

PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS: MEANING AND DOCTRINE, DOES  
THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS MEAN THAT WOMEN CAN  
BE ORDAINED?

Whenever the question of the ordination of women arises, people use almost the same Scriptures to support or oppose it. Some who support the ordination of women have said that since the Bible has indicated that we believers in Christ are priests for God, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers means that women should be ordained as pastors (in the sense of ordained pastors in Africa) or as elders (the term used in America). First of all, let us ask ourselves, what is the doctrine of the priesthood of believers?

The Idea of Papacy

The idea of priesthood of all believers grew out big and loud during the rise of the Reformation. The Reformation kicked against Romanism which said that the Pope is the visible head of the universal church of Christ invested with supreme authority over bishops and pastors in all parts of the world.

From this, the Catholic Church developed its distinguished characteristics. The power of the Bishops was strengthened. A collection of authoritative New Testament texts was recognized and a creed was formulated. The believers who made up the church were those who acknowledge the rule of faith (creed), the New Testament Canon and the authority of the Bishops.<sup>1</sup> To agree with the Bishops was therefore a necessity.

By A.D. 200, Rome had become the eminent and the most influential center of Christianity. This position was made use of to a great advantage by the Roman Bishops. Cyprian born probably in Carthage, c. 200 became a man of wealth and education. He later became the Bishop of Carthage. To him, the church is based on the unity of bishops. The church is in the bishop and the bishop in the church and if any one be not in the bishops, he is not in the church.<sup>2</sup> He formulated the doctrine that the Bishop of Rome is the head and that Rome is the chief church whence priestly unity takes its source.



There was a sharp distinction between the clergy and the laity. The hierarchy was established: Bishops, presbyters, and deacons constituted the major orders. The minor orders extended to sub-deacons, acolytes, exorcists, readers and janitors.

By Constantine, the clergy were exempted from the public burdens of taxation.<sup>3</sup> The bishops were the ones to give the benediction in the church. Pope Gregory VII had declared the infallibility of the church whose head is the pope.<sup>4</sup> The papal priests pretended, by their senseless assertion that the Lord's Supper bread has become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ in the hand of the priest. The pope had been termed, "Lord God the Pope."<sup>5</sup>

#### The Idea of the Reformers

The reformers kicked against such idea. Protesting, Luther, the morning star of the Reformation said, The custom of kissing the pope's feet must stop. Christ washed the disciples' feet but the pope is pretending to be higher than Christ. To Luther, the pope is proud like Lucifer. "Christ is nothing, the pope is everything."<sup>6</sup>

Luther says, "It has been devised that the pope, bishop, priest, the monk are called the ecclesiastical estate and the princes and lords, artificers and peasants at that time are called the temporal estate."

To Luther, there should not be any gap between the priest and the layman. Supporting himself, he quoted I Peter 2:9 "Ye are a royal priesthood, a holy nation"; Rev. 5:10 "... And has made us unto our God (by the blood) kings and priests." To Luther, "the bishop's consideration is just as if in the name of the whole congregation, he took one person out of community, each of whom has equal power given him to exercise for the rest."<sup>7</sup>

Luther opposed the papal system in that they had elevated the bishops and the priests too high instead of recognising that through the great grace of Christ and by virtue of baptism Christians are priests for God. Luther is not saying that women should be ordained, but that there should not be the great gap between the clergy and the laity.

The Roman Church is an exclusive hierarchy and assigns to the laity the position of passive obedience. The bishops are the teaching and ruling church. Lay men have no voice in spiritual matters. They cannot even read the Bible without



the permission of the priest who holds the key of heaven and hell, but "All Christians," says Luther, "are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them, save of office alone."<sup>8</sup> To those who quote texts like Gal. 3:28; Luke 8:2, 3 to support the ordination of women, Luther would say "If the man do that which pertaineth to man in marrying a wife, in governing his family, in obeying the magistrate, in behaving himself decently towards all men, if the woman live chastely, obey her husband, see well to her household, bring up her children godly (which are indeed excellent gifts and holy work), yet are all these nothing in comparison of that righteousness which is before God?"<sup>9</sup>

So, Luther was not advocating for the ordination of women but he was pointing out that we are saved by righteousness through faith and not by hierarchy in Romanism.

In his book entitled, On the Councils and the Pope, he declared that three Roman walls were overthrown by which the papacy had buttressed its power:

1. The pretended superiority of the spiritual to the temporal estate is baseless since all believers are priests
2. The truth of universal priesthood casts down the second wall that of the exclusive papal right to interpret the Scriptures and
3. That the third wall, that a reformatory council can be called by none but the pope should be discontinued.

The universal priesthood of believers is also the elect of God advocated by Calvin. To him, "it also denotes the whole body of mankind who profess to worship one God and Christ."<sup>10</sup>

Calvin's theocracy was based upon the sovereignty of the Christian people and the general priesthood of believers; the papal theocracy was exclusive make of the priesthood.

We have seen how the reformers, in the attempt to throw off Romanism, preached the doctrine of general priesthood. What meaning is given to the same idea in these modern times?

#### Meaning in Modern Times

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in the time of Tertulian (ca. 150-222) was the universal priesthood of believers of Luther and the general priesthood of believers of Calvin. This doctrine is still prominent today.



What are the various aspects of the doctrine? Peter says, "Ye are a royal priesthood, a holy nation" I Peter 2:9 and in Rev. 5:10, we read "and hast made us unto our God (by thy blood) kings and priests." The chosen generation (Greek: eklekton "elected kind, chosen people." The royal priesthood basileion hierateuma is a quotation from the LXX Ex. 19:6 meaning that we are to offer spiritual sacrifices to God and our sacrifices should be offered to God. We do not need any earthly priest who stands between God and man because God has made us "a kingdom, priests," a body of believers completely dedicated to Him (Rev. 1:6; Rom. 12:1). What does this priesthood contain or what is it made up of? Before we investigate this let us examine more tests:

"Ye also, as lively stones are built up a spiritual house an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" I Peter 2:5; "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people, that ye should show forth the praises (virtues: **arete**) of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" I Peter 2:9 "But you shall be named the priests of the Lord" Isa. 61:6 "And hast priests and kings to God and his father" Rev. 1:6 "And hast made us unto our God kings and priests" Rev. 5:10.

Therefore we can discuss more what this priesthood, kingdom, royalty, and sacrifice mean.

#### Christ As Priest

Christ who made us priests is Himself a priest. He is the perfect example. Christ did not call Himself a priest nor did He call His disciples priests when He was here on earth. Yet the symbolic name Lamb (John 1:39) is there. The New Testament by the power of the Holy Spirit had a lot of references to Christ as a priest in Hebrews (Heb. 13:8; 5:4-6; 7; 2; 9:15; 12:24). The word occurs in Hebrew 11 times. Christ is not only the priest but a mediator (I Tim. 2:5; Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). Christ is the mediator between God and man and He is the mediator of the new covenant.

#### Our Relationship Expressed

Many expressive terms are given in the Bible to show the relationship Christ has with His people on earth. He called us His "elect" (Matt. 24:22; I Peter 1:2; Eph. 1:4); "saints" (Psalm 145:10; 148:14; Rom. 8:27; Col. 1:12);



"disciples" (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 20:7); "brethren" (Matt. 23:8; Heb. 12:11)

We are the body while He is the head (Col. 1:8; I Cor. 11:3). We are His building (I Cor. 3:9; Eph. 2:21; Col. 2:7; Eph. 2:21). Many expressions like these are used in the Bible to express our relations to and function for God. One of these is priest.

#### The Priesthood

Christ is the priest. At the same time He is the sacrifice. He offered Himself and He is the offerer. So we are to present ourselves as a living sacrifices acceptable to Christ (Rom. 6:1-11). In the one spirit all have access to the Father (Eph. 2:18). So, according to Kung, "Faith, baptism and receiving the power of the Spirit **form** the basis of the universal priesthood of all believers." Therefore, being a priest, each member does not need a mediator to the grace of God. He can come boldly to the throne of grace (Heb. 4:16) and receive mercy. Each church member is a priest on the ground that Christ has gone before us to God and He, Christ, is still there pleading for us. When we send our prayers to the throne of God, we are offering the sacrifices. These sacrifices presented before God meet Christ there who is standing before "the Ancient of days" (Dan. 7:9). We, the chosen (Isa. 43:20) are His people (Hosea 2:23) have direct access to the throne of God, so that our sacrifices are offered directly to God through Christ.

The earthly priest had something to offer for himself first. Thus every believer is called to be holy (Lev. 16:6; 19:2) and to prepare himself first before he can serve others. Sanctification had to begin in him first before he can teach others to be sanctified. It is when each member is holy that a community can be holy.

#### The Spiritual

The new covenant is a part of the old. Today we do not offer goats, sheep, birds as sacrifices, but a believer has the spiritual sacrifices to offer which are higher than all the material sacrifices prescribed by the law (Hos. 6:6; Micah 6:6-8): prayer, praise and thanksgiving, penitence, justice, kindness, love, knowledge of God, walking humbly with God, ceasing to do evils, learning to do well, seeking



justice and judgment, relieving the oppressed, taking care of the fatherless and the widows (1:17, 18). The Bible is consistent because the same idea is expressed in the New Testament. The priesthood of the believers of the New Covenant is a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (I Peter 2:5). This is a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1); a sacrifice offered in faith (Phil. 2:17); a fragrant offering, acceptable and pleasing to God (Phil. 4:18).

To Paul, his preaching is priestly ministry (Rom. 15:16; Phil. 2:17) and other kinds of sacrifices are mentioned like love to fellow men (Heb. 13:15); offering up one's life (II Tim. 4:6); the prayers of the saints (Rev. 8:3).

### The Preaching As Sacrifice

The priesthood of all believers is dynamic. It is not just in worship and devotion but witnessing for God. We are the royal priesthood that we may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light (I Peter 2:9). Through us (the church), Christ can "sing the praise of God" (Heb. 2:12). We are the highly called to shine with light in this world of real darkness (Matt. 5:14, 15). Jesus said, "What I say to you in the dark, you must repeat in the broad daylight; what you hear whispered, you must shout from the housetops" (NEB Matt. 10:27). The primary command from Jesus to us is that we should preach His message (Matt. 28:18-20).

According to Kung, there are "around thirty different terms to describe the activity of preaching: proclaim, announce, preach, teach, explain, speak, say, testify, persuade, confess, charge, admonish, etc.

Preachers need to be sent (Rom. 10:14-17). They have been called through the word (Rom. 1:6; I Cor. 1:24; Heb. 9:15). We need to pray that the Lord may have everywhere the swift and glorious course (NEB II Thes. 3:1).

Various gifts are given to the church for preaching, and it was not by few, but the gospel spread through the preaching of merchants, soldiers, farmers, sailors, contrary to the whole wrong wish of Annas the high priest and Caiphas, and John and Alexander and all the Jewish priest-



hood (Acts 4:6); the believers, filled with the Holy Ghost kept on spreading the gospel and witnessing (8:4; 11:19). Paul confirms this of the Thessalonians and of the believers in Macedonia and Achaia and "everywhere" (I Thess. 1:8). Even when Paul was in prison, the believers "waxing confident to preach without fear, through some did without pure motive (Phil. 1:12-18).

It is true that women were asked to keep silent in the meetings (I Cor. 14:33-35). But this must be understood in the context of the times, not a fundamental principle because it is said in another place to be that a woman should be woman of a high principle "Who will not talk scandal" (NEB 3:11), that women should not teach (2:12) seems to be explained as accepting authority of the husband (I Peter 3:1). The Bible plainly says that all Christians need solid food as well as milk to teach (Heb. 5:12-14). All faithful members are taught by God (I Thes. 4:9). They have the anointing (I John 2:20) and they are to know the truth (I John 2:20). John says "the anointing which you receive from Him abides in you as the anointing teaches you everything (2:27). So, everyone who is taught by God is the one who can teach others with authority and this applies to every Christian. All may not be theologians, but all are called to believe and teach the gospel.

#### Baptism and Membership

Baptism qualifies a believer to the church membership. 'Make all nations my disciples, baptise men everywhere.' Belief is followed by baptism (Mark 16:15). The priesthood of all believers is the community or a group of the baptized. Today, every believer that is baptized has church membership which is expected to be maintained. The priesthood of all believers consists in the calling of the faithful to witness before the world and to win others in to the membership. The next question to consider is whether the priesthood of all believers means that women can be ordained as pastors or elders. What pattern should we follow? Does the priesthood of all believers mean that all are priests?



The investigation cannot be found but in the Bible. The standard of our faith is the Bible. What pattern do we find in the Bible? The pattern we find in the Bible is that prophets are called by God and priests are ordained by men. Sometimes, they were anointed in the process of the ordination. All the priests ordained had been men. There has never been a woman ordained as a priest in the Bible.

Let us take a study of the women known in the Bible times and their functions: Were any of them ordained?

#### Eve

When God brought all the animals to Adam to name, he saw that every animal had a companion. "Among all the creatures that God hath made on the earth, there was none equal to man. But God said, it is not good that the man should be alone (Gen. 2:18-20). "Man was not made to dwell in solitude, he was to be a social being" Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 46. So God gave Adam a helper corresponding to him. God celebrated the first marriage. Had they remained obedient to God, they would ever have been in harmony with each other. But Eve first sinned and now she is placed in subjection to her husband, p. 59. Adam as a teacher of the law, as the head of the house, as a priest, taught nine of his generations for almost a thousand years, p. 363.

#### The State of Subjection

The state of subjection does not imply that man has to ride the woman like a horse. God the Almighty sees that this would not make things to run normally. After the reference to her in 4:1, 2 as the mother of Cain and Abel, she is not mentioned again in the Old Testament not even alluded to again. In the New Testament, Paul mentions her twice, once with reference to the fact that the serpent beguiled her (II Cor. 11:3) and once with reference to her transgression's status assigned to woman after the fall (I Tim. 2:13).



## The Prophetesses

In the Old Testament the ministries which are made clear to us are those of prophets and priests. There was never any woman priest but there were prophetesses.

### Miriam

The first prophetess was Miriam. She was Moses' senior sister who offered to call a nurse. She was a leader of the choir as they came out of the Red Sea. She was called a prophetess in Exodus 15:20.

Commenting on this point, T. Housel Jemison says:

"Whether Miriam is called a prophetess because of the poetical inspiration of songs on this occasion or for other reasons, is not indicated. Although this is the recorded instance of her speaking under inspiration, it does not necessarily mean it was the only time. She is included by the Lord as among these "sent before the children of Israel as leaders." Micah 6:4<sup>11</sup>

But Miriam was never called a priest. She was not ordained.

### Deborah

In Judges 2 we read of Deborah. When the Israelites disobeyed God, he allowed them to be punished by the Midianites. Still God remembered them and raised Deborah who served both as judge and a prophetess (Judges 4:4). She was called a prophetess and she was a wife to Lapidoth. She prophesied to Barak that God has called him to deliver Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army. When Barak refused to go except Deborah went with him, she said that she will, but the honour would not be his (4:9). Deborah went into the war with Barak and the war was won and Sisera was killed by a woman called Joel.

Deborah and Miriam were prominent in the service of God but they were not priests, they were not ordained. So Joel contributed her part.



### Huldah

The third prominent woman that served as a prophetess was Huldah who helped Josiah the king when the book of the law was found in the temple, the king with his men sought directions from Huldah the prophetess. This is very significant in that Jeremiah the great prophet had been in the ministry for five years. But this prophetess was very important that the king sent his prominent men to her, and she told them of the evil things which God would bring into the tribe of Judah. She gave a particular message to Josiah, the king: that the evil things would happen after the king died. "Her message was not challenged for the fact that she was a prophetess."<sup>12</sup>

### Noadiah

She was not a true prophetess from God. She was associated with Sambellat and Tobiah who were trying to put Nehemiah in fear. But it is likely that she might have been claiming to be a true prophet because Nehemiah 6:14 groups her with other prophets.

### Isaiah's Wife

Isaiah is very important in the prophetic ministry of the Old Testament. He had a wife. In speaking of his wife he mentioned that she was a prophetess. The Bible did not tell us what the prophetess' contribution was. But we are told that she had a son for the prophet 8:3. Not all the words spoken by prophets or prophetesses were recorded.

The Old Testament prophets served God. They made their own contributions but they were not ordained (i.e. those of them that were women). What about the New Testament prophets?

### Elizabeth and Mary

These were not named prophetess but they made their contributions. No angel appeared to Elizabeth but to her husband Zachariah. When her cousin, Mary, came to visit her, she was moved by the Holy Spirit to speak inspiring words: "Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb ..." (Luke 1:42). Though she was not called a prophetess, she prophesied.

In the case of Mary, she is now elevated so high by



the Roman Catholic Church that she is like God to their mind, simply because she was the mother of Jesus. The Bible is not elevating anyone to the level of God. We are seeing in the Bible how God had used women in His work of salvation. Mary was seen by an angel. She was told that she would have a baby and whose name will be Jesus, the Saviour of the world. She also prophesied. Mary and Elizabeth were not priests but they featured prominently in the New Testament.

#### Anna

At the dedication of Jesus in the temple, Anna, a prophetess was present. She was very dedicated to prayer and spiritual service. Through the power of the Spirit, she recognised in the child Jesus the promised Redeemer. She was moved to speak of Jesus to "all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem" (Luke 1:38). She lived to an old age. She was not ordained.

#### Philip's Daughters

Luke tells us in Acts 21:9 that Philip the evangelist, one of the original seven deacons (Acts 6:5-8), who served in Samaria (8:5-8) and baptized the Eunuch on the road to Gaza "had four daughters, virgins, who did prophesy" (Acts 21:8-9).

#### Women Not Ordained

Therefore the Bible tells us in the above instances that women as well as men can be prophets and prophetesses of God. They can lead nations, explain the Scriptures, give counsel to leaders and make predictions. The prophetesses were not ordained and none of them agitated for ordination.



## PERSONAL REMARKS

The agitation for women ordination is a kind of religious enthusiasm which the devil is trying to use to direct our steps from the right point and to lower our values. For these reasons:

### 1. The ordination of women is not biblical

Our formulary is the Reformation formulary. The Bible and the Bible alone. Women Liberation has been going on in America in recent years. Out of this grew our the "enthusiasts who encouraged women preachers to be ordained which the Bible explicitly forbade."<sup>13</sup>

We should not allow this to happen. When Paul was writing to the churches that they should let women keep silent in the church, could it be that he was attacking such religious enthusiasts?

### 2. Records

The Seventh-day Adventists are regarded as "the pure church" (Nigeria); the clean people (An island in Australia). One of the Methodist members I was once talking with remarked that she was surprised that Seventh-day Adventists would be discussing ordination of women. To her, we are the "pure church, why should you be polluted?"

### 3. Christ - Our Example

Jesus Christ is our Example. There were women also when He was ordaining the disciples. Why did He not ordain women? He saw that God did not send Him to do that.

### 4. Avenue For the Devil

Ordination of women into the gospel ministry will be an opportunity for the devil to make a lot of our district leaders to be polygamous.

So, women in the church should be "women who use their gifts in the company of other women **teaching**; and **exhorting** at length what they had learnt on the Sabbath."<sup>14</sup>

The meaning of the priesthood of all believers has been there in the Old Testament as we see in Exodus 19:6; Isaiah 43:20. There are other relevant quotations as in Deut. 7:6; 10:15; Isa. 61:6. Why did not the ancient people apply and ordain women? Also the same meaning is



found in the New Testament (I Peter 2:5; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

But Christ, our only example and the apostles did not at any time ordain women. No woman was ordained at their time. Therefore we should not and cannot apply the same texts to mean that we should ordain women.

Therefore, "the priesthood of all believers" does not mean the ordination of women.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>William Walker, A History of the Christian Church, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>3</sup>J. C. Ayer, A Source Book For Ancient Church History From the Apostolic Age to the Conciliar Period, New York: 1913, p. 283.

<sup>4</sup>Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy, Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1945, p. 57.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 681.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Luther, "To the German Nobility," in The Harvard Classics, ed. Charles W. Eliot. New York: P. F. Collier & Sons Corporation, 1910, p. 311.

<sup>7</sup>Charles Eliot, ed., Harvard Classics, Vol. XXXVI, New York: P. F. Collier & Sons Corporation, 1910, pp. 297-280.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., Vol. VII, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup>Martin Luther, A Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1970, p. 449.

<sup>10</sup>William Walker, p. 351.

<sup>11</sup>T. Housel Jemison, A Prophet Among You, Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1955, p. 118.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>13</sup>David S. Lovejoy, Religious Enthusiasm in the New World, London: Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 55.