

The Significance of Men and Women in Theology

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ABSTRACT

Ekklisiyar ‘Yan’uwa A Nigeria (EYN) – Church of the Brethren in Nigeria is the bases for this publication as a case of study to address the ordination of women theologians as to the mother Church in America which produced the Missionaries that came to Nigeria in March, 1923. The purpose of this paper is to address the significance of men and women in theology where they both undergo the same training at all levels in theological seminaries both at home and abroad institutions of learning. The implication is that, what becomes of male and female having the same level of knowledge of theology but functions differently. Therefore, this paper seeks to address the apex leaders of some mainline churches that have not recognized the importance of women in theology to consider gender equality that at least there should be equity in the affairs of kingdom of God making as far as the church is concerned, looking at the ministry of Jesus Christ as seen in Romans 16:1-6; Acts 6:3; Luke 8:1-3; etc. concisely.

KEY WORDS: Women ordination; Mainline Churches; Theological Seminaries; Women in theology; EYN – Church of the Brethren in Nigeria

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The paper begins with an interesting book titled “BASIC” meaning - Brothers And Sisters In Christ which the writer believes in a Church which affirms, proclaims, lives out and makes visible sacramentally God’s creation of women and men as equal partners and the Good News of their reconciliation together to God and unity in Christ, (Rowland 1995: 7).

When God decided to create mankind or human beings, it is generally accepted according to the scriptures, that he first created the man physically seen, but alas, God himself declared, “It is not good for the man to be alone, I will

make a helper suitable for him.”¹ Genesis 2: 18. But looking at the earlier creation story in Genesis 1: 26, 27, God has created both of them i.e. male and female. For the Word of God said, “Let us make man in our image, and in our likeness; so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky; over the livestock and all the wild animals, and all creatures that move along the ground. So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”(Gen. 1: 26).

Looking at the Bible verses above and again in Gen. 2: 18; God said, “it is not good for the man to be alone ...”What does it signify? It means to me that man is never to do anything alone in whatsoever, because if you are doing anything alone, God is saying it is not good. Now as Bible believing Church (people), why are only men in some churches, even the mainline churches considered for ordination? What happened to the women? What criteria are followed? Don’t the women have ability to learn and be educated as the men? Does God approve the hindrances of women not to be ordained as pastors? Do only men God accept their prayers and abandon that of the women? Did God not use some women in the Bible even more than some men? Don’t we have women as theologians, who have read up to Masters and PhD levels? I think we have even those who have become professors in theology in our various mainline churches and are having big responsibilities in our Seminaries and some Christian universities. Examples just mention few: Carl Kum University in Nigeria and St. Paul’s in Kenya. The above are some questions to ponder upon as we continue in this paper; hoping that there should be change.

As I brought up these questions, my argument would be made very clear, especially towards my mother church in Nigeria: Church of the Brethren in Nigeria also called “Ekkliyyar ‘Yan’uwa A Nigeria”² (EYN). This is my church, a member of the mainline churches, which up till this day is yet to recognize women for ordination. This seems as a big threat of denying the women access to freedom of sharing ordinances in the church of God.

2.0 WHAT IS CHURCH?

In the definition of Church, there has been nothing like the mention of man, woman, children, black, white, or whatever because ‘Church’ is dealing with the entire creation of human race by God himself through his Son Jesus Christ.

The church therefore is the family of baptized Christians which they all believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The church then is the people and not the building. The Greek word is ‘*ekklesia*’ which means the ‘assembly of the called.’

In an English Dictionary, the simple meaning is, “A group of people who follow the same Christian religious beliefs, local or general.”³ (Collins Dictionary, 1994).

¹Holy Bible, Genesis 2:18 (NIV)

² Name of the Church under discussion in Hausa language in Nigeria

³English Collins Dictionary, 1994

2.1 UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH

As I have given a very brief meaning of the church, here the church (members) understands itself as the people of God; the body of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. As the people of God, the church is rooted in the purposes of God as the Creator and Lord of all history. As the body of Christ, the church looks to Jesus Christ as the source and norm of its life and the ultimate purpose of God for all of life. As the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the church experiences God's presence in power to lead the church into the future, and to equip it for its mission to go with the message of salvation. These should be the general notion of the church, especially the mainline churches; I call them "The member churches of the Bible in practice."

2.2 THE CONCEPT – CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

Church of the Brethren (my mother Church) believed that the church is both called out of the world and sent into the world. They believed that God's people (gender equality) are to be holy as God is holy, committed to a special identity and calling. To be called out or set apart, however, does not mean cut off others whether geographically, socially or even traditionally and culturally; but all believers are the ones that are called out. (www.brethrenlifeandthought.org).

The Church lives in an interdependent of its members, and traditionally Church of the Brethren believed all true (genuine) members as ministers; but also believed that the church has some specifically called out members by God amidst the entire Brethren to some particular services.

2.3 THE CALL CONCEPT - AN UNDERSTANDING OF CALLING

Calling of God starts in the Old Testament, calling out the whole people of Israel and subsequently re-calling out others among them with a specific task or role to play. So the call, in its fundamental New Testament usage, it's the call to discipleship, the call to follow Jesus Christ, and the call to ministry of all believers (to Minister God's Word). Its first and most general expression as I highlighted in the brief definition of the word church, is baptism by which we became members in Christ's crucified-risen body, the newly constituted people of God. This call not only precedes but also empowers our responses, for it is based on the objective work of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ, the One not to be argued although some argued.

There are so many instances of the call of God and diverse gifts accompanying the call within the individuals of the Church in the New Testament. Apostle Paul talks of his personal call in Romans 1:1 and 1 Corinthians 1:1; and from such references, we are assured that there is New Testament warrant for speaking of call in a personal, individual sense. According to the understanding, it is mediated through people who represent the community of faith. It is deeply personal, but it is not a private affair. It is both a profound inner conviction and the testing of the conviction by the Church. It is therefore, both the call of God and the call of the Church. Your behavior and the fruits you exhibit among brethren as you interact within and without speak more of who you are to the Church.

2.3.1 Affirmations Made By Church of The Brethren In The USA About The Call

An understanding of Current Leadership Needs: Church of the Brethren (COB) Supported by these fundamental understandings of Church, of Congregation, of Calling, and of Ordination, we make the following affirmations about current leadership needs as follows: -

- A. We affirm the need for inclusive leadership, drawn from full gamut of the Church's life. In faithfulness to the Pentecostal vision of the outpouring of God's prophetic Spirit on all flesh, the church is called to affirmative action in broadening the makeup of its leadership. Both women and men, the young and the old alike, and people from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds have essential gifts to contribute to the leading of God's people – the Church.
- B. We affirm the need for leadership that takes strong and fitting initiatives in the life of the Church without being authoritarian or overly nondirective.
- C. We affirm the need for competent Pastoral Leadership at the congregational levels. As noted above, ministry is the work of the whole congregation. Without the vision and support of those serving in pastoral roles, however, the ministry of the congregation will flounder, no definite of direction. The vitality of the congregation is in direct proportion to the quality of its leadership.
- D. We affirm the need for a circular flow of the gifts of leadership, reflecting our commitment to partnership and mutuality. The strength we seek must include the strength of all. We must find ways for congregational and ecumenical leaders continually to energize each other.
- E. We affirm the need for relating the leadership of special interest groups to mainstream structures of the Church in an appropriate way. It is important that those who speak for such groups have a visible forum to share their concerns so that the church may learn and grow from their witness. It is equally important that such groups do not become competitive with the mainstream mission of the church as structured through Annual Conference, the District, and the Congregation.
- F. We affirm the need for continuing nurture of leaders. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are already richly present in our midst at all levels of the Church's life. But these gifts need to be nurtured in deliberate ways through ongoing support system and through specific training experiences. Only in this way will leaders be able to guide the church effectively as we individually and corporately seek renewal of our life and mission through Jesus Christ the owner of the Church. (www.brethrenlifeandthought.org).

Note: The above affirmations made by Church of the Brethren in the United States of America should have been accepted fully by the other same Denominations across the globe, including that of Nigeria; but what's happening cannot be defined because I think it is just an African way of sentiment that does not sometimes yield positive growth in the church.

3.0 COUNCIL HINDRANCE NOT THE CHURCH DOCTRINE(CULTURAL)

The Missionaries from the US brought this denomination ‘Church of the Brethren Mission’ (CBM) to Nigeria far back to March, 1923. The Church’s policy and doctrine were fully accepted by my indigenous people. The Church grew very rapidly to some extent and gained so many memberships at first, in the north-eastern part and some parts in the Middle Belt in Nigeria. But today the church has spread almost all parts of Nigeria, having more than eight hundred (800) active ordained pastors (clergies); we also have a lot of probation ministers i.e. those waiting for their full ordinations into full ministers. The church has membership strength of about one million members across Nigeria, Togo, Niger, and Cameroun; all under the leadership of the Nigerian Headquarters in Kwarhi, Hong Local Government of Adamawa State.

Today the Church is independent, because it has its own Constitution, registered with Corporate Affairs in Nigeria. Its leadership is completely independent from the founding pioneers, but we do get supports from the US, Germany and Switzerland for other crucial programmes like Rural Health, Agriculture, and Disaster relief management as a result of Boko Haram’s terrorism.

We call ourselves ‘Brethren,’ meaning all members alike; men and women, young and old. We have been trying always to eradicate anything like differences of ethnicity, tribalism, nepotism, or any bad cultural and traditional backgrounds. Although as humans, sometimes such things do manifest within the church. Such shortcomings are part of the reasons sermons are preached every now and then in our churches across the globe.

Today as mentioned above, there are more than 800 hundred active ordained ministers (pastors) but how many women are among them, none. With all this growth of the church, there has never been a single time when even to make it as a joke to bring the issue of women ordination in the National Ministers (Pastors) Conference which is annually.

Sometime ago, I was discussing with someone about female ordination in our church; the person said, “I am waiting for a time to see who will that person be to bring or raise the issue of women ordination in our church,”⁴ when pressed with much questions for the reason why, the person said, “who is qualified among the women theologians do you think we have?”⁵ At that time, I looked at myself and the person saying or condemning the candidature for women ordination, and the other men that are pastors serving the Churches and I asked myself, ‘we that are men pastors, are we biblical pastors?’ Some of us received our theological training from these women in our Seminaries and now calling them they are not qualified to be ordained as pastors.

When sensing most of the opinions of the pastors, one could believe that the disqualification for women ordination in my Church is never biblical but just men’s sentiment on culture. Some threw their argument to the Bible background that even the Jews did not value women but classified them with the children. But did Jesus Christ our Lord approve them? Jesus Christ attacked the state of the Jews as being ignorant before his coming, because he said,

⁴ Name withheld for confidentiality

⁵ The writer

“Had it been I have not come you would have said you have no sin, but now that I have come, if you insist, your sins remain on you”⁶ (John 9: 41).

4.0 WOMEN IN MINISTRY WITH JESUS CHRIST

We have so many passages in the Scriptures where women were heavily involved in the ministry of the word of salvation, followed and experienced Christ’s divination, to the cross and even became the first commissioned people to testify to his resurrection to the designated disciples. But here we want to focus on Luke 8: 1-3: This text explains to us that among the large people of the followers who accompanied Jesus on his touring of towns and villages were many women. But three women were specifically mentioned; Mary also called Magdalene whom was delivered from 7 demons, Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward (probably this may explain to us one of Herod’s primary source of information about Jesus and His ministry (cf. 9: 7), and Susanna, and many others. If we read the Bible carefully, it tells us, “These women were helping to support them out of their own means”⁷ (Luke 8: 3b). We could see here that even the wives of the disciples were among the women who accompanied Jesus but were not mentioned (1 Cor. 9: 5). My point of concern here is that, these three women mentioned, they were not only using their resources (money) to support the ministry, but were also considered as deaconesses. During the earthly ministry of Jesus, there were no mention of deacons but these three women served as deaconesses, (Designated ministers of charity as seen in the early church, Acts 6: 1-6).

These women in particular, as we can see, their following of Jesus signify their intentions to grow in the ministry, just like the disciples (and also Elisha and Elijah in the O T 2Kings 2:1ff).NB: What are the roles of pastors, is it not to counsel, provide and care? And these women were with Christ, they were like Him, sensitive to the needs of the people. Thus, these women also acted as did Christ in the affairs of people including Christ Himself. He did not perform any miracle to feed this crowd as He did in feeding the 5000 and 7000, but He allowed this group to be dependent on the resources and generosity of these women.

This act of Jesus Christ allowing these women gave men and women the opportunity and privilege to participate fully in His ministry. And this practice of our Lord, allowing women to support Him and His disciples/followers gave approval for us to fully support evangelism. As I said earlier, these women followed Jesus up to His crucifixion and during the resurrection, they were the ones who first visited and proclaimed the risen Lord even to the disciples, (Mt. 27:55f; Mk. 15:40f; Lk. 23:55f; 24: 10f).This is a big episode for the men who underestimate women in the affairs of kingdom making; even when they brought the good news of Christ’s resurrection, only Peter or Peter and John according to the Synoptic Gospels went for the prove.

⁶ Holy Bible: John 9:4 (NIV)

⁷ Ibid: Luke 8:3b

5.0 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ORDINATION TO THE CHURCH

“The ordination of women into pastoral ministry is the unity of the Church, and the unity of the Church is the unity of God’s Kingdom in Christ”⁸ (Robert, 1988: 75). Christianity entirely is based on life eternal which the Father in Heaven has given to humanity through Jesus Christ. “It was never based on argument or given on gender equality, race, culture, or human traditions but on generality of human beings”⁹ (Mombo, SPU Chapel, March 15th, 2017).

The significance of women ordination cannot be overemphasized; it is for offering services to the people, which is the Church, God’s people, whenever there is need, anytime, anywhere it is possible. The ordination of women is to get more laborers in the vineyard of the Lord as He commanded (Matthew 9: 37-38). Some people may be concerned about the unity and oneness of the worldwide Church, and that seemed to be compromised, while it becomes uncompromised if some denominations practice women ordination while others do not.

Therefore, the ordination and pastoral ministry is a vocation in the services of others, equal to men and women, without distinction or gender, race or social condition as Gal. 3: 28 says, which cannot put obstacles in front of anyone carrying out the ministry which God has given to all in need. Women comprise the largest percentage of our church members, these women need pastors who can empathize with them. “Women pastors would have more possibilities of being in solidarity with them since they understand better the problem of women as a social group which is more vulnerable to marginalization, domination and exploitation”¹⁰ (Ursel & Sarah, 1993: 143).

So then, let those denominations that are yet to experience women pastors start and they will see the better aspects and performances of them; just as everyone knows how women are good in caring for the affairs of sympathy, empathy, household, just to mention but few.

6.0 WHAT THEN IS THE MATTER?

“We are all influenced in our interpretation of Scriptures by the particular group in the Christian community in which we have been nurtured: Catholic or Evangelical, conservative or liberal. And our individual experience of the society around us and our personal relationships all contribute to the way in which we interpret the Bible.”¹¹ (Robert, 1988: 43).

According to this view, some people just became adamant; they resist anything to do with women’s equal treatment in the society, even in the Church matters or affairs. Such people forget that ordination is making someone into servanthood. No matter the title of the office or position, if it does not serve the purpose of service, then it is not worthy of Christ like (Mark 10: 45). What have those refusing the ordination of women learned from Jesus allowing women to serve fully in the spread of the Gospel? If Christ approves them, do we deny them any access?

⁸ Robert Centaur, *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood*, (Church House Press, 1988), p. 75

⁹ Sermon by Prof. Esther Mombo at St. Paul’s University Chapel, 15/3/2017

¹⁰ Ursel Rosen Hagar & Sarah Stephens, “Walk My Sister” *The Ordination of Women: Reformed Perspectives*, (WARC Publications, 1993), p. 143

¹¹ Robert Centaur, *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood*, (Church House Press, 1988), p. 43

7.0 AVOID BAD SENTIMENT AND CULTURAL PRACTICES IN THE CHURCH

There are some religious people who emphasize the necessity to maintain severe discretion in the pastoral confidentiality, and they argue that a woman pastor would not be able to maintain such a silence. We could ask here, are all men pastors strictly discreet about the information they receive? In fact there is a popular saying, ‘men nowadays gossip more than women.’

The creation of women and men in the image of God is the starting point of recognizing the full human dignity in them. Therefore, women have the same responsibilities in the Church and society for the Kingdom making in Christ. We should try to remove bad cultures in the affairs of Church. Many people cite Paul’s letters that he silenced the women in the Church, they take a cultural problem to be a universal phenomenon. No, what did Paul say about the woman deacon and his women co-workers in Roman 16: 1-4? Can a deacon in the Church be quiet or silent?

According to Burgess, “Beside all this, the ministry of the New Testament is not bound to places and persons, as the Levitical Priesthood is, but is spread abroad throughout the whole world and exists wherever God gives His gifts, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers. Nor is this ministry valid because of any individual’s authority but because of the Word given by Christ.”¹²(Joseph A. Burgess, 1973: 7).

As earlier mentioned, sometimes we just pretend not to give women the ordination because most of the activities and functions of the ordained pastors they are actually doing it. They preach, teach, lead in worship services, help in administering the Holy Communion, write theological books which are used in churches and Seminaries, go for evangelism, in fact some even head our Bible Schools, etc. Let us avoid sentiments and embrace what the Bible recognizes or carries.

8.0 SOME LIMITATIONS OF WOMEN AS ORDAINED PASTORS

All human beings have weaknesses, in one way or the other, yet Christ allows us and calls us to serve with Him and for His people. But to be sure, there are some distinct features which even the Bible addresses about human made. Some pastoral duties require a man’s strength as it is generally accepted that most men are stronger than women.

8.1 OTHER LIMITATIONS ARE: -

- If she is married, then there will be difficulty in child bearing, anti-natal & post-natal.
- If the husband is not a pastor, placement of ministerial work has to be considered and also marriage authority. Here I mean, there may be some restrictions to suit her husband. This could happen especially if the husband is not a born again person.
- Cultural influence on the church generally especially in the African perspectives can be the other factor of limitations even to the women themselves.

¹² Joseph A. Burgess, Can Women Serve in the Ordained Ministry? (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1973), p. 12

9.0 MY RECOMMENDATIONS

As far as the grace of God is concerned, men and women are given the gifts of the Holy Spirit by this pure grace as seen in Joel 2: 28-29; c.f. Acts 2: 17-18. Ordination is one of the great sign of acknowledging the work of the Holy Spirit. Women should be given opportunities to follow their vocation since they have access to theological trainings up to PhD levels. But in the process of screening for ordination, there should be a strict observation in making assessment of candidate.

Others are, if ordained, they should appear descent, head covered as in African and Biblical standards, dress should cover sensitive parts to avoid Westernizations. The ordained women should not seek leadership at the apex levels especially in the mainline churches until when the time has fully come. Their ministerial works should be at their disposals to ease conflicts.

9.1 CONCLUSION

All that have been said is that; let us consider our struggles for the Kingdom of God. Whoever that has received the call of God to serve God's people, men or women should be considered and allowed to be ordained. That will erase the bias mind because it is not Christ intentions. It seems to me if our churches that are yet to ordain reputable women if they continue, then as if the women are colonized. Churches that want to work in solidarity with women should see the ordination of women as a gift of blessings in this our last days, cf. Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:17-18. We should remember that we don't have any church for men alone or for women alone, but we are all together, and so also both men and women in Christ have calls of God for ministry. For those denominations that do ordain women, congratulations! But for others of the mainline churches in Nigeria, let's wake up and eradicates our bias mind on cultural sentiment.

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