

WOMEN IN ACTS
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As we seek to understand the role of women in the early church, it is important to carefully review the role of women in the church as revealed by the Acts of the Apostles (“Acts”) written by Luke.

After the ascension of Jesus, the followers of Jesus followed his instruction in Acts 1:4 “not to depart from Jerusalem , but to wait for the Promise of the Father...” It is clear that women were in the Upper Room at the time when the Holy Spirit fell upon the believers. Acts 1:14 specifically mentions the following people as being in attendance in the upper room for prayer and supplication: “the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus and with His brothers.”

On the Day of Pentecost, Luke writes “they were all with one accord in one place” when the Holy Spirit fell and “divided tongues, as of fire, sat upon each of them.” The Holy Spirit did not discriminate by just falling on men but fell upon all who were present. (Acts 2:3).

When Peter stands up to address the crowd who witnessed the incident, Peter apparently addresses mainly the men in the crowd. We find the terms “Men of Judah” (Acts 2:14) , “Men of Israel” (Acts 2:22), and “Men and brethren” (Acts 2:29).

Interestingly, Peter uses as his text Joel 2:28-32 which reads as follows:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God,
That I will pour out of My Spirit on **all** flesh;
Your sons **and your daughters** shall prophesy.
Your young men shall see visions,
Your old men shall dream dreams
And on My menservants and on **My maidservants**,
I will pour out My Spirit in those days;
And **they** shall prophesy.
I will show wonders in heaven above
And signs in the earth beneath
blood and fire and vapor of smoke.
The sun shall be turned into darkness,
and the moon into blood,
before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord.
And it shall come to pass
That **whoever** calls on the name of the Lord
shall be saved.

The Scripture used makes it clear that God’s intent was to pour out His Spirit upon all people both men and women. Both men and women were invited to be saved and to receive the Holy Spirit.

The result of Peter's preaching and the movement of the Holy Spirit was that three thousand souls ("psychai") were saved that day and were added to the church. It was not just men who were added from the preaching but both men and women.

As Christianity expands it moves into the homes of the believers. Not only did believers meet in the Temple but they also shared bread "from house to house." (Acts 2:46).

In the Fifth Chapter of Acts we come to the interesting account of Ananias and Sapphira who were punished for lying to God. They sold a piece of property and told the church that they were giving the proceeds to the church. Instead, they kept back part of the proceeds and were punished by both of them dying. The account is interesting from the perspective of how man/woman relationships worked even in Biblical times. Surprisingly, it was not just the man who was punished, but both the man and his wife. The wife seems to have had some complicity in this sin because Acts 5:2 says that Sapphira "was aware of it." After Ananias is dead, three hours later, Peter confronts Sapphira and says in Acts 5:9: "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?" Although the account is obviously utilized to encourage the people of God to be honest both with God and with the Apostles, it does inadvertently show that life was not all male-dominated. Women had a role and many decisions were made jointly.

As the Apostles continued to do "signs and wonders" many people continued to join the church. Acts 5:14 states: "And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women..." As I have pointed out in other articles, the ministry to the church to widows was in complete accord with Jewish Tradition and Scripture; except that the church was more emphatic in carrying out this important task. As a result widows and women were attracted to the church seeing this love carried out in practice and action. In fact the Sixth Chapter of Act discusses the development of "deacons." This office arose because complaints had come up from the Hellenized widows that they were being overlooked in favor of the Jewish widows. Accordingly seven deacons were selected to oversee these regular distributions to the widows so that the Apostles would not be distracted from their primary purposes of ministry of the word and from prayer. (Acts 6:4).

Before we dig deeper into Acts, perhaps a moment should be taken to step back and review the overall purpose and message of Acts. Acts recounts the acts of the Apostles and the expansion and growth of the early Christian Church as the Good News of Jesus and what He had done was shared. As a part of this expansion, walls between people were torn down. When you became a Christian you entered into the family of God. Part of the excitement of the Christian faith was that there were no second class citizens in the Kingdom of God. The poor man was treated like the rich man; the slave like the free and women were treated as persons not as objects or chattel. Obligations to take care of the poor and the widows were taken seriously. The Holy Spirit pulled down the walls of division. Christianity was in its Springtime.

God had committed to Peter, the Apostles and the Church, the keys to the Kingdom of God. People shut out of the kingdom would now be let in. Peter was at the head of this breaking down of walls. The Holy Spirit had fallen both on men and women. Both orthodox Jews and Hellenistic Jews had been brought into the kingdom. The barriers between the Hellenistic and Jewish widows had been broken down and this gave rise to deacons. Through people like Philip, Peter and John, further walls had been breached. The Gospel had been preached to Ethiopian Jews, the walls between Samaritans and Jews had been pulled down by Philip, Peter and John and the baptism of the Holy Spirit had fallen upon the Samaritans. Philip had seen a Christian revival break out in Samaria. Acts 8:12 says:

But when they believed Philip, as he preached the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men **and women** were baptized.

As you recall, Jesus had already touched the people of Samaria when he had shared with the women at the Well of Jacob and the people of Sychar. After Philip preached he called upon Peter and John to come to Samaria and as they prayed the Samaritans were baptized by the Holy Spirit.

Further walls would be pulled down. Peter would have a dream of a sheet being lowered down from heaven with all kinds of beasts in it and he had been commanded to take and eat even of the unclean beasts. God had sent a message to Peter that he was no respecter of persons. Peter would go with the representatives of the Centurion Cornelius and the Holy Spirit would fall on the Gentiles.

In short God broke down barriers. The Holy Spirit fell upon both men and women, upon Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles. In Acts we smell the Spring flowers of God pulling down the walls of separation.

The pulling down walls among God's people has always been a concern of Satan. A study of church history suggests to me that a fierce attack came upon the church. It came both from within and from without. The attack from within came from a reestablishment of Pharisaical legalism and pride through the ascetics and those demanding celibacy and shutting down the elders, presbyters and bishops who were married and had families. Instead a new legalism would grow up where the people would be ruled by those who cared more for the rules of men than for the heart of God. At the same time, great attacks would come from the outside including the destruction of Jerusalem, the persecutions of Christians and Jews and the eventual establishment and absolute dominance by Islam over areas which had previously been great strongholds of Christianity. The establishment of Islam over Christian and Jewish areas can be easily viewed historically by seeing the establishment of the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount and by the conversion of the great church in the east, St. Sophia's, into an Islamic mosque. In fact in large areas, Christianity had been absolutely shut down and kicked out. Moreover, women who were achieving freedom in the church were re-enslaved and dominated by the teachings and practices of Islam.

In the non-Islamic west, a new priesthood had been established. Both the married pastor and women were relegated into second class citizens and a new priesthood was established which would keep things under control. In effect church legalism in the West did much as Islamic dominance and law did in those areas controlled by Islam.

As I review Acts, I see a brief Springtime before much of the gains brought about by the Holy Spirit had begun to blossom before being crushed by the historic forces of legalism which reasserted their control over the church.

Now I return to reviewing Acts.

The position of women in the early church is as much told by adversity as it is told by success. We find that a number of the early martyrs in church history were women. In Judea, we find that as Saul begins to persecute the church, his attack is as much against women as it is against men. Acts 8:3 says:

As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off

men **and women**, committing them to prison.

When it came to persecution, women were not considered to be docile and quiet. Instead they were persecuted alongside the men and sent to prison by Saul.

As I have mentioned elsewhere, the care of the church for widows was remarkable. Although, the Jews had a tradition of caring for widows and orphans, the church actually began programs for their regular care and feeding. This must have been an incentive for widows to come into church. If a widow was not cared for by her family, she was left in dire straits and with few alternatives. One of these alternatives was prostitution or selling themselves into servitude. The young church was absolutely remarkable because it dealt with this problem directly.

In Acts, one of the accounts is that Peter went to Joppa and the believers there came to Peter and asked him to do something because one of the “disciples” (followers of Christ) had died. Acts 9:36 says:

At Joppa, there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas. This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did.

When Peter goes in to heal her, Acts 10:39 says, “And all the **widows** stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them.” Evidently Dorcas had part of the church engaged in helping the church meet the needs of the widows. Part of these needs were clothing. The church through the charity of its members not only provided daily distributions of food but also clothing for widows and orphans. After Peter heals her and brings her back to life, Acts 10:41 says, “...and when he called the saints **and widows**, he presented her alive.”

Not only were widows, taken care of by the church, but they also provided prayer support for the Apostles and for the outreach of the church.

In the tenth chapter of Acts, the account is given of the expansion of the Gospel to the Gentiles. Peter is prepared for this expansion by having a vision or dream of a sheet let down from heaven having both clean and unclean animals indicating that God was breaking down divisions. One can almost wonder if not only clean and unclean animals were being let down in the sheet, but that the vision or dream applied to other social divisions in the Roman Empire including not just Jew and Gentile but divisions between slave and free and the divisions of man and woman.

When Paul goes to Caesarea, he finds the friends and relatives of Cornelius there (Acts 10:24). We conjecture that some of the friends and relatives were female and that the house of Cornelius contained both freed and enslaved males and females. When Peter comes to Caesarea to the home of Cornelius he addressed those there in Acts 10:34:

In truth, I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation, **whoever** fears him and works righteousness is accepted by him.”

Like at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fell on all the Gentiles listening to Peter. Acts 10:44 says, “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon **all** those who heard the word.” Paul recognizing that the Holy Spirit was bringing the Gentiles into the Church, proceeds to baptize them in water (Acts 10:47).

God had used Peter mightily. He used him at Pentecost, at the healing of the lame man at the Temple, at the healing of Dorcas, at the baptism and fall of the Holy Spirit upon the Samaritans and at the opening of the door of the Gospel to the Gentiles. If Peter had been granted the keys to the kingdom of heaven, he had used them wisely and the gospel was now going to all people, not just to the Jews. As Paul would later write, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28). Likewise Paul wrote regarding making Jews and Gentiles one people when he wrote at Ephesians 2:14, "For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation,..." Barriers had been pulled down. However, as fast as the barriers were pulled down, others wanted to build them back up. Judaizers from Jerusalem would insist the Gentile Christians follow the law. Likewise, the young church would within the first couple of centuries be captured by those who advocated that church leaders be ascetic and celibate despite commands to the contrary. Legalism was not out of the game. Instead of the church being a place of equals where leaders would wash feet and serve, new divisions and classes would be set up so that once again, priests and leadership would be in control and the sheep would know their place.

Acts next deals with attacks from without upon the church. James would be killed. Peter would be thrown into prison. Acts 12 gives the account where Peter was thrown into prison and chained between soldiers but in the middle of the night he is loosened from his chains and walks free of prison. As Peter is sleeping the church is praying. (Acts 12:5). Interestingly, where do we find the church meeting to pray? The answer is that the church is meeting and praying in a woman's house. The House is the home of Mary who was the mother of John Mark. Acts 12:12 finds that when Peter miraculously escaped from prison he went to the house of Mary where "many were gathered together praying." (Acts 12:2)

Women were considered to be over the house and in charge of the day to day raising of children. A number of women had joined the faith although we hear little or nothing about their husbands. One of these women was Mary who was the mother of John Mark and who not only had prayer meetings at her home but raised a child in the faith, John Mark. Mark would go on to go on the first Missionary Journey with Paul and Barnabas (at least part of the way). Later he would write one of the earliest of the Gospels, Mark. In addition, he would later be involved again in the ministry of Paul and would be a missionary and bishop in the church.

Another woman who also gave her son to the ministry was the mother of Timothy. In Acts 16:1 we read:

And behold a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed but his father Greek.

Now Mark had been born of a Jewish mother meaning that he was Jewish and had been circumcised. However, Timothy was born from a marriage where the mother was Jewish and the Father was Greek. Apparently Timothy had not been circumcised following the Greek practice which felt that any alteration of the body was inappropriate and defiled the body. Since Timothy's mother was Jewish, Timothy was considered to be Jewish. Because, Paul intended to take Timothy into synagogues, he had him

circumcised so that Timothy would not be offensive to the Jews. Nonetheless, the point is that part of the role of a Christian wife and mother was to raise her children in the faith. Both the mothers of Mark and Timothy did this.

As I have discussed elsewhere, Paul used the synagogue as his avenue to spread the Gospel both in Asia Minor and in Greece. In doing so, he would begin his preaching in an area by addressing the members of the local synagogue. Since the leadership of the synagogue was male, Paul would generally begin to address the men in the synagogue despite the fact that women were present as well. Some of the examples where Paul addressed men in the synagogue are found in Acts 13:26 and Acts 15:7.

As Paul is praying about the direction of where to go next he has a dream. In that dream a man from Macedonia pleaded with Paul "Come to Macedonia and help us." (Acts 16:9). This dream, interestingly, points Paul in a westward direction for his future missions rather than an eastward direction. Had Paul not received this direction his future missions would have been in an area where Islam eventually would extinguish the Christian witness. In fact, it almost did the same in Greece but Christianity survived the Islamic occupation of Greece and eventually forced Islam back out of these areas. In light of what would transpire in Philippi, it is almost surprising that Paul did not have a vision of a woman saying: "Come to Macedonia and help us."

After Paul and Silas (Timothy, perhaps Luke and others) go to Philippi they begin trying to witness but find that there is no synagogue where they can begin. So when the Sabbath comes, Paul and his friends head for the local river because they hear that there are some Jews who meet there. Acts 16:13 states that that they "went to the riverside where prayer was customarily made and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there." Interestingly, when Paul comes to Greece, he ends up preaching to a group of women rather than men.

In Acts 16:14-15, an account is given of the first conversion in Greece and that conversion is of a woman. That Scripture says:

Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira who worshipped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." So she persuaded us.

There are numerous things that are significant about Lydia. First she apparently was an independent businesswoman involved in selling purple textiles. She originally had come from Thyatira in Asia Minor. This city is near the modern city of Akhisar which is due east of Athens. Thyatira was about 80 kilometers inland from the Aegean Sea. Paul and his travelers would have had much in common with this woman. Further, she had to be fairly wealthy, not only because of her trade but because she had a home and a "household" and Paul, Silas, Timothy and perhaps Luke took lodging there after her conversion.

After Paul and Silas were imprisoned and beaten in Philippi we know that they "entered the house of Lydia" (Acts 16:40).

Significantly, the first convert in Paul's Missionary Trip to Greece had been an independent businesswoman, Lydia. Lydia does not fit the stereotypes which we have of Middle Eastern women

despite having come from Asia Minor. Instead she apparently is living without a husband, is wealthy and has her own business in society where it was primarily men who did business although women may have had more presence in certain trades such as textiles and clothing than certain other trades.

Not only was the first convert by Paul in Greece a woman but the first miracle that we know that Paul did also involved a woman. Apparently some men owned a female slave who had the power of divination and who made money for her masters through fortune-telling (Acts 16:16). The slave girl would proclaim "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." Paul finally casts the fortune-telling spirit from the slave girl and freeing her from demonic control. The masters of the slave girl are outraged because Paul has destroyed their fortune telling business and they drag Paul and Silas before the authorities where they are beaten and thrown into prison. (Acts 16:16-23).

Although we hear no more of the slave girl, Christianity would spread quickly among slaves as well as free men and women. In fact some of the earliest martyrs in the West would be slave women. Christ had come to set people free and that meant slaves as well as free people. It meant women as well as men.

We know that Paul and Silas then left Philippi and went to Thessalonica where as usual Paul began to preach in the synagogue. We know that Paul met with success in Thessalonica and the Gospel was accepted by some of the Greeks attending the synagogue including some of the women. (Acts 17:1-4). In Acts 17:4 it says, "And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas." Again, this passage shows that the Gospel was received with popularity by women.

Paul next headed for Berea where again he is met with success. Acts 17:12 says, "Therefore many of them believed and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men." Paul apparently leaves Silas and Timothy in Berea and travels by sea to Athens.

Paul at one point addresses the Areopagus in Athens. The Areopagus was a Court made up of judges, advisors and others which met on a hill just Northwest of the Parthenon. The hill was called the "Hill of Ares" or Mars Hill, Mars being the Roman equivalent to the Greek God Ares. The Areopagus would meet to hear and try cases involving murder, personal injury, religious matters and arson involving olive trees.

Paul preaches his famous sermon referencing the Athenian statue to the unknown God. As a result of this sermon, there are some who decide to follow Christ. Acts 17:34 says, "However some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris and others with them." Dionysius was evidently a member of the Areopagus Council and therefore was person of some importance. According to Eusebius, who in turn quotes from a bishop of Corinth, Dionysius would later become the head of the church in Athens.

A woman, Damaris, is specifically mentioned in the account. Little is known of Damaris. Various commentators have speculated as to why a woman would have been present at the Areopagus especially due to the fact that generally meeting consisted of men. Apparently an early text of Acts considered Damaris to be the wife of Dionysius. We have no further information regarding Damaris. However, the fact that she was mentioned probably suggests that she a person of standing. As the Gospel, spread in Greece it continued to attract women and the author of Acts seems to be acutely

aware of the Gospel's attraction to women and their involvement in the early church. It is just my opinion, but it seems to me that the author of Acts seems to go out of his way to highlight and mention the expansion of the Gospel among women.

From Athens, Paul proceeded to Corinth where he followed his customary practice of meeting with and seeking to convert Jews in the local synagogue. It is in Corinth where Paul meets one of the most famous women in the New Testament, Priscilla. Acts 18:1-3 says:

After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus who had recently come from Italy with his wife (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome) and he came to them. So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers.

Apparently both Aquila and Priscilla worked in the trade. Paul took up lodging with them and evidently worked in their shop helping to make tents. It is thought that Paul lived with them for about a year and a half.

Aquila and Priscilla are mentioned six times in the Bible. The relevant passages are Acts 18:2-3; Acts 18:18; Acts 18:26; Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19 and 2 Timothy 4:19. In two of the passages, Aquila's name comes first with Priscilla following; however in 4 of the 6 passages, it is Priscilla's name which comes first. Aquila and Priscilla are a great example of a situation where the couple is ministering together and in equality. Some have conjectured that Priscilla was the more important and others have conjectured that Priscilla may have written the Book of Hebrews since the name of the author apparently was omitted perhaps because it was believed that a book written by a female author would not have been accepted by some.

At any rate, Priscilla and Aquila were involved in the founding of the Corinthian church. When Paul decided to go to Syria, Aquila and Priscilla went with him and he left them in Ephesus (Acts 18:18) where they met Apollos (Acts 18:24) and it is there that they both were involved in instructing Apollos more accurately (Acts 18:26). Paul remained in Ephesus two years teaching and preaching in the School of Tyrannus which he rented.

Later as Paul and his companions are heading for Jerusalem, they stop in the home of Philip, the evangelist who was one of the first seven deacons and who was the one who had baptized the Ethiopian Eunuch. (Acts 21:9). This important individual in early Christian history had "four virgin daughters who prophesied." (Also, Acts 21:9). This is also important information because it makes clear that Philip was married and that his daughters were engaged in the prophetic ministries and gifts in the early church.

Paul makes his way to Jerusalem and is imprisoned by the Romans after the Jews riot believing that he had brought an uncircumcised man into the Temple. During the time that Paul is imprisoned by the Romans he has the opportunity to testify and make a defense of his faith. Interestingly this testimony is not only made to the authorities but also to their wives. In Acts 24:24, Paul explained his position and faith to the Roman Procurator of Judea and his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. On another occasion, King Agrippa came to Festus who succeeded Festus and both King Agrippa and his wife Bernice heard Paul. To me, it is of interest that in these matters the wives of these important leaders were involved and took an interest, suggesting that the role of women may have been more important than that many think, especially among the upper and educated classes.

The Book of Acts suggests that the role of women in the early church may have been more dynamic than it would be later in church history. However, the new found freedom of women would quickly be circumscribed in the following years as the celibates and ascetics became leaders of the church and the original elders and deacons were relegated to a place of subservience under celibate bishops.