belief that the rightful place of a woman is in the home. Besides, through marriage, women are destined to leave their parents and take their husband's last name (Madu 2014:123). Mercy Oduyoye, an African Theologian opines that women in general are educated to believe that being born female means to be born innately inferior and due to their low self-esteem, they underrate themselves. This hinders them from participating in *male terrain* (1997:65).

The African traditional society was somehow unfair to women. They were mostly exploited, oppressed, and restricted by taboos, including the issue of withholding training from them (Familusi 2012:310). The status of women became a major concern to mostly female scholars in the promotion of women studies. However, with changing times and with the pertinent questions surrounding the role of women in mission and the recognition of the fact that full partnership between men and women is essential to the fulfillment of the church's mission, the church in Africa has begun to take small steps toward changing the situation (Ruth 1999:109). However, this slow rate of allowing women access to theological education in Africa may keep them unequipped for the task of mission. It may also pose a difficulty in contributing their much needed voices to theological discourse (Ayanga 2017:20).

Ellen White On the Theological Education of Women

Ellen White sensed her call to the ministry in 1889 when in her youth she was chosen by God (after two men had declined the commission) to be his special messenger (Anderson 1984:109). This makes her writings on the role of women in the church very pertinent.

Ellen White used the term ministry to designate the calling and work of every Christian. Thus she explains:

The Saviour's commission to the disciples included all the believers. It includes all believers in Christ to the end of time. It is a fatal mistake to suppose that the work of saving souls depends alone on the ordained minister. All to whom the heavenly inspiration has come are put in trust with the gospel. All who receive the life of Christ are ordained to work for the salvation of their fellow men. For this work the church was established, and all who take upon themselves its sacred vows are thereby pledged to be co-workers with Christ. (1940:822)

Her basic definition of ministry is the calling of all Christians "to work for the salvation of their fellow men." One can say that since the work of saving souls depends on all believers (including women), likewise, all believers who feel called to ministry need to be given access to formal theological education. White's usage of the terms "ministry" and "minister" gives a sharper focus to the study of women in ministry and also suggests that women should labor in the gospel ministry. She speaks of women who do work that is in the line of ministry and also refers to young women being trained for this work. She believed women to be indispensable in ministry, because they can minister in ways that men cannot (White 1970:472). White additionally affirmed that "when a woman is in trouble, let her take her trouble to women" (1970:460). She further states that:

Our sisters generally have a hard time with their increasing families and their unappreciated trials. I have so longed for women who could be educated to help our sisters rise from their discouragement and feel that they could do a work for the Lord. This will bring rays of sunshine into their own lives, which will be reflected into the lives of others. God will bless all who unite in this grand work. (1970:114)

Furthermore, she opines that “the Lord has a work for women as well as for men. . . . They can do in families a work that men cannot do, a work that reaches the inner life. They can come close to the hearts of those whom men cannot reach, their labor is needed” (White 1902:26). The Lord had shown her times without number that women teachers are just as greatly needed to do the work to which He has appointed them as are men” (1970:493). She therefore encourages that

the youth should be encouraged to attend our training schools for Christian workers, which should become more and more like the schools of the prophets. These institutions have been established by the Lord, and if they are conducted in harmony with His purpose, the youth sent to them will quickly be prepared to engage in various lines of missionary work. Some will be trained to enter the field as missionary nurses, some as canvassers, and some as gospel ministers. (1970:229-30)

This simply implies that our theological schools’ curriculum should be such that encourages the various aspects of the missionary work. Again, White asserts,

We should be people of the Word, mighty in the Scriptures; and our women should be as earnest in this matter as are consecrated men working along such lines: The plan of holding Bible-readings was a heaven-born idea. There are many, both men and women, who can engage in this branch of missionary labor. Workers may thus be developed who will become mighty men of God. (1915:192)

Women were vital in the Adventist Church in the 1860s and were formally inducted into the official ministry in the 1870s. They were needed as evangelists for the unentered areas. Both men and women were encouraged to receive ministerial training to allow them to enter the field (Haloviak 1988:1). Unfortunately, women constitute only a tiny minority in our theological institutions either as students or teachers. This may pose a challenge to fulfilling God’s mission.

Women in Adventist Theological School in Nigeria

Seventh-day Adventist theological schools are established for the purpose of training students in fulfilling God's mission of reaching people with the gospel of salvation and preparing them for Christ's soon return. They also serve to instruct students to work intelligently as Christ did by presenting a noble and elevated Christian character to those with whom they associate (Ola 2013:1). The first Adventist theological school in Nigeria was established in 1959. It was then called the Adventist College of West Africa (ACWA), aimed at meeting the need for training people for ministry (Agboola 2001:64). Later in response to the dynamics of its socio-political environment, ACWA became known as the Adventist Seminary of West Africa (ASWA) in 1975; however in 1999, ASWA came to be known as Babcock University. Its Christian Religious Studies (CRS) Department serves the purpose of training pastors and ministers to be fit for ministry and to make a positive difference in theological education in Nigeria and beyond.

There is an insignificant ratio of females enrolled in the CRS department at Babcock University. From 2001, out of an average of 35-45 students enrolled every year, only about 7 were females (Efe 2020). The lack of sponsorship from conferences and unions could be one possible contributing factor to this insignificant rate of women in theological training. Most CRS students (males) are sent from their churches with sponsorship, whereas female students are mostly self-sponsored. Also, cultural issues may contribute to the low enrollment (Mugambi 2005:516). Paul Miller suggests that for Africa to fulfill its missionary and evangelistic mandate, workers must be adequately equipped in theological education. He recommends that the churches should experiment with training women for ministry: "Train women workers in the church. This would be in addition to and beyond the present home economics offered for the students' wives" (Miller 1969:11).

The idea that theological education is meant for men has caused most women to be reluctant to join in theological studies. For instance, during my undergraduate years, a teacher addressed me as "Brother Harriet" while returning our papers. This was funny, though not surprising, because being the only female in a supposedly "men's world" what else could I expect? However, this perspective needs to be erased because the purpose of establishing theological schools is to train gospel workers, both men and women, to be fit and equipped for mission. Women are not excluded from participating in fulfilling the Great Commission (Owusu 2014:49). Therefore, the church needs to invest in fully equipping them.

The possibility of being unemployed as a pastor is another factor keeping some women from enrolling in theological studies. There is an urgent need for women to be fully integrated in ministry in a variety of ways.

Benefits of Theological Education of SDA Women in Nigeria

Below are some potential benefits for the church to fully support, sponsor, and train women in theological schools:

First, educating women theologically will allow for the close involvement of women in the daily lives of the people. Women's work serves to "soften the effects of cultural imperialism and create a model for gender-based missions (that is, women ministering to women) for subsequent generations (Patterson 2014:68). Second, a greater partnership between men and women in the Lord will be created. Missionary women will not only be interested in the spiritual welfare of women in their contexts but also in their social status and overall welfare, thus improving the status of women in society (Ayanga 2017:20). Throughout the history of missions, many women have become Christians as a result of other women (teachers, health workers, reading tutors, or visiting neighbors) who have touched them at their point of need. Women can reach the hearts of other women and connect on a level that is not possible for men. In many countries, only female missionaries have been able to gain access to women (Patterson 2014:68).

Fourth, Romans 16 records how several women's missionary endeavors contributed significantly to the life and growth of the church. Priscilla must have been well-grounded in Christian theology to become a capable instructor of the great Orator Apollos (Acts 18:26). Also, women tend to be more reliable and effective in implementing changes in their communities that will help their children and raise the standard of life. Since women are referred to as "nation builders" (Olubunmi and Oloruntegbe 2014:158), they can also be kingdom builders. Therefore, if they are encouraged through sponsorship and church employment to participate in theological education, the church will grow more spiritually, numerically, and financially. The church will enjoy more peace and a touch of compassion if Christian women are sincerely accepted and trained to use their God-given gifts.

Fifth, when women receive theological education, their courage and self-confidence will increase, which could enable them to free themselves from the societal prejudice and negative stereotypic image they have come to accept and which in a way affects the church socially. The combination of men and women learning and interacting together represents the complete creation of God. At Creation, God looked at male and female and saw that all he had made "was very good" (Gen 1:31).

Finally, the recognition of the priesthood of all believers implies a church in which women and men work side by side in various functions and ministries, endowed with gifts distributed by the Holy Spirit according to his sovereign will (1 Cor 12:7-11). As some men are called into the ministry by God so are some women. The statement is germane to this discussion:

Women's work is essential and without it the cause will suffer great loss. Women will be more successful in this area of ministry than will men. The Lord has a work for women, as well as for men. They may take their places in His work . . . and He will work through them. If they are imbued with a sense of their duty, and labor under the influence of the Holy Spirit, they will have just the self-possession required for this time. . . . They can do in families a work that men cannot do, a work that reaches the inner life and come close to the hearts of those whom men cannot reach, hence become beneficial in enhancing visitation and retention of backsliding members. They can come close to the hearts of those whom men cannot reach. Their labor is needed. The combined talents of both men and women are essential for the highest success in the work of the ministry. Therefore the ideal here is team ministry. (White 1902:7,8).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The theological training of women remains imperative for the SDA Church in Nigeria where women outnumber men in the general population. The task of mission belongs to the church in its entirety. Because both men and women are given the missionary mandate, they should both be trained and equally equipped. Also, because there is no gender specific spiritual gifts (the Holy Spirit does not show any partiality in distributing his gifts to believers), there should not be found in the church any form of discrimination against women's full participation in ministry. One of the implications is that the church should work on dismantling all the barriers to women's full participation in theological education by vigorously combatting any form of discrimination against women, providing educational sponsorship, and subsequent equal employment opportunities for women who feel called by God to dedicate themselves fulltime to ministry.

Endnotes

1 The theme of women here generally refers to all discourses about women, ranging from their status, roles, and leadership positions, etc. In other words, there must be a topic on women probably because of the patriarchal system. Hence; the word “theme” has to do with issues/debates surrounding them, which in most cases pose challenges to their theological education.

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