

# THE QUESTION OF WOMEN ORDINATION IN THE REFORMED CHURCH OF EAST AFRICA

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## 1. Introduction

Moderator sir,

Allow me to start by thanking this honourable synod for electing me into the position of Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA) Synod Professor of Theology. According to the RCEA constitution, the bearer of the office of Professor of Theology is expected to perform three main tasks, namely, to preach and teach the word of God; to teach students in institutions of higher learning; and to advise the church on theological and doctrinal issues. I pray that God will guide me as I undertake these roles.

### 1.1 Mandate for this paper

The question of “ordination of women” in RCEA has generated and continues to generate conflicting opinions among various RCEA pastors, parishioners and students in theological institutions. Currently RCEA has 27 women who have finished their theological training at various levels from diploma to Masters degree and another 9 who are currently undergoing theological training in various institutions. Whereas there has been no dispute on theological training for women, there is no consensus on the role of women who graduate from theological institutions. The question is: What should they do after they train for ministry of word and sacrament just like their male counter parts?

The same question has been raised for over two decades in various synod sittings but a final decision has not been made. In resolution 5/SYD/11/07 of the 44<sup>th</sup> synod of RCEA, I together with the Reformed Institute for Theological Training (RITT) was mandated to spearhead the writing of a theological paper on women ordination so as to assist the church in making a decision regarding the same subject from an informed and objective perspective<sup>1</sup>. A few days ago, I received a special invitation from the current Moderator of RCEA, the Reverend Musa Maina, to advise the 49<sup>th</sup> RCEA

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to minutes of the 44<sup>th</sup> synod, resolution 5/SYD/11/07 “Women ordination”.

synod on the matter of “Women Ordination”, in my capacity as RCEA synod Professor of Theology. Against this background, I wish to present a paper entitled “The Question of Women Ordination in RCEA”

## **1.2 Purpose of the paper**

Currently RCEA has 27 women who have finished their theological training at various levels from diploma to Masters degree and another 9 who are currently undergoing theological training in various institutions. It is important to consider seriously the need to ordain those who have been called to the ministry of word and sacrament.

The overall aim of my presentation is to highlight some of the key biblical and perhaps theological arguments that need to be considered in deciding whether or not women should be ordained in RCEA<sup>2</sup>.

## **2. Biblical and Theological Considerations**

### **2.1 Discourse on why women may not be ordained**

Most of the arguments raised against the ordination of women are based on some of the writings of Paul. The prominent ones are discussed below.

#### **2.1.1 Women should be silent in the churches (1 Corinthians 14: 34-35 NRS)**

<sup>34</sup> *women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.* <sup>35</sup> *If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.*

<sup>34</sup> *Wanawake na wanyamaze katika kanisa, maana hawana ruhusa kunena bali watii, kama vile inenavyo torati nayo.* \* <sup>35</sup> *Nao wakitaka kujifunza neno lo lote, na wawaulize waume zao wenyewe nyumbani mwao; maana ni aibu wanawake kunena katika kanisa.*

An analysis of various scholarly interpretations shows that this passage has been interpreted in two main ways. The first interpretation holds the view that in this

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to point out that while researching for this paper, the writer consulted with the reformed community at St. Paul’s University. Since RCEA is a reformed church, the writer of the paper also carefully consulted materials that are strictly written from the experience of other reformed traditions. The sources consulted will be indicated in the bibliography at the end of the paper.

passage Paul issues a universal rule, which emphasizes that only men should lead public worship and that women are not to do any public speaking in churches. Proponents of this interpretation understand Paul as giving a twofold explanation as to why women should not speak in church: On the one hand, Paul states that it is not permitted for women to speak. On the other hand he states that women should be submissive as the law says. Proponents of this view also point out that Paul makes provision for women who wish to learn to ask their husbands at home because it is “it is shameful for them to speak in the church<sup>3</sup>.”

The second group of interpreters argue that in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul does not make a blanket prohibition for all women. In their view, the passage should not be taken as a general, absolute and timeless prohibition on women speaking in church. To this group of interpreters, the contents of this passage are specifically limited to the situation in the Corinthian Church at the time when Paul wrote the letter. It is argued that in this passage, Paul was dealing with the issue of order in church worship. The situation in the Corinthian church was so chaotic that everybody could speak anything and apparently wives were asking all kinds of questions that added to confusion or disruption of service. For this reason Paul advised that wives could get the information they wanted by waiting until they returned home and asked their husbands. Proponents of this interpretation also argue that if Paul indeed meant that women in the universal church of Christ should not speak during worship, then he would be contradicting his own statements in 1 Corinthians 11: 4-15, where he allows women to pray and preach so long as they are veiled and they have kept their hair long.

Looking at both sides of the argument with regard to the entire context of 1 Corinthians in which directions are given for how women are to prophesy and in view of the immediate context in which several prohibitions are given to maintain order in worship, it may be concluded that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is not a text which in any

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<sup>3</sup> This interpretation attracts several questions, which are not easy to answer from the passage. To whom are women supposed to be submissive in this context? Is it to their husbands or the church as a whole? Which law does Paul have in mind? Some scholars that the law mentioned here refers to Genesis 3:16 but this text does not fit well in the context of Paul's writing. Others think that Paul is most likely appealing to his background knowledge of the oral Torah as found in Judaism, which may be problematic for application to a Christian context.

way prohibits women participation in the ministries of preaching, teaching, or leadership in the church.

### **2.1.2 No woman is allowed to teach or have authority over a man (1 Timothy 2:11-15 NRS)**

<sup>11</sup> *Let a woman<sup>b</sup> learn in silence with full submission.* <sup>12</sup> *I permit no woman<sup>c</sup> to teach or to have authority over a man; <sup>d</sup> she is to keep silent.* <sup>13</sup> *For Adam was formed first, then Eve;* <sup>14</sup> *and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.* <sup>15</sup> *Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.*

<sup>11</sup> *Mwanamke na ajifunze katika utulivu, akitii kwa kila namna.* \* <sup>12</sup> *Simpi mwanamke ruhusa ya kufundisha, wala kumtawala mwanamume, bali awe katika utulivu.* \* <sup>13</sup> *Kwa maana Adamu ndiye aliyumbwa kwanza, na Hawa baadaye.* \* <sup>14</sup> *Wala Adamu hakudanganywa, ila mwanamke alidanganywa kabisa akaingia katika hali ya kukosa.* \* <sup>15</sup> *Walakini ataokolewa kwa uzazi wake, kama wakidumu katika imani na upendo na utakaso, pamoja na moyo wa kiasi.*

This passage has yielded two main interpretations. The first group of interpreters hold that this passage points to wifely submission and secondary status as compared to men. The passage is in this regarded understood as a guideline for the role of women in church, that is, they should not be allowed to teach nor to hold any authority over men. This interpretation has however been opposed by a second category of interpreters as seen below.

The second group of interpreters hold the view that in 1 Timothy 2:11-15, Paul addresses a special case of circumstances in the Ephesian Church. It is argued that at the time of Paul's writing, women in the Ephesian church were less likely to be literate than men neither were they trained in philosophy and rhetoric as men were. The danger was that in those days, false teachers had emerged and they were spreading heresy in the Ephesian churches and exploiting ignorant women (1 Timothy 5:13; 2 Timothy 3:6), Paul's prohibition here makes good sense because uninformed women would easily fall into the trap of heretical philosophical thinkers. Paul therefore offered a short-range solution that women should not teach; and a long

range solution to “let them learn” (1 Timothy 2:11). The situation might be different after the women had been instructed (1 Timothy 2:11; cf. Romans 16:1-4, 7; Philippians 4:2-3).

If 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is taken without regard to the prevailing historical context difficult conclusions could be made. If read without due consideration of the broader context, the passage would appear to be making a universal rule that women should not teach and they should not have authority over men but they should keep silent. However, if that is the case, then Paul would be contradicting himself by denying women’s performance in ministry. Many questions would be asked: Why didn’t Paul rebuke Priscilla for instructing Apollos as it is reported in Acts 18:26? Why did he hold Priscilla in high esteem before all of the churches and why did he refer to her as a co worker?<sup>4</sup> Why did he recommend Phoebe as an efficient minister of the church at Cenchrene?<sup>5</sup> Why did he describe Junia as an outstanding apostle?<sup>6</sup> Why did he labor side by side in the Gospel with Euodia and Syntyche? (Philippians 4: 2-3). In addition, if taken literally, the passage would suggest that women will be saved by bearing children. The question is: what about the many single women or many married women who are unable to conceive?

### **2.1.3. A bishop ( overseer/minister) should be the husband of one wife (1 Timothy 3: 1-7 NRS)**

*<sup>1</sup> The saying is sure: <sup>a</sup> whoever aspires to the office of bishop <sup>b</sup> desires a noble task. <sup>2</sup> Now a bishop <sup>c</sup> must be above reproach, married only once, <sup>d</sup> temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, <sup>3</sup> not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. <sup>4</sup> He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way-- <sup>5</sup> for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? <sup>6</sup> He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. <sup>7</sup>*

*<sup>1</sup> Ni neno la kuaminiwa; mtu akitaka kazi ya askofu,<sup>a</sup> atamani kazi njema. \* <sup>2</sup> Basi imempasa askofu awe mtu asiyelaumika, mume wa mke mmoja, mwenye kiasi na busara, mtu wa utaratibu, mkaribishaji, ajuaye kufundisha; \* <sup>3</sup> si mtu wa kuzoelea ulevi, si mpiga watu; bali awe mpole; si mtu wa kujadiliana, wala asiwe mwenye kupenda fedha; <sup>4</sup> mwenye kuisimamia*

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<sup>4</sup> See Romans 16:3

<sup>5</sup> See Romans 16:1

<sup>6</sup> See Romans 16:7

*nyumba yake vema, ajuaye kutiisha watoto katika ustahivu; \* <sup>5</sup> (yaani, mtu asiyejua kuisimamia nyumba yake mwenyewe, atalitunzaje Kanisa la Mungu?) <sup>6</sup> Wala asiwe mtu aliyeongoka karibu, asije akajivuna akaanguka katika hukumu ya Ibilisi. <sup>7</sup> Tena imempasa kushuhudiwa mema na watu walio nje; ili asianguke katika lawama na mtego wa Ibilisi.*

The above passage is one of the key texts from which the RCEA constitution derives the criteria for validating ordination candidates. In this passage Paul states that an overseer should be a husband to one wife. On the basis of this statement, the church has traditionally viewed ordination to ministry of word and sacrament as exclusively reserved for men. However, some interpreters have noted that the emphasis of this passage is on the necessity of fidelity in a “monogamous relationship” as one of the several tests of the moral character of an overseer. The intention of Paul’s recommendation in this regard is not to suggest that women cannot be made bishops because they are not capable of being husbands with one wife. Notice that the text refers to “anyone who aspires to be a bishop” or “whoever aspires to be a bishop” but not necessarily a man. This passage, therefore, is viewed from a critical perspective as not a strong reference that prohibits women from ordination.

## **2.2 Biblical models of women in divine and social ministries**

The quest for women to serve as preachers, teachers, administrators, and even disciples is not discordant with our biblical knowledge. There are a number of examples of women involved in divine and social responsibilities both in the Old and the New Testaments. These women serve as models for women aspiring for ministerial and other leadership positions in RCEA. Examples of these women are described below.

### **2.2.1 Old Testament women in divine and social ministries**

In the days of King Josiah of Judah, there was a prophetess named Huldah. When the book of the law was discovered in the house of the Lord, the king dispatched his secretary, the priest, and three other messengers, with the counsel to enquire from the prophetess concerning the words of the book. Huldah replied “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel...” (2 Kings 22:15). It is important that the contemporary of Huldah was prophet Jeremiah, yet Huldah was preferred. Another example of OT woman dedicated to divine and civil ministry is Deborah. She was a poetess, soldier, and

judge, and Israel had peace for many years as she led them. She spoke in the authority of the Lord and summoned Barak saying...Like Huldah, Deborah was a woman under divine call, affirmed and placed by God in significant leadership roles accepted by God's people.

### **2.2.2 New Testament women in divine and social ministries**

In the time of Jesus, there was a New Testament prophetess known as Anna. Faithful and devout, upon seeing Jesus she gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:38). In Acts 21:9, Paul and Luke were hosted in the house of Philip, whose four unmarried daughters had a gift of prophecy. Another example is Priscilla, whose story is told in Acts 18. When Paul came to Corinth, he lived with Priscilla and her husband Acquila. Just like Paul, Priscilla and her husband were tent makers. When Paul left Corinth and went to Ephesus, he took Priscilla and Acquila with him (Acts 18:1-2). They stayed in Ephesus when Paul left. During their time in Ephesus Apollos came to the city. Although eloquent and full of Spirit, his knowledge was limited. "When Priscilla and Acquila heard him, they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:24-28). It is highly significant that both Priscilla and Acquila are named as instructing and illuminating Apollos. This shows as a woman, Priscilla was engaged in a teaching ministry, teaching a man of God.

Another model for women leadership to take note of is Tabitha or Dorcas. She was well known as a person of good works and a merciful spirit. In the Scripture, she is described as follows, "Now there was at Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which means Dorcas (or Gazelle)" (Acts 9:36). Many people rarely believe that women were also disciples. It is good to be reminded that disciple is inclusive term or title and refers to all women or men seeking to follow Jesus and God's will and purpose for their lives. There is also the case of Phoebe. Paul concludes his letter to the Romans with a whole list of personal greetings. He states "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchrene..." (Romans 16: 1-2). There is a considerable difference of opinion about the Greek word translated here as "deaconess". This same word is frequently translated as "minister."

### **2.3 Conclusion on biblical and theological considerations for ordination of women in RCEA**

In conclusion to the biblical and theological debate on whether or not women should be ordained, it is important to realize that our church constitution upholds the **doctrine of the priesthood of all believers**. In general terms, this means that each believer has received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and because of that Spirit, is able to approach God directly through Christ, without the necessity of any other human intermediary. It also means that the believer is able to read and understand the Scriptures for herself or himself, guided by the Holy Spirit. This inclusive Christian liberty of the Spirit is epitomized by Paul in Galatians 3:28, where he states *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”*

### **3. Practical and Contextual considerations for ordaining women**

In the current constitution of RCEA, article V, the main tasks for Ministers are: To preach and teach the word of God, administer sacraments and ceremonies of the church, shepherd the congregations, admonish the congregations, give pastoral care, guard the church constitution and doctrines, and to participate in the government of the church. I am convinced that called and trained women can carry out these roles.

#### **3.1 Can women Preach?**

Women are just as competent to preach as men. This has clearly been demonstrated by at least four of our women trainee pastors who have preached before an examining audience in various Presbyteries namely:

Fridah Mengich ( Eldoret Presbytery)

Lilian Ruto (Eastern Presbytery)

Priscah Cherob (Turbo Presbytery)

Emily Meli (Bungoma Presbytery)

Lenah Rob (Southern Presbytery).

It is my understood that the trainee women pastors received positive feedback from their audiences and therefore deserve to move to the second level, i.e, ordination. Indeed women in other churches have demonstrated that women can preach very well if given opportunity. It is also important to note that preaching is a gift which is



developed by being used. In real sense, the more the gift is used, the better it becomes. More women ministers need more occasions to develop their gift of preaching.

### **3.2 Can women teach?**

The gospels more than once describe the ministry of Jesus as preaching, teaching, and healing. The pastor of any church must have some ability to teach. The pastor is a the teacher of teachers and a leader of leaders. Can women ministers teach? The answer to this question can easily be obtained when one considers the fact that in all educational institutions women are as competent in teaching as men. It is notable that for several years we have had women teaching in our theological institution and our own Pastors have been taught by women. Our own women theologians are currently teaching in institutions such as St. Paul's University and Reformed Institute of Theological Training (RITT).

### **3.3 Can women be evangelists?**

Our church has the evangelism wing. Can women serve as evangelists? Can they effectively lead a congregation in church growth? Our church today is lacking behind other churches as far as evangelism is concerned. Can women face this tough challenge? The answer to this question can be seen when one considers numerical growth in churches led by women in Kenya today. Look at the reality in our local churches: who are more active in reaching to others? Men are certainly not better than women in this regard.

### **3.4 Can women shepherd the congregation or do pastoral care and counselling?**

Can women do pastoral care and counselling? If you have doubts on this look at the capability of women working in health service or human service fields. There are visiting nurses, public health nurses, school nurses, industrial nurses. "In my experience as a minister for 25 years, I have found out that some of the most effective ministry to the suffering or bereaved is rendered by registered nurses, practical nurses, or nurse aides. Time and again I have seen these women show such cheerfulness in life, such sensitivity to pain, and such compassion and understanding that their patients, men and women have been helped tremendously!

### 3.5 Can women participate in church administration and government?

Apart from preaching, shepherding the flock, evangelizing, and teaching sound doctrine of the church, a minister is also expected to participate in the administration and government of the church. Ministers need to assist boards, committees, and organizations within the church to fulfill their ministries effectively. In order to do this, the minister needs to be able to work with people, enlist their cooperation, and to motivate them to meaningful participation. Can women do this work? The answer to this question can be found by looking at the various administrative responsibilities outside the church, which some of our own female members are involved in. Some are chiefs, some are District Officers. Some women in our midst head very powerful institutions, while others are political representatives. This tells us that women can perform if given a chance.

### 4. Concluding remarks

Christian Men and Christian women form the body of Christ. Each part of the body or each member of the family has been given a gift or gifts to be used for the benefit of the body in carrying out that ministry of reconciliation. Women and men alike have been given those gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12: 27-28 Paul states:

*<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. <sup>28</sup> And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.*

*<sup>28</sup> Na Mungu ameweka wengine katika Kanisa, wa kwanza mitume, wa pili manabii, wa tatu waalimu, kisha miujiza, kisha karama za kuponya wagonjwa, na masaidiano, na maongozi, na aina za lugha. \* <sup>29</sup> Je! Wote ni mitume? Wote ni manabii? Wote ni waalimu? Wote wanatenda miujiza?*

The obvious intent of this passage is that each person, lay or ordained, female or male, use those gifts and all inherent or developed skills and abilities for the good of the body in fulfilling the God-directed ministry. It is equally clear that every person is to use effectively God's enrichment of his or her life with faithfulness. When Jesus told the story of the talents, he strongly indicated that failure in faithfully using divinely given resources carried very serious consequences (See Matt. 25:14-30). Simply stated the call to open the pulpits our churches for women ministers to serve

as pastors is the call for the church to do what it is supposed to do anyway. It is to make the best use of all the resources God has made available. Women ministers deserve the opportunity to answer God's call upon their lives and faithfully to use in the local church the gifts God has given to them.

The call to open the pulpits for women is not only a call for change but it is also a call to responsible stewardship. Our church can no longer afford the luxury of wasting such resources given to us by God. It is certainly time for our church to change from the old tradition of not ordaining women to a new tradition of ordaining them. However, the final decision on this subject can only be made carefully and prayerfully by the honorable members of the synod and as the Holy Spirit guides them. Amen.

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NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION

CONSTITUTION OF THE REFORMED CHURCH OF EAST AFRICA (1992)

Ordination of youth

Women ordination should be procedural

Question:

Not willingly refused.

27 women

Article 5 parishes are free to call

Unmarried pastors