

WEEK 2

Digging Deeper

Women in the Book of Acts: Real, Diverse, and Essential

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Skeptics often accuse Christianity of having a low regard for women and treating them as second-class citizens. While there's no denying that many professing believers, past and present, have been guilty of this, the view from the Scriptures is radically different.

Unique among all religions and philosophies with roots in the ancient world, the biblical world view presents both women and men as created in God's image and thus coequal in value and dignity (Genesis 1:26-28). In fact, a group of prominent women played a vital role in Jesus' earthly ministry, providing financial support as well as being the first eyewitnesses of his resurrection (Luke 8:1-3; 24:1-12).

This pattern was reinforced during the early years of the church. The book of Acts is peppered with stories of women that would've raised eyebrows in the 1st century and might still today. These women aren't the stuff of Sunday School picture books. They're real and they're diverse – household servants, tradeswomen, business leaders, intellectuals – and they're essential to the church's understanding of itself in any era or culture.

Mary, the mother of Jesus: Acts 1:12-26

The women who had followed and supported Jesus during his time on earth, who had borne witness to his resurrection, didn't simply vanish after he ascended into heaven. They were present in the upper room with the eleven apostles, part of a larger group of about 120 disciples, the first formal gathering of the church in its history.

Among their number was Mary, the mother of Jesus. This brief glimpse of her is quite distinct from the way she's often portrayed in later art and tradition. She and the other women are engaged in corporate prayer with the rest of the church as it conducts its first order of business: choosing a successor to Judas to stand with the other apostles. It's a rare, down-to-earth snapshot of Mary in later life, participating in the work of the early church along with her fellow believers.

Tabitha a.k.a. Dorcas: Acts 9:36-43

As the Gospel spread out from Jerusalem, churches began to spring up in the Judean countryside. In the port city of Joppa (now part of modern Tel Aviv), a disciple named Tabitha was singled out for her acts of kindness to her community. Her Greek name, Dorcas, suggests she was a Hellenistic Jew who had grown up outside Judea and assimilated Greek language and culture. The primary focus of her ministry was to poor widows, for whom she made tunics and other items of clothing.

In a touching account, Luke, the author of Acts, records Tabitha's illness and subsequent death. He draws attention to the widows, weeping and showing Peter the good things Tabitha had made for them while she was living. In response, Peter followed the example of his Lord, praying over Tabitha and raising her from the dead.

Like Barnabas and other early disciples, Tabitha was evidently a person of means, able to clothe the poorer women of her community at her own expense. But hers was a hands-on approach, devoting her resources as well as her time and labour to a life of practical service.

Mary, the mother of John Mark: Acts 12:6-19

During the first few centuries of church history, there were no dedicated church buildings. Local groups met in the homes of believers whose houses were large enough to accommodate such gatherings. One of these early house churches was hosted by a woman named Mary, the mother of John Mark.

For a woman to own a house and lead a large household was uncommon but not unknown at the time. Mary was most likely a wealthy widow, originally from Cyprus and related to Barnabas, who had opened her home as a meeting place for the church. Peter was a close friend of this congregation, and Mary's son eventually became his assistant, writing the Gospel of Mark from the great apostle's memoirs.

Rhoda the servant girl: Acts 12:6-19

From all indications, Mary's household was marked by an atmosphere of warmth and good humour, as exemplified by her servant girl, Rhoda. Among Rhoda's duties, it was her job to answer the door when visitors called, much like a maid or personal assistant might do today.

After Peter was miraculously freed from prison by an angel, he came to visit his friends at Mary's house. Rhoda rushed to the door, dropped her jaw at the sight of Peter, and rushed right back without letting him in. One can picture her flapping her hands and squealing in delight that Peter was at the door, while everyone told her she was crazy and she kept insisting that, no, no, it was really him. Meanwhile, Peter just stood outside and kept knocking, waiting to be invited in.

This charming episode plays like something out of Shakespeare or a modern sitcom. Through these two women – a kindly rich widow and her slightly flighty servant girl – Luke preserves a slice of early church life far removed from the stern, patriarchal caricature of popular imagination.

Lydia of Thyatira: Acts 16:11-40

Prominent, wealthy women continued to play a vital role in support of the Gospel as it spread from Judea into the Greco-Roman world. And by all accounts, few of these women were as wealthy or prominent as Lydia, the first Christian convert in what is now Europe.

Originally from Thyatira in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Lydia was an agent of the lucrative dye and fabric industry based in that city. Thyatiran purple was renowned throughout the empire and reserved for emperors and other high-ranking officials. Accordingly, Lydia ran her business from Philippi in Macedonia (modern northern Greece), a Roman colony for retired politicians and military leaders. She moved among and did business with the rich and powerful of Rome. If there had been a Forbes index of top female CEOs in the empire, Lydia would've ranked high on the list.

Like Cornelius before her, Lydia was a gentile attracted to the God of the Jewish Scriptures. Once she was converted to Christ, she placed her home and considerable resources at the disposal of Paul and his ministry team, even after they had been released from prison. In doing so, she provided a bridgehead for the apostle's mission as it moved down into Greece and eventually across Europe.

Damaris the Areopagite: Acts 17:16-34

Upon arriving in Athens, Paul began to discuss the Gospel with members of various philosophical schools in the city. At length, they brought him to the Areopagus to present his teaching in a more formal setting. The Areopagus was a court where intellectuals and other cultural elites would meet to critique new ideas. In effect, Paul was giving the equivalent of a TED talk, except that he could get into serious legal trouble if his audience didn't like his presentation.

As a result of Paul's speech, a number of people at the meeting came to faith, including Damaris, an Athenian woman notable enough for Luke to mention by name. In a strict sense, Damaris would not have been an Areopagite because women were generally not allowed to participate. The primary exception was for hetaerae, essentially courtesans or mistresses, well-educated women who

provided company and intellectual conversation for prominent men. Damaris may well have been such a hetaera before her conversion.

In any event, just as Lydia moved in the lofty circles of Roman commerce and industry, Damaris held her own in the rarefied air of Greek academia and high culture. These two women, leading lights of Greco-Roman society, showed that the Gospel reached beyond the poor and disenfranchised to everyone, regardless of gender or social class. Moreover, they would have been able to speak truth and minister in avenues that were off limits to most believers of their time.

Priscilla, of “Priscilla and Aquila”: Acts 18:1-28

Compared to Damaris or Lydia, Priscilla occupied a relatively modest niche in 1st-century Roman society. Together with her husband, Aquila, she ran a small business in Corinth making tents. In modern terms, Priscilla and Aquila were artisans or tradespeople. They were also a cross-cultural couple; unlike her husband, Priscilla likely wasn't Jewish but a Roman woman from an upper-class family, judging by her name. After meeting and working with Paul, the well-travelled duo became valued members of the apostle's missionary team.

Unusual for the time, Priscilla and Aquila are always mentioned together, suggesting they were equal partners in life, business and ministry. Even more unusual, Priscilla is almost always named first, indicating hers was perhaps the higher-profile role within the church.

In Ephesus, the couple met an educated Alexandrian Jew named Apollos, who taught accurately about Jesus, but only up to the work of John the Baptist. Priscilla and Aquila then took Apollos aside and explained the Gospel to him more fully.

It's hard to imagine this scene as Priscilla standing off to the side while the men chatted. Given the description, it's evident that she took an active role in training Apollos, preparing him to be a powerful advocate for the Gospel in Ephesus, Achaia and beyond.

Conclusion

In the words of Paul to the churches of Galatia, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

The idea wasn't that the Gospel flattens humanity into a raceless, genderless mass. Rather it was to emphasize the colourful mosaic of the Kingdom, made up of men and women from every ethnic and social background, all with equal access and standing in Christ.

Paul's friend Luke was especially concerned with the women in this wonderful kaleidoscope of the early church. Both in his Gospel and in the book of Acts, he took pains to portray them in all their diversity, from maids who answered the door to cultural elites who moved in circles of privilege and power. These were real women of warmth and wit and intellect, who played essential roles in the spread of the Gospel that turned the world upside down.

In the 21st century as never before, it's crucial that the church reaffirm these truths, not only for its own sake, but also for the sake of the surrounding culture that's watching.

Sources and further reading

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Questions To Ask When

Sometimes when we read a passage in the Bible it can be confusing or we may not know how to best figure out what it is saying. Below are some good questions to ask when reading the Bible to help make the Bible make sense.

1. What stands out to me?

Note that this does not say “What does this passage mean?” Consider what stood out to you? What did you notice? What did the Holy Spirit highlight for you as you read it?

2. What does the text say about the character/nature of God?

The Scriptures are primarily about God so ask first what the text says about Him before moving to what it says about us, about His plan, or about anything else.

3. What does the text say?

Look at what the text literally says first (this may not be the intent of the text but it is important to look at it as read... at least initially).

4. How is it saying it?

What is the genre of the text and how should we read text in that genre?

5. Why does it say it that way?

Speculate about why the author chose this method of saying what they've said.

6. What is it trying to say?

Getting behind the Scripture, looking at its context, its original audience, its author, etc., what is the text trying to get across to the reader (both the original audience and us today?)

7. How does this fit into the whole of the book and the whole of Scripture?

Looking at the whole book, does what is being said jive with the whole book, with the whole of Scripture?

8. What questions do I have?

Do you have questions about the text? If they aren't answered in the text, are they good questions or are we asking questions that the text isn't meant to answer?

9. How do I feel about this teaching/text? Why do I feel that way?

What does your gut say? Are you frustrated with it? Are you trying to make it say something else than what it says? Does it make you uncomfortable? Where are these feelings coming from? Is there sin in my life I need to repent of?

10. What is the universal application of this text/teaching?

What are we to do with this text? Consider the original audience as well as us today.

11. What is my personal application?

What is God calling you to apply with what you've learned with this text?

12. How will I apply what it calls me to?

Make a plan to apply what God has taught you. Seek to be faithful and obedient to His leading, wherever it may go.