

## Have We Been Viewing Women's Roles in the Church Wrongly?

The New Testament is pretty clear when it comes roles and duties in the church that are **not** the responsibility of women. They are not to be burdened with the obligation of *leadership* or *preaching*, cf. 1Corinthians 11:3; and 1Timothy 2:8 - 3:13. Though the reasons for being liberated from these particular aspects of service have to do with *creation order*, the *consequences of ancient transgression*, and having *other critical duties* that take precedence (read carefully 1Timothy 2:13-15), it is also easy to see, if we really look, God's manifested wisdom in gender-based division of labor within the church. Though women certainly have the capacity for *preaching* and *leading* God's people- as demonstrated by in the Old Testament through the examples of women like Deborah (cf. Judges 4-5) and Esther (Esther 1 -10), their particular nature and skills make them more valuable in other areas of usefulness and service. So, perhaps we've been looking at women's roles in the church from the wrong perspective- as *restricted*, rather than *freed* to perform vital tasks for which they are particularly endowed, and for which men are neither particularly suited nor especially capable. Let's consider an illustrative example.

**Acts 9:36-42, Tabitha (or in Greek, Dorcas).** The text records that "*this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity, which she continually did.*" If Dorcas had been burdened with the task of *preaching* and *church leadership* in Joppa where she lived, who would have performed these vital roles? The men of Joppa? Hardly. While men are created, suited, and tasked with cultivation and provision (see Genesis 2:15; 3:17-18; and 1Timothy 5:8), they are not nearly as well-equipped by the Creator for deeds of "*kindness and charity*" as women. Though men's heads and backs are well-suited for growing and harvesting crops of cotton or flax, neither their hearts nor hands are well-suited for the gracious and compassionate act of turning such raw materials into "*tunics and garments*" for those in need. But Dorcas, being endowed with both the heart of compassion and the hands of particular skill, was free to use them both to the glory of God in service to others.

Consider another aspect of this account from v.42, "*And it became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.*" The "*it*" to which the text refers is surely the *raising of Dorcas from the dead* in v.41, but ponder a much-related question: Why was Dorcas raised? Surely, women died in Joppa almost if not daily. Why was *this woman* resurrected? The answer seems obvious enough- Dorcas was raised because the *content* of her heart and the *quality* and *quantity* of her service prompted her fellow Christians to call for Peter, cf. vv.36-39. I do not believe they wanted him to simply "preach her funeral." Understanding at least somewhat of the power of the Holy Spirit wrought through this apostle (cf. Acts 5:14-16), they wanted Dorcas back! And they got her back, vv.40-41! Her miraculous return to life resulted in many *believing in the Lord*. Why? Because God through Peter raised a woman from the dead? Yes, in part. But why was *this woman* raised from the dead in the first place? Because she was a valuable *preacher* and *leader* in the church at Joppa? Certainly, but her *preaching* wasn't done in the pulpit nor was her *leadership* over the assembly! She proclaimed Jesus through the compassion of her heart and the skills of her hands, and led and inspired others through service in the kingdom. Being liberated from the roles of *public preaching* and *leadership*, both her nature and abilities were free to be better utilized to great effectiveness in the *private sector*- resulting in many becoming believers!

"But I can't sew and make garments." You don't have to sew garments to "*sow seeds of the kingdom.*" There are many other areas of *private service* that, like Dorcas' deeds, can have great impact in *preaching* Jesus and *leading* souls to Him. Consider **1Timothy 5:9-10** where a partial list is provided. Women can serve through:

- **Being the wife of one man;** being a *suitable helper* by freeing him from other tasks to perform those for which he is more suited by the Creator, Genesis 2:20; by assisting him in the private teaching role which she is permitted, Acts 18:24-28; and by being the kind of wife that allows him to fulfill his *public* responsibilities of *preaching* and *leadership*, 1Timothy 3:1-13 (especially v.11);
- **Having a reputation for good works;** obviously, Dorcas is a prime example, but consider also the instructions of Titus 2:3-5;
- **Bringing up children;** the importance of this role and responsibility cannot be overstated, cf. 1Timothy 2:15, and can be well-illustrated through Eunice and Lois with regard to Timothy, cp. Acts 16:1-2 and 2Timothy 1:5;
- **Showing hospitality to strangers;** men, by nature and responsibility, are somewhat *suspicious* of strangers and *protective* of their families; women, again by both nature and responsibility, are more *caring* and *nurturing*- not only of their own, but also of others in need, cf. 1Kings 17:10-16 and Mark 12:42-44;
- **Washing the saints feet;** though this particular act of service is not needed now as it was when most travel was done *on foot*, a willingness to serve, in whatever capacity, is still needed- even if only to *rejoice* or *weep* with those who *rejoice* or *weep*, cf. Romans 12:15;
- **Assisting those in distress;** which may include helping those whom others are unable to help, 1Timothy 5:16; and,
- **Devoting themselves to every good work;** the eternal judgment scene depicted in Matthew 25:43-40 is predicated upon *assisting* and *providing* for those in need.

So, rather than viewing the role(s) of women “in the church” as *restrictive* because they are prevented from *public preaching* and *leadership*, we need to see that with these areas of responsibility given to the men, women are *freed* from such to provide services for which they are uniquely qualified and eminently capable. Through the divine grace of their hearts, and the endless compassionate nurturing and provision of their hands, women are much better suited to provide tremendous impact in and for the kingdom through these vital areas of service. In these things, we need to understand the wisdom of God’s order in division of labor. “*For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness,*” Romans 12:4-8. In the Lord’s body, there are no unnecessary parts, or unneeded roles. Perhaps we’ve just been looking at them from the wrong perspective! (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at [southportcofc.org](http://southportcofc.org); email to [mrpcstrong@hotmail.com](mailto:mrpcstrong@hotmail.com))