

PHOEBE AND PRISCAL IN THE CONTEXT OF WOMEN MINISTRY TODAY

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Abstract: *The Priesthood of women in the New Testament in the mainline churches is a controversial issue that calls for attention. Priesthood should be given without consideration for sex. Since the priest is one who communes with God and communicates with the flocks. Above all, ordination is a ministry of service, which is purely pastoral, and administrative, there should be no obstacle on the way of women aspiring to be priest. This is because in other facets of life women have proven to be efficient and capable administrators and leaders. The Bible conformed from the beginning; females have taken an active and important part in the promotion of the gospel. They seem, more than others to have contributed to Christ of their substance. They were His most faithful attendants, "last at the cross, and first at sepulcher Phoebe was a servant of the church, as succored of Paul, and of many others.*

Keywords: Priesthood, Women, Phoebe, Priscal, Ministry

Introduction

The agitation for the ordination of women to the priesthood today is still on the increase. Ministers and theologians are still posing serious questions regarding the historical exclusion of women ordination in the ministry of the Church. This question has only recently assumed any urgent status.

The Old Testament Hebrew Society featured prophetesses, such as Miriam (Exodus 15:20) and Deborah (Judges 4:4) and the New Testament contains records of female evangelists, Deaconess, beginning with Anna (Luke 2:38-39) and the woman of Samaria (John 4:28-29 and of "Fellow Labourers" with the apostles including Euodias and Syntyche (Phil. 4:3). Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. (Rom. 16:1). Priscilla and Aquila, (Rom. 16:3).

Even Medieval Europe had ordained Abbesses who sometimes were given the same authority as men – the rights to hear confession, preach, read the scripture in public, administer ecclesiastical and religious ceremonies involving both men and women, and who were invested with cape, miter and stole.

In the letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 2:11-15) women are not only forbidden to teach but also to speak in the assembly {1 Corinthians 14:34-35.} The passage implies that women should be excluded from ordination to the office of Christian Ministry. And with the church's belief in the teaching of Paul, women are subordinate to men indeed, without mincing words, most human cultures give the women a subordinate place vis-à-vis the man. Although many human societies including Nigeria, have had great female leaders in both the secular and the religious sectors, such women have been regarded and categorized as exceptional or iron lady. Orebiyi ,2001

Many potentials and ideas have wasted as a result of cultural discrimination by the concept and practice of a sexual hierarchy that makes and keeps female as a group

subordinate to male. In the history of Nigeria, such women as Queen Amina, Idia Moremi and Madam Tinubu and Iyalode Ibadan, who have in their time commanded the respect of both men and women, fall into the category of the strong and exceptional.

With the issue of human civilization, the rise of female education and of the freedom of women to compete with men in politics, business women have proven that they are not inferior to men neither are they incapable of achievement and leadership.

There has emerged recently, movements for women liberation, and some theologians now see the question of the ordination of women as part of the rights of women.

This study is to highlight the roles of Phoebe and Prisca in the context of the Methodist Church Nigeria.

Women's Roles in the New Testament

In the New Testament, particularly in the letters of Paul, there are women who in addition to being wives were involved in itinerant Ministry, using their gifts and talents for the furtherance of the gospel of Christ. They were not limited to domestic duties alone.

Bonnie Tharston posits that the list of the functional roles assumed by women in Romans 16 is impressive and includes that of Deacons, Prostrants (Patron), fellow-workers, hard-workers, and apostles (missionary). Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Junia, Ampleatus Tryphosa and Tryhaena and others were women who helped in the public ministry of Jesus Christ and Paul.

The words and actions of Jesus with respect to women are remarkable. In the Gospels, Mary and Martha were disciples of Jesus Christ (Luke 10:38-42) in Luke 8:1-3 when Jesus went on his preaching mission, he had the company not only of the twelve but also women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary, called Magdalene from whom seven demons had gone out, Joana, the wife of Chuza,

Herod's steward, Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their means.²² Also, Luke records that the women had followed him from Galilee (Luke 24:49) He even allowed a sinful woman to approach him in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:3-18).

To the great astonishment of his own disciples Jesus conversed publicly with the Samaritan woman (John 4:27) and he took no notice of the state of impurity of the woman who had suffered from hemorrhages (Mathew 9:20-22).

He compassionately pardoned the woman caught in adultery and by this action he shows that one must not be more severe toward the fault of a woman than toward that of a man (John 8:11).

He departed from Mosaic law and Jewish custom, and affirmed the equality of the right and duties of men and women with regard to the marriage bond (Mark 10:2-11; Matt 19:3-9). Legrand, 2006 maintains that "contrary to the Jewish Modality, which did not accord value to the testimony of woman, as Jewish law attests; it was nevertheless woman who were the first to have the privilege to seeing the risen Lord, and it is they who were charged by Jesus to take the first Pascal message to the Apostles themselves (Mathew 28:7-10, Luke 24:9-10; John 20:11-18) in order to prepare the latter to become the official witnesses to the resurrection."²⁵

From the above, we may conclude that Jesus paid special attention to women and ignored the prejudice of his time even though women were not included in the group of his apostles. Abogunrin,²⁶ noted that "it is true that no woman was among the Apostles. This is so because it would have ruined his ministry and reputation in the light of the then culture; an unmarried woman was rare to come by among the Jews unless she was a public woman. Jesus could not have broken up homes just because he wanted to have a female disciple at all cost. He granted women privileges beyond what was allowed in Judaism. Also, Jesus would probably have endangered the lives of his disciples if he had included witnessing to the Gentiles in the commission. No Jew who knew that they had entered the homes of the Gentiles would allow them to come near their homes. It should be noted that some of the women who followed Christ during His ministry assumed a prominent role at the time of the crucifixion and resurrection. At the risk of their lives they followed Christ to the cross and they followed His body to the burial place. They wanted to show their tender love for him by returning later to embalm His body with spices and ointment (Luke 23:55-56; Mathew 27:59-61; Mark 15:47, 16:17-28). When the women returned to the tomb after the Sabbath to anoint Christ's body, they were honoured with the news of the resurrection. Their loyalty and devotion to Christ were rewarded by their being the first to encounter the risen saviour (Mathew 28:9, Mark 16:9; John 20:14) and to be commissioned to break the news of the resurrection to the

disciples (Mark 16:7; Mathew 28:7, 10). In the passion narratives the women clearly show a greater loyalty, courage and faith than the twelve disciples.

The same women who ministered to Jesus during His journey and at His death were also present among the disciples in the period between the resurrection and Pentecost. Presumably they were also among those upon whom the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost (Acts 1:12-14, 12-14, 2:22-47)³⁰ Therefore, one can say that women shared with men in the witness in the beginning of the gospel proclamation. Women were visible and active not only in the ministry of Jesus, but also in the life of the apostolic church. Immediately after Christ's ascension, the disciples gathered in the upper room together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers (Acts 1:14). These women were there not to cook for the men, but to pray with them and seek divine guidance over who should be Judas' successor. The women who had played a significant role in the ministry of Christ now continue their service within the life of the community.

Similarly, women joined the expanding church in large numbers. Luke notes that "more than ever, believers were added to the Lord, Multitudes both of men and women" (Acts 5:145). When Philip preached the Gospel in Samaria, the result is the same; many were baptized, both men and women (Acts 8:12). There is no doubt that the apostolic church followed Christ's example by including women in the ministry of the church. As significant as the roles of women were in the earthly ministry of Jesus, it must be noted that no woman was included among the twelve.³²

Consequently, women were described as "fellow—workers." Women distinguished themselves in the apostolic church not only at the level of local church but also in the wider missionary outreach of the church. Much of the missionary activities reported in the New Testament focus on Paul and his co-workers many of whom were women.³³ Romans 16 records several women whose missionary endeavours contributed significantly to the life and growth of the church.

It is noteworthy that both Paul and Luke mention Priscilla almost always before her husband, Aquila presumably because she was the more prominent in missionary endeavours. In Acts she engaged with her husband Aquila, in teaching the great Orator Appollos (Acts 18:26) Priscilla, therefore must have been well-grounded in the Christian faith and a most capable instructor.³³ Paul refers to this couple as "fellow-workers". The term was often used by Paul to characterize those persons who worked with him.

Another position where women featured is Deaconesses role. There is evidence for the existence of women deaconesses in the period of the apostolic church. Phoebe was mentioned as a deaconess (διδασκάλου) of Cenchaere in Romans 16:1-2 Deaconesses were teachers of the Christian doctrine. After the New Testament times, the deacons (διδασκάλου) became

clearly identifiable ministers in the church especially in the East. They became necessary because of the more fulsome baptismal anointing of adult women converts. The candidates for baptism entered the pool naked. Deaconess (*διδάκονον*) plunged her into the water three times and completed the anointing with oil applied over the entire body.³⁵

McCrath, 2002 writes that the “deaconesses” (*διδάκονοι*) also performed a host of other duties. The deaconess instructed the female catechumens, acted as intermediary between baptized women and the bishop, conducted the necessary physical examination when a virgin was accused of breaking her vows. She guarded the church door against the entrance of women who were not members of the community and, sitting in a chair similar to the Bishop’s Cathedral, presided over the women’s section at logical gathering. It was also the task of the deaconess to prepare the bodies of the faithful for burial. The New Testament and the practice in the apostolic churches support both the inclusion and the exclusion of women ordination to the pastoral ministry. To sum it all, in the (Greek) New Testament the radical break in Patriarchal structure provides a new order of freedom in which women as followers are welcomed by Jesus into a discipleship of equal. They were included in the earliest congregation and also became local leaders. While at the same time Mark and John placed women on an equal level with men as witnesses to Christ (John 4:1-42; I Timothy 2:11-13).

We cannot speak of the exclusion of women as priest in the Greek Testament because this model of ministry or leadership does not exist in that period, rather, the royal priesthood applies to all members of the new people, who live by the mercy of God as signified by baptism in the death of Jesus Christ’s calling to service for both women and men. In baptism all put on Christ or are joined to His resurrected body as the first fruits of the New Creation (Gal. 3:27-28).

All receive the same gifts of the one spirit (Corinthians 12:13; Col. 3:9-11) Ordination as the laying on of hands was not practical in the Pauline church in regard to the role of Presbyter and deacon. In the Palestinian Churches, ordination was practical in setting aside the presbyter or Elder in a manner similar to Jewish custom.

The Roles of Phoebe, Prisca and Other Women in Romans 16:1-7

The participation of women visible and active; women were visible and active not only in the ministry of Jesus, but also in the life of the apostolic church. Immediately after Christ’s ascension, the disciples gathered in the upper room” together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brother” (Acts 1:14). These women were there not to cook for the men, but to pray with them and to seek divine guidance over whom should be Judas’ successor. The women who had played a significant role in the ministry of Christ now continue their service with the life of the community.

On the day of Pentecost women were in the upper room together with the disciples when the Holy Spirit was poured out and all of them began speaking in tongues (Acts 2:1-40). Peter explained the event to the skeptical crowd by quoting Joel: Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy and on my maid servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit” (Acts 2:17-18). The specific reference to “daughters” and “Maid servants” presumably served to justify why the women also had received the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁶¹

Women in the Expanding church. Women joined the expanding church in large numbers. One of the early converts in Jerusalem was Mary, the mother of John Mark. She offered her house as a meeting place for believers in that part of the city. It must have been an important meeting place, since Peter went there immediately after his release from prison (Acts 12:12) some scholars believe that the upper room was in her house.⁶²

When the Gospel reached Europe, women again were prominent. The first European convert was a woman named Lydia, “from the city of Thyatira, a seller of Purple goods” (Acts 16:14). The next convert mentioned by Luke was also a woman, a former demon-possessed slave an example of how the gospel reached all classes (Acts 16:16).

The rest of the book of Acts is replete with example of women who responded to Paul’s proclamation of the gospel by becoming active participants in the life of the church.

In Thessalonica and Berea among the many who believed there were “not a few Greek women of high standing” (Acts 17:4, 12). In Athens one woman, Damans, is specifically mentioned among the few who believed (Acts 17:34). In Corinth Prisca, together with her husband Aquila, took an active role in instructing the learned Apollos (Act 18:2, 26).

Charitable Service: A major need in the primitive church was caring for the needy, the sick, the widows, the orphans and the visitors. The apostles were made forcefully aware of such a need soon after Pentecost by the murmuring of the Hellenists over the apparent neglect of their widows (Acts 6:1). To remedy the problem “seven men of good repute” were appointed at that time. (Acts 6:3) Soon women, especially widows, became active in the charitable services of the church, communicating Christian love by deeds of mercy and hospitality (1 Tim. 5:9-10)

Deaconess; closely related to the ministry of widows is that of women who became known as “deaconesses”. This ministry is highlighted by Paul’s reference to Phoebe, a deaconess of the church Cenchrae she has been a helper of many and of myself as well” (Rom. 16:1-2). The word “deaconess” is a translation of the Greek *diakonos*, a masculine name which was used both for men and women with two distinct meanings.

In the vast majority of its occurrences in the New Testament, the term *diakonos* simply means “servant” or “one who ministers” to another. Paul, for example speaks of himself and his co-workers as *diakonoi* (servants, ministers) of Christ, of the Gospel and the new covenant (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; Eph. 3:7; 1Thess. 3:2). He also speaks of his apostolic work as a *diakonia* (Rom. 11:13).

In a few cases, the term, *diakonos* is used to describe the church office of “deacons” (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-13). Here, one is not sure whether *diakonos* is used in the general sense of ministering or in the restricted sense of an established diaconate. The question then is to determine whether Paul is commending Phoebe as a member of the church at Cenchreae who has served others.

Diakonos is used by Paul in a technical sense to describe the official role Phoebe played in the church.

The main reasons are three:

First, the use of the participle “being” (*ousan*) in Greek and the connection with the church – “Phoebe, being a deacon of the church in Cenchreae” ... reads like an official title. Paul may have chosen to introduce Phoebe to the Romans by her official role in her home church, especially if she was the carrier of his letter, as is generally believed.

Second, the characterization of Phoebe as a “helper of many” (Rom. 16:2), suggests that she played a vital role in the Cenchrean church by offering assistance to many, including Paul himself. Such a service was associated especially with the office of the deacon.

Third, in 1 Timothy 3:11 Paul describes the qualifications of a group of women serving in the church – qualifications which are point for point parallel to that of the deacons given immediately before (1 Tim. 3:8-10). “The parallel lists of qualifications strongly suggest” as James B. Hurley Observes, “that the function of these women was parallel to that of the deacons.”⁶⁴

The reason why Paul does not call these women deaconesses (*diako-nissa*) is simply because such a term did not yet exist. The term first appears in the syriac Didascalia (ch. 16), a document written in the early part of the third century. The masculine form “deacon *diakonos*” was used for both men and women as in the case of Pheobe (Rom 16:1). In 1 Timothy 3:11, Paul uses the word ‘women ... *gynaikas*’ instead of “deacons *diakonoi*” presumably to avoid confusion, since he had already used *diakonos* to introduce the men in 1 Timothy 3:8. Thus, it would seem best to understand the “women” of 1 Timothy 3 as a group of persons who served the church in a similar capacity to that of the deacons.

Women as “Fellow-workers.” Women distinguished themselves in the apostolic church not only at the level of local churches, but also, in the wider missionary outreach of the church. Much of the missionary activity reported in the New Testament focuses on Paul and his co-workers, many of whom were women.

In Romans 16, Paul greets several women whose missionary endeavors contributed significantly to the life and growth of the church. Outstanding among them, is Prisca (a diminutive of Priscilla) and her husband, Aquila. Of them, Paul says, “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks; greet also the church in their house” (Rom. 16:3-5).

This couple lived in Rome until about A.D. 49, when they were forced to move to Corinth after Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome (Acts 18:1-3). From Corinth, they moved their tent making business first to Ephesus, (Acts 18:18-26; 1 Cor. 16:19) and then, back to Rome.

Paul refers to this couple as “fellow-workers”. The term was often used by Paul to characterize those persons who worked with him, including Titus and Timothy (Rom 16:9, 21; 1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 1:24; 8:23; Phil. 2:25; 4:3; col. 4:11; 1 Thess 3:2).

Recommendations

Women in the contemporary church are challenged to be faithful servants of the Lord Jesus Christ who has called them into the ministry of the church.

Therefore, if women are allowed to play their due roles in the ministry, the church will grow more spiritually, numerically and financially. Owing to cultural misconceptions and misinterpretation of the Bible, women are hindered from playing their God-given role in the church alongside their male counterparts. The church will enjoy more peace and a touch of compassion if Christian women are sincerely accepted and allowed to make full use of the gifts God has given them.

Lorry Lutz, narrates a situation when women saved a hopeless situation in Somalia. After the withdrawal of the peacekeeping troops there, the warlords renewed fighting and killing. The women of Somalia formed peace committees made up of the elderly, respected women of each of the clans. According to Lutz, they confronted the warlords reminding them that it was their children who were suffering, and their farmlands, which could not be planted or harvested without a government structure, without an official head of state, these committees become the negotiators for peace, the providers of food and the distribution network for

what little supplies get into country.

This shows that God can use a woman to achieve certain things which men cannot achieve. If the church recognizes the potentials and gifts of women, it will do well to overcome the unprofitable bias on gender, which has undermined the growth and the general welfare of the church. The Somalia women cited above learned that they could make an impact without guns or positions of power in the areas of life and death affecting other homes and children. Perhaps nobody would have officially appointed them to form such committees at peace times. Development workers have come to the same conclusion. Women tend to be more reliable, more effective in implementing changes in their communities that will help their children and raise the standard of life.

The church will benefit from tapping the untapped resources of potentialities of women bias. The combination of male and female working together represents the complete creation of God; when he looked at male and female and saw that all He had made was very good (Genesis 1:31). Thus, if the church encourages men and women to work together, they can combine their strength. Examples abound of women who have been used of God immensely. In Philippians 4:3, Paul talks of some women who toiled along with him in spreading the good news. He compared them with "Clement and the rest of his fellow workers whose names are in the Book of Life. This shows that God uses males, as well as females. It should be noted that "the great commission does not exempt anyone. Every Christian, whether male or female; should work together without restraint by every possible means to become active witness, confessor, testifier or proclaimers of the good news of every creature."

The Lord Jesus Christ gave a woman (Mary Magdalene) the responsibility to deliver the report of his resurrection to men (John 20:11-17). The story of a blind woman, Frances Jane Van Alstyne, who composed Methodist Hymn 422 is an example of what God can do through women. Many more examples could be cited of women with whom God has worked as single ladies or married women.

On the basis of that affirmation, these are the recommendations for women in the Methodist Church Nigeria.

➤ The conference of Methodist Church Nigeria should

undertake a study on the Christian Theology of the human person in order to dispel all Biblical misconceptions that form the basis of opposition to women's ordination.

- Women should be recognized and integrated in the communion of love. To recognize that, to have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and they are fully integrated into the community through their baptism, and participation in the Eucharist.
- That the collaboration of men and women is indispensable for evangelizing the world; and for renewing the life of the church.
- Women, in particular should be given special theological education which would increase their courage and self confidence and enable them free themselves from the societal prejudice and negative stereotypic image which they have come to accept.
- There should be informed and serious discussion on the issue of the ordination of women at all levels; such discussion should be carried out under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is essential therefore, that the discussions be undertaken prayerfully that we may have God's grace and be open to his guidance rather than being motivated by purely human considerations.
- Church should work on demolishing blocks to women's full participation in church by exposing female stereotypes and analyzing socio-economic roles that oppress women.

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