



October 12, 2016

feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dearest family,

For the last few months we have been studying the text of the Acts of the Apostles. At first sight it would be easy to assume that this is referring to the Twelve disciples, who were indeed a particular apostolic group. To be one of those kind of apostles, as we see in the election process for Judas' replacement in Acts 1:21, you had to fulfill specific qualifications: having been with Jesus from His baptism to His ascension and a witness of his resurrection. But the fact is that apart from Peter, these Twelve are not mentioned in the main narrative at all. Peter is prominent, together with Apostle James (not the one-of-the-twelve James) and he shares the stage with an apostle who did not qualify for the Twelve, yet he was an apostle nonetheless, who said, *"I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle."* (1 Cor. 15:9) Then, as the story of the church unfolds in the New Testament, we encounter other apostles like Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, Timothy. Paul refers to Epaphroditus as the Philippians 'apostle' (2:25) The delegation that was sent to Jerusalem in 2 Cor. 8:23 are described as apostles. What I am saying is that though the Twelve are acknowledged at the beginning of Acts they cannot be the only apostles referred to in the title. They are not. It is a much broader company, and although the narrative seems at first sight to be dominated by male apostles, women were integral to the apostolic ministry and were apostolic themselves. They were neither also-rans nor add-ons.

On Sunday I referred to the long and entrenched history that had cast a shadow over women's lives and ministries in the church. But it is not only to the Garden of Eden that we go for answers, but more importantly to the Garden of the empty tomb, that liberates us to work out, discover, and experience the implications of this mighty redemption for men and women, equally the image of God, who in Christ become God's new humanity. My point in Sunday's message was to assert the importance of the Acts narrative in honoring the spiritual ministry and leadership of women, both consistent with what preceded it in the gospels, and ground-breaking in its expectations of what would be normative in the church.

Briefly, we looked at the gospel record that preceded Luke's Acts narrative, and in particular noted the continuity in Acts of his emphasis in his gospel, especially when it came to the way he featured the role of women, first in Jesus' personal life and then in the life of His body, the church, beginning from the opening verses of Matthew's genealogy, all the way through to the end of John's account where the first word out of the angel's mouth at the tomb was *"woman"* and the first word that the resurrected Christ spoke was: *"Woman!"* (Jn. 20:13, 15) The first name he addressed was a woman's: *"Mary!"* (Jn. 20:16) Less than 20 written verses later in his two-volume work, he describes the women in the upper room, who were equally initiated by the Holy Spirit into an experience of tongues of fire on their heads and new tongues in their mouths, and equally commissioned to the nations.

I suggest you listen to the download to get the quick survey that I did of strategic moments in the Acts narrative that serve to instruct us by the examples of incredible apostolic women, beginning with Mary in the first chapter, all the way through to Philip's four prophesying daughters toward the end of the story. Luke was an impeccable historian and is deliberate in what he draws our attention to. He takes us as readers into a world of fulfilled prophecy, from which advantage point it is understood that Jesus has brought salvation to the entire world, absolutely no exclusions. No less than 23 times in Acts, he draws that attention to a group that had previously experienced exclusion. You cannot miss them - they are called women. But yet we do often miss them, or treat them as minor characters in a play, or as extras on a film set, as the headline of the narrative seems first to be Peter's mission and then Paul's. At first look, there doesn't seem to be a woman apostle in sight. Luke would be really discouraged if

we missed them. His immediate mention of the women present in the first chapter is in total keeping with the prominent place he gave women in his writings. One commentator observes: *"Given the culture's usual down-playing of women's public roles, the equal participation of women is noteworthy, especially their apparent mixing with men."* (Keener BBC IVP) It is that equality of togetherness that is the first presentation in Acts of the church. It was foundational, not concessionary or supplementary. Indeed, Luke's descriptions about the roles and responsibilities, the integrity and influence, the local ministry and international mission of women needs to be understood against a cultural backdrop of patriarchalism, but much more importantly and positively, as evidence of the power of the gospel to break separating walls of prejudice that deny and destroy the truths about the equality of humanity, dignity and responsibility - in the image of God He made THEM! *"Male and female He created THEM ... let THEM rule over ... God blessed THEM ... I give you ... they will be YOURS ..."* (Gen. 1: 26-29)

I often say that Jesus was a man's man and a woman's man, in that he equally knew and holily loved both men and women. The Acts of the Apostles were the acts of both men and women. The text includes the stories of apostolic women. From the beginning in Acts 1, they had an equal place in the gathering, and received an equal share of the Spirit's dispensation and anointing. They would have participated in the decision-making processes when the text says that the church discussed something and made a decision. They were equal in status, they were equal at the place of prayer, they were equal as candidates for spiritual empowerment, they were equal as converts and members of the church, they were equal in serving, in leading, in church planting, in spiritual gifts. They were treated equally when it came to accountability and responsibility. They were equally in the priesthood of all believers.

It is unconscionable that Paul should be accused of being a misogynist. There is an untold story of deep sadness and brokenness in his life, for although he appears as a single in the narrative, to be a member of the Sanhedrin, he must have been married at one point. We do not know what happened or what pain he bore, or what decision he made to commit himself in his singleness to the cause of the gospel. I can hear a great tenderness in his voice when he writes about marriage. But I also think that when he was radically converted on the road to Damascus, he had to deal in his repentance with his sin against women-believers, many of whom had died and had been imprisoned as a result of his hostility and persecution. The fact is that when the Lord stopped him on the road, he was going to Damascus to persecute those who belonged to the Way *"whether men or women."* Women had been his victims. In the Acts narrative time line, women as well as men were being incarcerated and martyred for their faith in Jesus. I'm saying this to point out that of all the equalities that the narrative presents, the equality of suffering has to be acknowledged. I think the redeemed, delivered, forgiven Paul was as aware of this in his ministry as anyone, and consequently always sensitive to the extraordinary spirituality of the women he knew, always respectful of their spiritual influence in the church and their contribution to the Acts of the Apostles, not simply as secondary players who sent the men mission care packages, but as frontline apostolic messengers, fearless witnesses, formational disciplers, generous financiers, just and merciful workers, foundational church planters.

"Also some women ... along with the women ..." (Lk. 8:1; Acts 1:14) There couldn't be more weighted understatements. Yes, Acts is a story about apostolic men, but it is equally a record of apostolic women. And the history of the church has not changed in these dynamics, and the history of this church, which incidentally was birthed in a prayer meeting organized by a woman, has been no different. I offer you Sunday's message as a meager contribution to the Acts series, in praise of God, and in honor of his spiritual daughters, my sisters – and in praise of the acts of godly apostolic women!

Pastorally yours,
Stuart