

# Truth Discovered: Biblical Equality in the Kenyan Context

By the Revd Dominic Misolo

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My wife, Christine, and I celebrate the glory of discovering God's will for men and women as equal human beings. God used this simple discovery to teach us a radically different understanding about his will concerning the relationship between women and men. It has changed our lives and it is already confronting the patriarchy of the culture and church in Kenya.

I was born in a traditional, male-dominated, polygamous family that held to common cultural convictions that depict men as superior to women. Our culture views women as inferior in many ways. We have common sayings that refer to men as pillars, great bulls and buffaloes, heroes, and lions. Meanwhile, women are referred to as mongooses, because the mongoose belongs not in the home but in the bush. This is a reference to the belief that a woman's destiny is determined in marriage. She does not truly belong with her birth family but with her future husband. If she grows to marriageable age and dies unmarried, burying her at her place of birth is thought to bring bad luck to younger siblings and a curse on the community. Thus, every girl must be married. Once she is married, the husband is considered the protector and provider of the family, and the givers of children. Women are simply the bearers of children, and are to be housewives and help their husbands raise the children. These days many women are educated and act as bread winners, but are still expected to perform the traditional duties at home. This background and cultural orientation influenced me very powerfully, and I grew up believing the lie that males are superior to females and should have power over them.

## The Truth Concealed

In the Kenyan context, this is the cultural lens that informs ministry, both in preaching and interpreting Scripture. For this reason, I strongly believe that church ministers have contributed greatly to the creation of unjust societies and structures that destroy and harm females. Even before European missionaries arrived in Kenya, traditional religious beliefs did not allow women to be priests and diviners. They were perceived to be unclean, especially during menstruation. The church has brought much healing to our culture, but still upholds patriarchy by misinterpreting the Bible.

Scripture has been misused to affirm male superiority. Eve, it is said, was created from Adam as an afterthought. Then, she was deceived by the snake because she was the weaker sex and because she was not an original creation (because she was created from Adam). Even worse than her original sin is the sexual intercourse she makes available to Adam. This is blamed for bringing down humanity and causing the suffering of the world. In the New Testament, Paul's

commands for women to submit to their husbands to be silent in church are taken out of context to prove that inequality is God's ideal.

Teachings about marriage often enable domestic violence. Since the Bible teaches that marriage is God-ordained and valuable, many churches teach that no marriage should be nullified. Thus, even badly abused and battered women cannot walk away from a marriage. And because sex is a taboo subject in our culture, churches do not address sexual abuse. By teaching that the Bible upholds patriarchy and by failing to address domestic abuse, the church has contributed to a culture that allows women to be violated and beaten, even to death. For many years, I did not recognize the problems and injustice of these teachings.

By the time I began to attend university, I was already an ordained priest with four years of experience, and I had completed a diploma course in pastoral theology. Yet, I must confess that despite my training and experience, I held to these mistaken interpretations and theologies and believed very strongly in the supremacy of man over woman as natural and God-ordained. The idea of biblical equality was foreign and unknown to me.

## The Truth Discovered

In 2009, I was in my first year of studies at Saint Paul's University. I was searching the library for books and journals for class assignment when I came across *Priscilla Papers*, the academic journal of Christians for Biblical Equality. As I read these journals, I became curious and interested to learn more. They critically challenged my traditional worldview with facts about Bible, faith, and society. I continued reading *Priscilla Papers* not only for academic adventure but as a theological document with great potential to change my life and ministry. Before long, I was convinced that the Bible demands equality of males and females. This conviction led to immediate changes, which God is already using to heal many people.

The news of biblical equality transformed my relationship with my wife, and also challenged us to engage in new kinds of ministry. I no longer see my wife, Christine, as just a housewife; now she is a close partner with potential, skills, and the ability to chart her own destiny and to support our family. We are now able to discuss important issues maturely together as equals. When I told Christine about my dream to spread biblical equality, she told me, "I feel the need to stand by you on this journey, and my call is to look into the practical, daily challenges faced by poor women in the community."

We concluded that to follow this vision, Christine should attend university and get a bachelor's degree in education. In addition to being a very smart and gifted, God is already putting her gifts to work in the community. She has formed a group called the Gender Alliance for Community Health and Development. The group, made up of women from several local churches, explores ways to empower women through farming, poultry-keeping, savings and loans, and basic education about human rights.

## The Truth Brings Healing

Biblical equality is currently confronting patriarchy and its devastating consequences. As we preached biblical equality through projects and Bible studies across churches and community groups, we saw God is releasing his people from oppression, abuses and injustices. We decided

to make this ministry official by registering a new faith-based, non-profit organization called Ekklesia Foundation for Gender Education (EFOGE). EFOGE has become an African leader in championing gender justice and equality from a biblical perspective.

When we first began speaking publicly, some priest and church leaders argued that our teachings were heretical. Others believe that we are like several popular feminist groups in Kenya that have caused harm to families and marriages by creating a battle for supremacy between men and women. But there are others, such as Bishop Johannes Angela of the Anglican Diocese of Bondo, who recognize our mission to free people from injustice, and offer their full support. Thanks to support from many partners and friends around the world, we are at work on many projects geared toward justice and equality.

We are working for equality for students and for church leaders. Through partnerships with seven schools in the Bondo and Rarieda districts of Kenya, we are training youth in biblical leadership, gender justice, and equality. We've been able to help pay the school fees of eighteen needy students, and we are providing feminine hygiene products to girls so that they can continue to be in class during menstruation and therefore receive the same education as their male counterparts. We are planning an annual pan-African leadership conference to emphasize biblical equality among leaders, and we are helping to coordinate emerging egalitarian groups in Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Ghana, South Sudan, and Nigeria.

We see great potential for the healing power of biblical equality in the Kenyan church. We have seen churches ordaining women and raising them to influential positions. Recently, the Anglican Diocese of Bondo installed the Venerable Monica Owiti as archdeacon. She is the first woman in all of western Kenya to hold this office. Two female priests have been promoted to the office of rural deans, who have authority to oversee many churches and parishes. More and more female priests are being considered for ordination, and our neighbouring churches are opening up to women in leadership. Currently we have more than fifteen churches that are applying to partner with us in doing the work of biblical equality.

The church is one of the strongest social institutions in Kenya and in many parts of Africa. In the past, this has meant that it has been able to harm women by teaching patriarchy. But today, this means the church has great potential to change people's attitudes on gender and shape cultural values to heal communities, families, and individuals. We are already seeing this take place when churches embrace God's truth about gender. Women and men are being healed and released from oppression. Biblical equality is real and we are witnesses. It is through this ministry that we can true show our love to one another and bringing healing to humankind.

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