

## A Study of the Roles of Phoebe and Prisca in the Epistle to the Romans in the Context of the Methodist Church Nigeria

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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 gender. 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, Book of Romans, Ministry

### Introduction

The problem of an existing gap in gender poverty especially as it affects the women calls for concern in the society at large and the church in particular. The Bible and African Traditional Religion both agree that the woman is a creation of God’ created purposely for a specific mission in the plan of God for the world.

*And Adam said, this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man, Gen. 2:23*

This verse may have several meaning; “taken out of man” It can equally mean “subject to man’s dominion and lordship” as the case is in many African societies.

“Bones of my bones, flesh of my flesh” on the other hand can mean that she is part of man, equal with man, absolutely essential to man. This shows that she was created in the image of God like the man and was never intended to be inferior.

Jewish tradition and culture, however, gave no prominence to women in both social and religious spheres, in fact, contempt, discrimination and demeaning references often characterized rabbinic teachings about women’. Rabbis were not even encouraged to teach (Luke 10:39) or speak to women (John 4:27) Jewish culture is solely Patriarchal.

Yoruba culture is, to a large extent, similar to Jewish culture in this respect. The Yoruba women’s primary vocation is motherhood. The superiority of men over women is unquestionable. Women always play subordinates roles at home, in politics and to some extent in religion. Women were identified with leakage of secrets; therefore they were banned from the council of men when decisions were being taken and implemented. Yoruba culture is also patriarchal and women are not seen as equal to men.<sup>2</sup>

It is noteworthy, however, that right from the onset women has been seen as inferior to men not until 19<sup>th</sup> century that women have been recognized in the society. In most of the culture that women have been the poorest of the poor.

It is sadden that the church of God that suppose to be a source of total salvation, spiritual, economic and political are still being relegated women to background.

Thus, as much as one cannot deny the fact that there are still some restrictions on women’s role to equality with men in the area of politics and religion, there is need to appreciate and acknowledge the fact the things have changed considerably from what it used to be – a situation in which women were not given any prominence or any chance in policy making. Time was when women were banned from Councils of men when decisions were being taken and implemented.

There is an urgent need in our society today for women like Rosa Park (1955) whose act of protest galvanized America’s civil rights revolution<sup>4</sup>. By her refusal to give up her seat to a white person in the bus, she proved to the world that blacks are not inferior to the whites. It is not enough for us to debate and discuss women’s rights and roles, it is high time women rose up to claim and assert their roles.

Above all, Formal Ordination through the laying on of hand is important, but not the sole basis of divine call into the ministry. The New Testament did not show any record where the early disciples of Jesus Christ were formally ordained through the laying on of hands<sup>5</sup>. They simply responded to the divine invitation of Jesus

Christ to make them fishers of men. Therefore, it is unnecessary for women who are called into the ministry to wait for a formal before they begin. As they lean on the power of the Holy Spirit and forge ahead, they will be as successful as the early disciple.

## 2.2 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 (1994 ) 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 . ( Drury,1996 )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 ,2002) 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.

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,2004 ) 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) 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.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> 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 ( $\delta\iota\ \kappa\omicron\nu\nu\omicron$ ) of Cencreae in Romans 16:1-2 Deaconesses were teachers of the Christian doctrine. After the New Testament times, the deacons ( $\delta\iota\ \kappa\omicron\nu\nu\omicron$ ) became clearly identifiable ministers in the church especially in the East.<sup>34</sup> They became necessary because of the more fulsome baptismal anointing of adult women converts. The candidates for baptism entered the pool naked. Deaconess ( $\delta\iota\ \kappa\omicron\nu\nu\omicron$ ) plunged her into the water three times and completed the anointing with oil applied over the entire body.<sup>35</sup>

(McCrath,2005 )<sup>36</sup> writes that the "deaconesses" ( $\delta\iota\ \kappa\omicron\nu\nu\omicron$ ) 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 can not 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

### **2.3 Reference to Phoebe and Prisca in Romans 16:1-3, Acts and Others**

Acts 18:2-28 tells of Apollo's visit to Ephesus. Apollos is praised for his knowledge of the scriptures and the things concerning Jesus. But 'he knew only the baptism of John', the text affirms,

... but when Prisca and Aquila heard him, they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately. Clearly Prisca is team teaching theology with Aquila and the student is no beginner, no fledging catechumen; rather he is the famous, eloquent preacher of Alexandria. Furthermore, Luke's Gospel was indeed dedicated to Theophilus. But there is little doubt that Luke also intended it to be read by the church. Thus when he identifies Mary as the author of the *Magnificat* he indirectly presents her as a teacher of theology, ethics, and social justice for all his readers. Yet irrespective of one's view regarding sources and authorship. Luke presents Mary as the singer of this song and thus as a teacher of the readers of his Gospel. These two texts witness to the fact that in the early church, women (Mary and Prisca) could teach theology to men.

Phoebe is called a deacon (*diakonos*) not a deaconess. The evidence for the feminine use of this Masculine form is slight.<sup>40</sup> Most likely this masculine ending is because Phoebe was ordained to a clearly defined ministry, that of deacon (*diakonos*). Thus the formal title appears. Another reason is that the Aramaic word is *Shammash*, which is used to describe the High Priest officiating in the temple on the Day of Atonement. But the feminine *Shammasha* means a prostitute. The need for an honourable title would dictate the use of the masculine in a church where a significant number had Aramaic as a part of their linguistic heritage.

In any case, for centuries, scholars have observed the official nature of Phoebe's position. Regarding this verse, John Calm wrote,

He begins by commending Phoebe ..... first on account of her office, because she exercised a very honourable and Holy ministry in the church'.

In the contemporary scene, Granfield concludes, we regard it as virtually certain that Phoebe is being described as a or possibly, the 'dean' of the church in question, and that, this occurrence of *diakonos* is to be classified with its occurrences in Philippians 1.1 and Timothy 3:8

We would add to this that in 1 Timothy 4:6 *diakonos* is applied to Timothy himself where it is usually translated 'minister'. While recognizing that Romans is written when the church's ministry was in an early and more undefined stage, Dunn feels that, 'servant' is inadequate.

He writes,

*diakonos* together with *ousa* points more to a recognized ministry ... or position of responsibility within the congregation.

Paul refers to himself and Apollos as *diakonoi* in 1 Corinthians 3:5 Furthermore, Phoebe is called a *prostatis* over many. This word was applied to the leader of worship in a Graeco-Roman temple as well as to a governor, a chieftain, and the leader of a democracy.<sup>45</sup> Dunn argues for patron/protector, or leader/ruler. A ninth century Arabic version translated this phrase, '*qa' ima 'ala katherin wa' alayya*', in authority over many and over myself as well.<sup>47</sup>

A second text relevant to women deacons is Timothy 3:8-11. Here the qualifications for deacons and for 'the women' appear. The two lists exhibit striking parallels which can be seen as follows:

1 Timothy 3:8-11

Deacons likewise must be:

1. Serious (Semnous)
2. Not double-tongued (*dilogus*)
3. Not addicted to much wine
4. Not greedy for gain
5. They must hold fast to the mystery of the faith (*ekhonstas to*)

The woman likewise must be:

1. Serious (*semnas*)
2. Not slanders (*diabolous*)
3. Temperate
4. ---
5. Faithful in all things (NRSV) (*Pistas en pasin*)

Better: Beliving in all

These two lists are obviously intended to be parallel. The critical item for our subject is number five. The deacons must hold onto the faith. As seen above, the parallel item for the qualifications of the women is 'Pistas en pasin.' The other six occurrences of this word in I Timothy are translated as referring to the act of believing in the faith. Here, alone, it is consistently translated 'faithful in all things' referring to a character trait. Does not the parallel nature of the two lists make dear that 'believing in all things' is what is intended? These women engaged in activities directly related to the faith in the same way as the men. Deacons in Act 6 appear in Acts 7 and 8 as preachers of the word (cf. Stephen and Philip). Regarding 'the women' here in Timothy John Chrysostom wrote.

Some have thought that this is said of women generally, but it is not so, for why should he introduce anything about women to interfere with his subject. He is speaking to those who hold the office of Deaconesses.

Above all, Priscilla was among those who Paul described as all of whom "worked hard" in the Lord. The term Paul uses here, is descriptive of the toil in proclaiming the Gospel. It appears that during the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries a name known by the church, East and West, to be female gradually became the name of a man in the West. In the Middle East this shift of gender did not take place until the nineteenth century. The shift in both cases was made without reference to any evidence.

We may now ask, is the title 'apostle' significant? In the New Testament this title was primarily applied to the twelve. Paul, James, Barnabas and the two people in the text were also called apostles. From the shortness of the list and the prominence of the first three names, it is clear that they were a highly selected group. In 1 Corinthians, the apostles head the list of church orders (12:29). As noted, the church is built on them (Eph. 2:20). The title is best understood to have maintained its original meaning, which was an eye-witness to Jesus who had received a direct commission from him.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, the title of apostle (as applied to Junia) cannot be seen as a casual reference to an insignificant early Christian witness. With Chrysostom,<sup>51</sup> the Early Fathers, Arabic and Syriac Christianity, and the Authorized Version translators, we can affirm with full confidence that Junia (feminine) was an apostle.

Paul's commendation of Phoebe; Romans 16:1-2 read 'I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the Saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well.'

It is evident from the above statement that Phoebe, was a servant of the church in Cenchreae. The word Deaconess would have meant either a Pastor or a servant. Whether as a Pastor or a deaconess, Phoebe served the church so much to merit Paul's commendation.

Paul, who found it unnecessary to still leave Priscilla and Aquila there, moved them on to the church at Ephesus (Acts 18:18). She was also of such a tremendous spiritual and material help to the saints that Paul said of her 'has been a helper of many and myself as well'. It is to be noted here, that Paul would never commend anyone who did not impress him, especially on spiritual matters. Phoebe was a female minister of very high standing. The same Paul who said woman should keep silent in churches also commended Phoebe for the work she was doing at Cenchrea.

Other women greeted by Paul in Romans 16:6 are: Mary Tryphaen Tryphosa, and Persis, all of whom 'worked hard' in the Lord (vv 6, 12). The term Paul uses here, is descriptive of the Lord in proclaiming the Gospel (1 Corinthians 4:12; 15:10; Philippians 2:16; 1 Timothy 4:10). In Philippians 4:2, 3, Paul mentions two other women, Evodia and Syntyche, as persons who have laboured side by side with him in the gospel.'

Appeal is often made to Paul's reference to Junias (Rom 16:7) to defend the alleged leadership role women fulfilled in the apostolic communities. The text reads: "Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and fellow prisoners; they are men of note among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me (Rom 16:7). Among a long list of fellow workers, Paul here acknowledges two Jews who shared in his imprisonment. Their services make them noteworthy "among the apostles". Is Paul here characterizing a woman, Junias, as an "apostle"? If so in what sense?

Lethia Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, view the case of Junias as a major example of the fact that 'from the beginning women participated fully and equally with men.' In the leadership of the church, they write:

One woman 'apostle' is even mentioned in the Bible! Junia, saluted by Paul in Romans 16:7, is a common Roman name for a woman, but since she is identified as an "apostle" many translators have assumed the name to be a contraction for a much more common male one.<sup>58</sup>

This categorical conclusion is discredited by three important considerations. First, the name  $\text{Iouvi v}$  in the Greek text grammatically could be the name of either a man or a woman. Thus, the grammatical form does not permit a categorical conclusion in either direction. Second, it is possible that the passage does not identify Andronicus and Junias as apostles at all, because the grammatical form of "men of note among the apostles" can be translated equally well as "they are noted by the apostles." The latter appears more plausible because, as John Murray explains, they were Christians before Paul and, no doubt, were associated with the circle of apostles in Judea if not in Jerusalem.

Third, the term "apostle" is used in the New Testament in both a narrow and broad sense. In a narrow sense it designates "the twelve" as when Mathias "was enrolled with the eleven apostles" (Acts 1:26) to replace Judas. Because of this extensiveness, Paul had to labour to prove the legitimacy of his apostleship (1 Corinthians 15:9-11; 2 Corinthians 12:11-13; Galatians 1:1, 11:2-9). In a broad sense, the term "apostle" means a "messenger" someone sent out for a specific mission (2Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25). If Andronicus and Junias were apostles, most probably it would be in the latter sense, since nowhere else are their names associated with the inner circle of the apostles.

In the light of the foregoing considerations, we conclude that Paul's reference to Junias lends support to the view that she was a woman apostle. The name can refer equally well to a man, and whether the person is a man or a woman, (he/she) was not an apostle in the narrow sense of the word.

### **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 along side 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.<sup>11</sup>

Lorry Lutz,( 2003 ) 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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).<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup> 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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