

“There is neither male nor female”

Theological reflection on Galatians 3:28 as a faith-based response to gender-specific persecution

Samuel Oluwatosin Okanlawon¹

Abstract

This paper considers the paradigmatic Pauline assertion in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither male nor female,” as a faith-based approach to counter gender-specific persecution of women and girls. Drawing on Vander Watt’s hermeneutic theory of contextual relevance, I propose that Paul elevates the female gender to the level of equality with males, on the basis of having been saved by Christ. Therefore, gender distinctions between males and females in their essence and nature, which cause females to be restricted in the expression of personhood within the Christian community, are removed. Females should not be disempowered within or outside the church community in any form on the basis of their sex.

Keywords Gender-specific persecution, Pauline theology, women, church, Galatians 3:28.

1. Introduction

Persecution generally involves the unfair treatment and subjugation of another person. It often includes physical brutality and is widely viewed as a serious violation of human rights. It is also the cumulative effect of numerous harms that affect a person’s subjective psychological make-up (Kelly 1993:645). Therefore, any actions and rules that demean and subjugate any person can be classified as persecution.

Gender-specific persecution (GsP)² can affect men or women, but women are disproportionately affected because of the unequal power relationships and structures within families, communities and countries. These inequalities can spill over into church settings, causing women to have limited decision-making power and

¹ Samuel Oluwatosin Okanlawon, PhD is a Senior Lecturer in Christian Theology, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. His research activity includes ensuring that female members of the ecclesiastical community are given more space to express their spiritual giftedness alongside their male counterparts and counter the marginalization of women and girls. This article uses British English. Article submitted: 11 April 2019; accepted: 12 May 2020. Email: samtoscares@yahoo.com; so.okanlawon@ui.edu.ng.

² In the context of this paper, gender-specific persecution relates to persecution resulting from a person’s sex, most commonly persecution of women because they are women.

to be under-represented in the church's leadership structure. Gender distinction, rather than gender distinctiveness, leads to GsP. Actions and attitudes that demean or subjugate women in the church context and which can be considered gender-specific include, but are not limited to, excluding women from some ecclesiastical offices (Kasomo 2010:129), theologies of women's silence, submission and sacrificial suffering (Fisher, Miller and Mayer 2020:35-36), and biblical interpretations that describe women as sinners, manipulators and temptresses. These actions are not found in every church congregation, and especially not in social contexts characterized by true democratic governance.

Previous studies of GsP have largely concerned national and international asylum laws and guidelines related to the topic (Kelly 1993; Hagglund 2015; LaViolette 2008; Chertoff 2017; Harris 2009), female refugee situations (Marshall and Barret, 2018; Crawley 2001; Haines 2003; Kirk 2010; United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees [UNHCR] 2008; Ankerbrand 2002; Anker 2001), feminist and gender-equality settings (Freedman 2015; Greatbach 1989), and the situation within the Christian community (Gilbert 2018; Moore 2015). Despite the contributions of these studies, this discourse needs to be further emphasized within the Christian community, especially as it relates to the non-physical persecution of women and girls.

Therefore, this paper examines the Pauline paradigm, "There is neither male nor female," in Galatians 3:28 as a faith-based approach to counter GsP of women and girls within the Christian community, from the perspective of a Christian based in Africa. I draw on J. G. Vander Watt's hermeneutic theory of contextual relevance, which emphasizes the similar and dissimilar elements between the world of the biblical text and that of the interpreter in the act of biblical interpretation. The relevant data come from the biblical text and analyses thereof, along with published materials on GsP. The focus is on derogatory attitudes towards women in the church that demean and subjugate them despite their status as God's creatures.

2. Gender-based persecution of women

Gender-based persecutions of women are connected by the common threat of gendered relations and power relations that ascribe particular roles and behaviours to women. They include the use of sexual violence as a means of power and control over women, forced marriage, targeted seduction and militia conscription (Fisher and Miller 2019:2). Also, they are based on a dysfunctional and hegemonic interpretation of the female gender, rooted in socio-cultural constructs (Fisher and Miller 2019:5) that question women's capacity to be human and declare that men must be in control. Sultana (2012:3-5) refers to this pattern as the "institutionalization of male dominance over women" and notes that it unavoidably upholds women's dependence on men.

Most practices relating to the gender-based persecution of women are grounded more in attitudes than in specific actions. They often emanate from a religious and cultural ethos that has grown out of the misinterpretation of religious texts and the misappropriation of oral traditions embedded in a culture. In the church context, women are sometimes persecuted for having transgressed the supposedly traditional mores of Christianity. Some consider women to be a second-level creation of God and so inferior to men; thus, they conclude, women should be subservient to men even in carrying out ecclesiastical roles.

In the context of this paper and Galatians 3:28, the persecution of women is not physical in nature; rather, it takes a form that demeans and devalues beings who were created in God's image. This devaluation of women can cause great psychological trauma and self-perception as inferior. It consists of the unequal and unfair treatment of women and girls on the basis of their being female. It is an internalized, ecclesial persecution rather than an externalized, violent one. Some consequences of this form of persecution are the domestication of women, regulation and control of women's sexuality (Sultana 2012:4), prevention of women from exercising their full human rights, reduction of their participation in the full life of the ecclesial communities, low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and increased risk of depression and anxiety.

3. The context of Galatians 3:28

The passage being considered comes as the climax of a discussion concerning the relationship between law and faith in Christ that runs throughout Galatians 3. It furthers Paul's discourse on justification by faith or by observance of the law. Generally, Galatians was written as a protest against the corruption of Christ's gospel (Tenney 1989). Thus, Christian liberty is the central theme of Galatians.

The context of Galatians 3:28 concerns, first, the nature of justification or, more specifically, the condition of full membership in the Abrahamic covenant with its attendant blessings. Second, it discusses the social implications of being saved (Davis 1976; MacArthur 2010; Balge 1981). Paul's immediate aim in writing was to dissuade the Galatian believers from submitting to circumcision and from conforming to Jewish identity as an essential prerequisite for participating in God's new covenantal people.

The Judaizing heresy, whereby Jewish Christians were compelling the Gentile Christians to live by Jewish practices (1:6-7; 5:2-3, 12; 6:11-15), and circumcision in particular, had become prevalent in Galatia (Donovan 2016). The Judaizers were demanding Torah observance. At the time when Paul wrote this letter, there was a deep division between two cultures within the body of Christ: Jews and Gentiles. The Gentile was uncircumcised and was previously no child of Abraham. But in Christ, the barrier

has now been broken (Ephesians 2:11-18). Therefore, no distinguishing qualities are important for entrance into or functioning within the church of Christ.

4. Interpreting Galatians 3:28

Galatians 3:28: οὐκ ἔνι Ἰουδαῖος οὐδὲ Ἕλληγ, οὐκ ἔνι δοῦλος οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερος, οὐκ ἔνι ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ· πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἰς ἓστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (NIV).

Fung (1988) states that Galatians 3:28 falls within Paul's exposition of the purpose of the law, that is, to be a slave-guardian on the path towards maturity and unrestrained enjoyment of sonship (cf. 3:24; 4:1-7). This verse is part of a paragraph that commences at vv. 26-27: "For you are all God's sons through faith in Christ Jesus. For so many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (KJV). This is Paul's affirmation of the believers' status in Christ. He then mentions, in v. 28, a triple pair of distinctions, by ethnicity, social class and gender. The verse emphasizes the vertical consequence of salvation for the believer (i.e. our relationship to God). "There is no male or female" is followed by "You are all one in Christ Jesus."

Grobler (2011) notes that Galatians 3:28 is made up of three negated couplets as well as an explanatory clause. Two of these couplets are positioned within the recipe that there is no "there is neither" X *oude* Y (X nor Y), but the third couplet contains a slight change: "there is neither male 'καὶ' (and) female." A different combination is apparently used here to connect two contrasting nouns. Degner (2001) says that the reason is not totally clear, but that when "male" (ἐνι ἄρσεν) occurs with "female" (θηλυ), the couplet is almost always καὶ. Hove (1999) argues that the variation, in conjunction with the third pair, is an intentional reference to Genesis, where God created humanity as "male and female" prior to the Fall, and it was very good (Genesis 1:27, 31).

Paul's declaration that there is "neither male and female" stands in marked contrast to commonly accepted patterns of privilege and prejudice in the ancient world. Women were considered inferior within both Jewish and Greek culture. Hellenistic men regularly thanked God for allowing them to be born as human beings and not as beasts, as Greeks and not as barbarians, as citizens and not as slaves, as men and not as women. Jewish men commonly recited a prayer each morning which stated, "I thank thee, God, that thou hast not made me a slave or a woman or a Gentile dog" (Esler 2014).

Hence, Paul is emphasizing in Galatians 3:26-28 that men and women enjoy a new, equal and exalted status before God. Thus, the female gender has been raised from degradation and denigration. Earthly relationships are put in the perspec-

tive of salvation history. All persons in Christ have the same salvation status before God, though they do not necessarily have the same function. There are no ethnic, economic or gender distinctions. This was contrary to the cosmopolitanism being promoted by Paul’s contemporaries (i.e. Greek philosophers) in the first century. Paul promoted the community of all human beings. His use of contrasts in this verse covers the full range of the most profound distinctions made within human society: racial or cultural, social or economic, sexual or gender-based (Witherington 2009). Paul does not intend these three divisions as comprehensive, but rather as illustrative. He is saying that, in Christ, all the barriers that divide one person from another are rendered null and void.

According to most Bible scholars, Paul’s emphasis in this verse is not on abolishing gender differences, promulgating the Magna Carta of gender equality, or denying human categories generally (Botha 2000; Gundry-Volf 1997; Eisenbaum 2000; Witherington 2009). His concern is to show that neither being male nor being female is of any importance for being in Christ. As Gundry-Volf (1997) asserts, Paul has the “adiaphorization (this word comes from the Greek *adiaphora* for indifferent matters) of sex difference” in mind. This means that being male or female does not bring any advantage or disadvantage. Tolmie (2014) concurs that there is a deconstruction of the male hegemonic sentimentalities that pervaded the religio-socio-cultural contexts of Paul’s time. The apostle re-prioritises ethnic, socio-economic and gender identities by subordinating them to “being in Christ.” Modern sociologists term this process “recategorization” (Brawley 2014). Every other distinction, including gender distinction, is subordinated to the Christian identity, which becomes the superior identity.

Paul, in Galatians 3:28, elevates the female gender to equality with males on the basis of their salvation status in Christ, within a socio-religio-cultural context that had denigrated and degraded the female sex. Thus, gender distinctions between males and females, in their essence and nature, are removed and a complementary relationship between both sexes is established. This does not deny that the roles women and men play in the family, church or other communal contexts may be not different, dependent on the particular context. Paul envisages a social ideal of harmony and connection, where those factors in the society that create division, conflict, and persecution have been removed.

5. Theological reflection on Galatians 3:28 in relation to gender-specific persecution of women

One’s theological viewpoint determines one’s actions and reactions. Theology drives practice. The theological implication of this verse is that as the gospel has changed our vertical relationship (God to humans), it also changes our horizontal

relationships (person to person). Paul's emphasis is on the relationship between ethics (Christian behaviour) and theology.

Paul's logic in Galatians 3:28 applies to ethnicity, class and gender. His theology calls for inclusiveness in ethnic, social and gender terms. With respect to gender, the arguments against women serving in positions of church leadership are much the same as the arguments presumably made by Paul's opponents to restrict leadership to Jewish believers only. He writes against the dominating gender construct of ethno-Jewish and Hellenistic-Roman society. It was tailored towards developing a radically new, Christian mindset within the existing cultural and religious context.

Paul's theology in Galatians 3:28 is not only soteriological but ecclesiological. As Fee (2000) asserts, it would be theologically disastrous to divorce ecclesiology from soteriology in this passage. Appealing to Galatians 2:11-14, Snodgrass (1986) contends that the phrase "male and female" in Galatians 3:28 has social implications, which lead to encouraging women to participate in ministry as they did in the New Testament. This is an indication of ecclesiastical equality. Paul's corporate Christology introduces within the Christian community a non-gendered valuation of persons belonging to that community. The old dualisms (Jew-Gentile, free-slave, male-female) are obliterated. Paul argues for a corporate identity that is geared towards social unity.

This teaching is not based on the current climate of the culture. It is not liberal, conservative or political; rather, it is the direct result of the gospel. It is a statement about our equal value in the eyes of God and about how we should learn to view one another. Since all Christians are in Christ, we are all one. The racial, social or gender identities that formerly divided the people have lost significance. God no longer sees human distinctions. Therefore, we must not prevent women from taking up leadership positions in the church. The calling to even the ministerial offices identified in Ephesians 4:11 is a *charisma*, a gift of the Spirit. If God has gifted a woman, who are we to resist?

There is no enumeration of gender-specific tasks in the New Testament (Romans 12:3-6). As 1 Corinthians 12 points out, the church is the body of Christ, so every member of the body – that is, each Christian – functions as they are equipped or graced. Moreover, redemption has made males and females of equal status. Thus, by implication, the dignity of both males and females is of equal importance and the church, as an institution, must endeavour to eliminate all situations that promote non-violent persecution and erode the dignity of persons God has elevated. The church must especially protect the dignity of women and girls because they are more vulnerable. We should not use the specific ecclesial contexts of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and Titus 2:4-5 to override a generalized ecclesial context indicated in Galatians 3:28. Paul affirms the full equality of men and women in ministry in other

passages as well (1 Corinthians 11:5; 12:12-20; Romans 12:4-5, 16; Colossians 3:15).

In the church, our nationality, status and sex remain. No one should be discriminated against or persecuted on the basis of that person’s gender, race or economic status. God’s act of creating humanity in Genesis 1:27 shows that God created gender as constitutive for the human condition. The distinction between male and female is essential for propagation of the human family, as introduced by God before the Fall (Genesis 3). Men and women function differently in the Christian community, but no one should be limited in operation on the basis of their gender.

6. Recommendations for action

The following recommendations for action arise from the foregoing analysis:

1. Christian theologians should continue to articulate a theology that encompasses violent and non-violent persecution, rather than addressing only the persecution that inflicts physical pain and injury, and to adapt this theology to present-day circumstances. This is a necessary part of the clamour for religious freedom.
2. Academic theology should emphasize the interconnectedness of both male and female roles within the ecclesial community through relevant topics in church history, biblical studies, practical theology and missiology.
3. Church leaders and theologians should provide a counter-cultural response, in relation to the subjugation of women in the church, through teachings and practices that elevate the personhood of Christian women and girls. This is crucial to the church’s resiliency and witness in the midst of violent and non-violent persecution.
4. Christian women must be given the latitude to exercise their spiritual gifts along with men, including being placed in any hierarchy of church leadership as affirmed in Ephesians 4:11-16, to keep the body of Christ functioning appropriately. The walls of socio-cultural stereotypes must not be erected in the church, for they will become an instrument of gender persecution and will curtail religious freedom.

7. Conclusion

The radical shift towards inclusion of women at all levels of church leadership that began in the twentieth century must be sustained. This push is not just for gender equality but for gender equity and complementarity. Christian women should not be defined by sexuality and reproduction, but as veritable and equal partners in church life, in a variety of capacities as the Holy Spirit empowers. Both chauvinism and feminism are wrong; men and women should be allowed to fulfil their callings

to minister to God's people and to care for creation in their own unique ways. An appropriate contextual interpretation and application of Galatians 3:28 prevent the text from being used as a theological trump card to promote discrimination, segregation and competition.

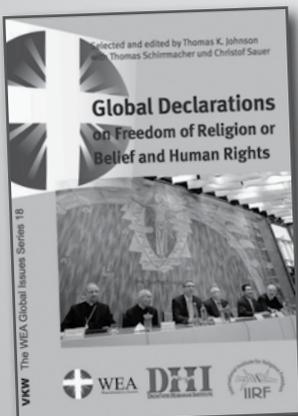
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Global Declarations on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Human Rights



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