



Women and Social Justice: The Lukan narrative as the object lesson for addressing poverty in the African Church

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates Luke's purpose of showing God's revolutionary dealings against societal prejudice against the debased and the marginalised members of the society of the time. The Lukan narrative portrays God's rejection of the complacent elite by embracing the poor and the repentant respondents to the clarion call of the Messiah. There is no doubt that the Luke-Acts narrative surfaces and elevates the role of women in a very distinctive approach. The diverse reflections show that women can set the tone for African church, especially the role that can be actively played by women in social justice. There are distinctive characteristics that can be noted for social justice advancement in the African church. These are *koinos* synergy, revelatory pronouncements, and salvific testimonies. The conclusion is made by highlighting the character of Dorcas in Acts narrative as the object lesson for African Church in relation to social justice. This social justice is derived from the understanding of service evangelism.

Keywords: women, social justice, narrative, proclamation, service.

Introduction

The study survey of the Luke-Acts account regarding women is very broad and spectacular in the real form. From Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist to Mary the mother of Jesus, there is a record of women healed by Jesus, those who set a good example, those blessed by Jesus, and those who witnessed the glorious resurrection. The narrative starts by distinctively drawing attention to the angelic announcement to Mary that God had chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah. Leading the account towards the climax, this narrative (Gospel of Luke) is the only Synoptic Gospel that records the miraculous conception of Elizabeth, the story of the prophetess Anna, the Virgin Mary's song of praise, and the woman who anointed Jesus' feet and was forgiven. Furthermore, there is a reference to the women disciples, along with men, who accompanied Jesus in his itinerant ministry. Luke presents women not only as witnesses to the events surrounding the birth of the Messiah, but also as active participants in God's Messianic purposes leading up to the resurrection.

Luke's purpose was to show God's revolutionary dealings against societal prejudice against the debased and the marginalised members of the society of the time. The narrative portrays God's rejection of the complacent elite by embracing the poor and the repentant respondents to the clarion call of the Messiah. Luke's portrayal of Mary is emblematic of how God reverses the poverty and powerlessness of the human condition. And throughout his narrative, Luke pays particular and positive attention to the role of women. The theme of reversal is expressed as well by the inclusion within the people of God of Samaritans and Gentiles" (Johnson, 1991:22).



The Luke-Acts narrative is marked with a distinctly feminine overtone. The author's concern for downcast women is particularly prominent, and the panoramic overview of the narratives attests to the fact that over half of all references to widows in the first five New Testament Books appear in Luke's Gospel.

In relation to social justice, there is no doubt that the Luke-Acts narrative surfaces and elevates the role of women in a very distinctive recall. The diverse reflections show that women can set the tone for African church, especially in the active role of promoting social justice.

The Lukan distinctives regarding social justice.

There are distinctive characteristics that can be noted for social justice advancement in the African church. For instance, synergy (*synergéō*), whereby a symbiosis, and perichoretal relationality of the triune God is the bedrock on which human relationality should be based highlights the importance and the role of women in social justice. God created men and women for partnership - males and females participating in the triune life of God as they are united with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit; and as together, they are the body of Christ, the body that is in need of him as its head (Summer in Crisp & Sanders, 2014:146). The biblical instruction regarding human beings as the image of God relates to both men and women in their wholeness, in their full, sexually specific community with each other (Moltmann, 1992:94). One can also consider *koinōnos*, which is an adjective signifying having in common with *koinos* as a noun denoting a companion, a partner or a partaker (Vine, 1939:833).

The Lukan perspective highlights *koinos* whereby males and females or salvific acts are in partnership for the common good. Few examples to be noted are the prophetic announcement of Jesus' conception received by Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-45); and the prophetic announcement of Jesus' birth to Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38). The Messianic acts of healing are also portrayed in *synergies* such as healing of the possessed man and Peter's mother-in-law in Capernaum in Luke 4. The same trend is observed also in his ministry of raising the widow's son and Jairus' daughter in Luke 7 and 8. This is not binaries, but synergies that demonstrate that men and women are seen as a synergy that fulfils the purposes of God in communities. However, as opposed to patriarchal tendencies that see men as prominent figures, the Lukan narrative, especially in Acts, seems to be seeing women as major stakeholders. For instance, in the Acts narrative there is a mention of Ananias and Sapphira in Chapter 5; the raising from the dead of Tabitha and that of Eutychus in Chapters 9 and 20 respectively. And in the middle of the narrative, there is the conversion at Philippi of Lydia and the jailor in chapter 16.

On further observation the Acts narrative specifically mentions "both men and women" in reference to the early church. For example, both men and women responded to the apostolic *kērygma* (5:14). Both men and women responded to Philip's *kērygma* and were baptised (8:12). Men and women became victims of persecution (8:3; 9:2; 22:4). Luke underscores the "equal opportunity" approach to persecution of believers. It looks like the idea of *koinos* (*common*) in the Luke-Acts narrative was the partnership of doing things together or experiencing things together for the good of the society, or even for the revelation or incarnation of God and His works. It is clear then that, "the concern for the role of women often noted in the gospel (Luke) continues in Acts" (Barret, 1994:275).

Koinos capsulizes the New Testament notion of *synergéō*. This is "togetherness" with the English derivative "synergy." It carries the meaning of the two or more people working together to produce an effect greater than the sum of their individual effects. In the modern era, *synergéō* does not give space for hedonism and consumerism. Hedonism focuses "on the sensational side of the satisfaction of needs. It is aimed at the acquisition of a feeling of pleasure (*hedone*), happiness, comfort, and satisfaction" (Van der Ven, 1996:447-8). On the other hand, consumerism "relates to the endeavour to use as many products and services as



possible, in order to satisfy one's own needs to the maximum" (Van der Ven, 1996:448). *Koinos* is impossible without *synergēō*. The two concepts operate *symbiotically*. This means the relation between two different individuals that are interdependent work together for each to gain benefits from the other (complementary role). This truth is captured by Crow Jr (1982:30) that "God creates humanity as a community of men and women, a vision of human unity based on obedient and joyful service to God." Mutuality and interdependence are the inevitable forces that can propel the church towards the maximum achievement of goals of social justice. Mutuality and interdependence are the *symbiotic synergies* that imply that social justice can be achieved in and by the local church locally and abroad. The people in *koinos* relationship can learn from each other what it means to be *ekklesia* in this world. God's creatures were meant to live in communion with God and with one another. The same can be expressed that Christ and the Church exist *symbiotically*, what is commonly known as communion *ecclesiology*. As the relationship of those in *koinos* continues, they can both expect to have their *ecclesiological* convictions challenged and spurred to move on towards the betterment of their identity and effectiveness. Kritzinger et al (1994:24) capture this truth that "a key dimension of this concept is the central Christian understanding of *koinonia*, community, sharing, partnership. According to 1 Corinthians 12:26 and 27, Christians are irrevocably bound to one another in a body..."

Secondly, there is revelatory pronouncement. The revelation (*apokalypsis*) manifested to the couples working in partnership towards a common goal is observed when one reads about God's prophetic revelation to Elizabeth and Zachariah; the role of Simeon and Anna after Jesus' birth; Mary and Martha serving Jesus in Bethany; and the group of women going to the tomb on the resurrection morning. In all these encounters, God revealed Himself in some unique ways. In all situations, women were the agents and the recipients of God's intended purposes. In the first instance of revelation to Elizabeth and Zechariah, God's purpose was the announcement of the due time for God's Messianic promises to be fulfilled. With Simeon and Anna, God's revelation was the confirmation of the authenticity of the One born i.e. He is indeed the expected hope of the nations. At Bethany in the *oikos* of Mary and Martha, Jesus revealed his power over death; and at the resurrection, God wanted the women to experience his power of the resurrection. The Lukan narrative shows that God's revelatory pronouncement cannot discriminate against women. Women can be both the agents, the vessels, and the recipients of God's revelation in changing the world. Dulles (1987:187) highlights the truth that:

the value of revelation in this cosmic outlook, is not simply to bring the individual believer to his eternal salvation, but to contribute to the realization in the world of the values of the kingdom of God: justice, freedom, plenty, brotherhood, and the like.

These revelatory pronouncements in the Lukan narrative are solicitous to preserve the unique values of the Christian principles regarding God not being a respecter of any person. God chooses to communicate himself to any human being regardless of the gender affiliation. The fact remains, as Witherington (1990:215) asserts:

Luke's intention is once again to convey a certain male-female parallelism in order to stress the equality of man and woman in God's plan of salvation, and their equal importance to the new community.

Thirdly, there are salvific testimonies. The last two chapters of the Gospel of Luke elaborate in detail that women were among those who observed the crucifixion (23:27, 49). It was women who prepared spices to anoint Jesus' body (23:55-56). Women were the first to find Jesus' tomb empty (24:1-3). They were the ones to receive the angelic message of Christ's resurrection (24:4-8). Women were the carriers of the message to the disciples that Christ is risen (24:9-11). The reference to women in Acts is not abundant as in the Gospel of Luke. The



culture of the New Testament times limited the importance of women, but Luke portrayed them as good examples in the church of the first century. This is attested by narratives such as that of a sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet and ended up being forgiven (7:37-50). There is a story of Mary who listened to Christ while her sister, Martha performed acts of hospitality (10:38-42). A parable of a woman finding a lost coin (15:8-10) was used to demonstrate the seeking love of Christ. It is further observed that the story of a widow who kept going to a judge to obtain justice (18:1-5) can be used to demonstrate persistence and perseverance. And a poor widow gave two small coins to the temple (21:1-4) then Jesus used this as an object lesson regarding giving out of generosity.

The reference to the distribution of food among the widows in Acts 6:1-7 is approached from the dual cultural views. Men (deacons) were chosen for a task that would normally be performed by male servants in a Jewish setting, while in the Hellenistic culture of the time, it was the woman's task.

Now coming to the New Testament example of the role of women in the African church is the story of a woman called Tabitha (Acts 9:36-43). She is an epic and perfect example for African Church. She is also called Dorcas – the female roebuck or a 'gazelle' which is an emblem of beauty. Dorcas was a resident of Joppa, in the local church which attaches its origin to Philip the Evangelist. Her dressmaking made her famous. She was a woman of means to serve humanity as freely as she did. In the seaport town of Joppa, she became known for her acts of charity and is the namesake for a charitable group named the Dorcas Society. Here was a woman who with her needle embroidered her name ineffaceably into the beneficence of the world. Where did she learn to sew, make garments for the poor and become notable for her charitable works? It could possibly have been in a godly home that she was taught how to use her fingers and her funds for the comfort and relief of the needy (Lockeyer, 2002:46).

Dorcas belonged to the church "that was not only a centre of fervent evangelism but also of a well-organised social service" (H Lockeyer 2002:46). It was in this church that Dorcas probably caught the vision of serving humanity with money and a needle. Her charitable acts stemmed from the regenerated heart; and she knew that behind the sewing of garments lies a saved soul. Dorcas the disciple was a philanthropist, the benefactress par excellence. Her thoughtful plans were personally implemented for the benefit of those in need. She served the needy in the church and the community with her loving hands. A needle in her hand became an instrument of social justice. The garments she sewed represented Christian faith in action. For her, being good meant also doing good. Her garments served both men and women. She epitomises the fact that one's position within *ecclesiastical* community disregards classism, racism, and sexism (Gal 3:28). This is fully supported by Nasimiyyu Wasike (1989:68):

For men to be what they have to be, women must be allowed to actualize their potential and to freely participate in all ministerial roles. This is the way in which humanity could be restored to wholeness. Women and men in the Church must be educated to equality, and women's expectations of themselves have to be raised to a model for human justice.

Lessons for African church

It was at Lausanne 1974 that in his paper, The Social responsibilities of Evangelisation, George Hoffman, laboriously quoted Andrew Walls that:

Questions of world poverty, of world food supply, of all the vast infra-structure of health, medicine, education, and government which undergird it, are his direct concern because God has so instructed man, and because they are duties of man as man. He can work wholeheartedly with other men, even if they do not know his Lord, in fulfilment of the mandate. These cannot be treated either as a distraction from the Gospel, or as a sort of bribe to make it



more palatable: they are part of man's response to the first command God gave him (Let the Earth Hear His Voice, 1975:699).

The gender-biased language in this quotation is appalling. Well, this was in the seventies when Christianity, especially the evangelical faith was widely interpreted patriarchally. However, the contents regardless are true. They express synergy, symbiosis, and *koinos* that are so critically needed and are explicitly expressed in the character, Tabitha or Dorcas. The African church needs the heroes like Dorcas – the heroes that must see the importance of taking care for the poor. This is undoubtedly one of the important tasks of the church. The *kērygma* cannot go without *diakoneō*. Proclamation and service are the intertwined tasks of the church. The apostolic leaders in Acts 6: 2-4 were spot on to strike this balance: *So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.* This justifies the fact that "by caring for the poor the church in some sense preaches the gospel" (Kuiper, 1998:168). This is the honourable and urgent task of the church.

The time is now for Africa to embrace the role of theology in the social reconstruction of the continent. At the fifth Assembly of All Africa Council of Churches, in Lomé, Togo, there was a formal adoption of theology of reconstruction as a new and favoured paradigm for African Christian theology. Rev Arnold Temple concluded in his paper that "God frees and empowers us to participate in the ongoing reconstruction and renewal of his creation" (2001:89).

The church in Africa has to call for a fresh focus on the gospel's power to transform lives for the marginalised and outcast. "It is through a high level of commitment to community development that ways are found to make known the reality of Jesus Christ" (Ross, 2009:517). The rivet of the reality is that the *ecclesiastical* mandate is to seek to preserve the true spirit of the gospel and at the same time to adjust the focus to the needs of the time. The church that is rooted in the New Testament, taking its cues from the Lukan narrative is constantly called to express her relation to Christ by her visible acts of social justice in the heart of the world. Stinton (2004:256) praises Mugambi's Christological reflections by asserting that "Christological praxis is considered fundamental to social transformation." The invisible Christ becomes visible through and in the words and actions of the church. This is when *incarnation* and *apokalypsis* become inseparable. The Christ who came is the Christ who is revealed. The community of faith is the social order which is orientated to human social welfare. It "requires the broader social context without which it could not exist" (Gunton, 2002:136).

Conclusion

Evangelism is not only proclamational, but also incarnational. Dorcas is a perfect example of this. She is an object lesson for the church in Africa – the community that must unashamedly embrace service (*diaconal*) evangelism. The most obvious *incarnational* evangelism is the *service* evangelism. The Greek word "*diakoneō*" means to serve or to minister – to render any kind of service. This refers to "the various forms of ministry and service in which the Christian community, in imitation of Jesus of Nazareth (who was among us as one who serves), puts itself at the service of the whole world" (Kritzinger et al., 1994:37). The acclaimed South African missiologist, David Bosch in referring to this as the church crossing frontiers in the form of a servant, declares that:

we should find a way beyond every schizophrenic position and minister to people in their total need, that we should involve individual as well as society, soul, and body, present and future in our ministry of salvation (1991:399).



Service evangelism is the loving acts of service that are accompanied by proclamational activities. In the words of Kritzinger and his colleagues: “Word and deed are absolutely intertwined as dimensions of the one “good news activity” (1994:143). It was at Amsterdam 2000, when Ross Rhoads explained to the workshop audience: “To couple the work of God with the words of God is a winner. The Gospel needs to be twofold: word and work” (2001:413).

Service evangelism is embraced in institutional work such as schools, hospitals, community upliftment projects, training, working with those with special needs etc. This can also be expressed in community development programmes where people are trained in life skills (hard or soft) to redress menaces such as poverty, diseases, unemployment etc. “It is through a high level of commitment to community development that ways are found to make known the reality of Jesus Christ” (Ross, 2009:517). It is very important, especially in Southern Africa to note service evangelism expressed in processes of peace and justice whereby issues such as peace, reconciliation, mediation, advocacy etc. are addressed to all sectors of the societies that may find themselves as victims or even as perpetrators. This is a holistic mission of *ecclesia* – the church *incarnate*. It is what Augsburg (1990:17) alludes to, that “Evangelism is everything we do to make faith in Christ an option. It includes sharing the good word and doing the good deed.”

It is therefore justifiable not to narrow evangelism to proclamation, but to include all other activities that give people an opportunity to make up their minds to follow Christ. Moffet (1981:730) is right that “the evangelistic proclamation was never so narrow that it became isolated from the immediate pressing needs of the poor, the imprisoned, the blind and the oppressed.” Service evangelism is about salvation and service – a call to be engaged in proclamation and social action. It is the holistic approach that does not take side with narrowness limited to verbal expression or diaconal appearance. A group of social analysts in South America concluded that:

the holistic witness of incarnational living had once again proven that God’s message to the whole person is attractive and compelling, and many will respond when given the chance to see it lived out in their midst (Yamamori, T. et al., 1997:76).

Women participate with God in sustaining the creation (livelihood) through the practices of food sustainability, natural and social justice and health promotion. Indeed, women possess some enormous capacity and ethical responsibility to sustain the integrity of creation (Butkus & Kolmes, 2011:170). It is women who under strenuous circumstances, till the land, plant the crops, care for them until their full maturation ready for consumption. Through their efforts of producing the food from the land, selling the goods and the products, they labour industriously as the shepherds of the nation ensuring that there is food security for human survival. Yet, they remain religiously committed. Waruta (in Maimela, 1994:79), is right that religion is not separated from daily concerns for food, shelter, health, wealth, children, happiness and good social life.

The women in Luke-Acts narrative are generally the object lesson for the church in Africa. The narrative reflects the importance of synergy or partnership in social justice. The women receive the revelation from God like men. They have the stories to tell regarding God’s soteriological acts and Christ’s incarnational deeds. Dorcas has blazed the way to show the power of women in church’s social justice endeavours. When women are empowered, the church clearly and unequivocally moves forward!

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