

Brave-Hearted Women

THROUGHOUT THE AGES, COURAGEOUS WOMEN HAVE GIVEN UP EVERYTHING TO FOLLOW CHRIST. WHAT MOTIVATED THEM TO ABANDON ALL FOR THE GOSPEL?

Are men alone created by God for deeds of bravery? Did God create women to be shy and retiring? If you were to meet biblical figures such as Priscilla or Phoebe, Deborah or Jael, would you consider them role models for Christian women today?

Author John Eldredge has written a popular book, *Wild at Heart* (Thomas Nelson), which suggests that men have a desperate desire for “a battle to fight, an adventure to live and a beauty to rescue.” Men, he says, are born with a craving for adventure, “with all its requisite danger and wildness.”

Eldredge claims that though men must know they are powerful, women must know they are beautiful, that they are “worth fighting for.” Eldredge, I believe, overlooks an important fact—that to be human, not just male—is to be born with a God-given desire for adventure, to be part of something larger than ourselves.

Women born of the Spirit of God have valiantly served Christ as missionaries, scholars, Bible translators, martyrs, administrators, church leaders and reformers. They have done so despite cultural taboos—even within the church.

A short sample of history from the time of the early church until the mid-16th century will negate the notion that men alone are born for adventure. History reveals that women have preached the gospel, built churches and denominations, and died as martyrs. These brave-hearted Christian women serve as powerful images of what we all might accomplish for Christ.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS KNOW NO GENDER In the three passages he wrote on spiritual gifts, Paul never suggested that they come in

pink and blue! (See Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:7-11; Eph. 4:11). Rather, Paul taught that gifted women may serve as evangelists, prophets, pastors, teachers and apostles.

When you consider his culture, Paul's claim that spiritual gifts are not distributed along gender lines was radical. Hence, we find women throughout the New Testament who advanced the gospel alongside Paul as evangelists, prophets, pastors, teachers and apostles.

Priscilla and her husband, Aquila, were not only evangelists. They were also pastors. They established a church in their home and risked their lives for the gospel (see Rom. 16:3-4).

In four of the six times Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned in Scripture, Priscilla's name appears before her husband's. In the book of Acts, Apollos was teaching on John's baptism when Priscilla and Aquila gave him further theological instruction in the way of the Lord (see Acts 18:24-28).

We know that Anna was a prophetess (see Luke 2:36-38) and Phoebe was a church leader (see Rom. 16:1-2). Lydia, a convert of Paul's, established the first European church in her home in Philippi (see Acts 16:14-15,40). Paul referred to Junia as an apostle in Romans 16:7.

Through faith these women, despite their low status in society, saw their weaknesses transformed into strength. They refused to shrink from sword, famine, poverty and persecution. Embracing the biblical call to gift-based ministry, we discover a tradition of brave-hearted women in each age.

THE EARLY CHURCH ERA Despite cultural expectations, courageous women used their spiritual gifts to build the early church. Women advanced the gospel, even when it cost them their lives.

Thecla (First Century) is the most famous missionary of her day. She initially heard the gospel during Paul's first missionary trip to Asia Minor (see Acts 13:51).

Thecla was so drawn to the gospel that she broke her engagement and renounced her family wealth in order to become a Christian. Her parents were outraged, and in retaliation they attempted to have her burned, raped and thrown to the wild animals, all of which she miraculously escaped.

Thecla forsook all the comforts of her class to serve Christ as a missionary near Antioch, where she had a dynamic ministry of preaching, teaching, healing and baptism. In fact, the church fathers Basil and Gregory spoke of Thecla's ministry in Syria as a center of teaching and healing. A team of German archaeologists excavated her hospital in 1908, describing its dimensions as the size of a football field.

Thecla served as a model of brave-hearted women during the time of the early church. There is a famous mural of her, in which Thecla is seated next to the apostle Paul, indicating that her leadership in the early church was recognized.

Apollonia of Alexandria (D. 249) served Christ as a deaconess until she was martyred for her faith in 249.

Because Christians were hated in the early Roman Empire, an angry mob seized Apollonia, who was then an old woman. They broke her teeth and built a fire on which they threatened to end her life unless she renounced her faith. Asking for space to consider, she gave her pursuers a chance to back away, and then she ran into the flames and ended her life.

When Rome officially became a Christian empire, a church was built in honor of Apollonia. The tradition of deaconess, dating back to the time of Phoebe, included many pastoral duties such as discipling, baptizing, teaching, anointing the ill and serving the poor. To women such as Apollonia, the church owes much of its existence.

Paula (347-404) was a wealthy Roman woman and a very close friend of Jerome, the great Bible scholar. After the death of her husband, Paula used her vast fortune to build hospitals,

monasteries and churches, including the famous Church of the Nativity, thought to be located at the birthplace of Jesus.

With her daughter Eustochium, Paula moved to Palestine, where she mastered the Hebrew language. Her linguistic skills proved a priceless resource to Jerome.

Together Paula and Jerome translated the ancient languages of the Bible into Latin, the language of their day. With her own funds Paula purchased the original manuscripts upon which our Bible is based.

It was in Paula's convent in Palestine that the tradition of transcribing the Bible began. Jerome praised her intellect and her ability to speak Hebrew so perfectly that those who heard her thought she was born in Palestine.

In gratitude for her assistance, Jerome dedicated much of his work to Paula. In her book *Great Women of the Christian Faith* (Barbour), author Edith Deen attributes the following quote to him: "There are people, O Paula and Eustochium, who take offense at seeing your names at the beginning of my works.

"These people do not know that while Barak trembled, Deborah saved Israel; that Esther delivered from supreme peril the children of God... Is it not to women that our Lord appeared after His Resurrection? Yes, and the men could then blush for not having sought what women had found."

The next time you read the Bible, think of Paula and Jerome, who were some of the earliest Bible scholars and translators. Paula's gifts were used to give the world its first popular Bible—the Latin Vulgate.

THE MIDDLE AGES Queen Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-1231) is famous for feeding 900 starving people at her castle door and for building a hospital for lepers. She gave away her vast wealth to care for the elderly and the sick, especially the lepers—one of whom she brought home to live in her palace.

It is reported that when her husband learned Elizabeth had brought a leper home, he went to their bed and pulled down the covers to see Christ lying there. When famine ravaged their land, Elizabeth ordered the cooks to work all night, preparing food that was distributed to 900 hungry people at the castle gate.

Elizabeth opened soup kitchens throughout her kingdom and turned churches into homeless shelters. She emptied her personal pantry and sold her possessions to meet the needs of the people.

Elizabeth's husband's family was outraged by the liberal way in which she lavished their wealth on people. When her husband died, she was banished from their home.

Eventually Elizabeth was restored to her palace at the insistence of the pope. In 1228, she became a Franciscan nun, renouncing family, wealth and pomp to perform works of charity among the elderly, lepers, the poor and the ill unhindered.

Four years after her death, 200,000 people gathered to honor her. Elizabeth fulfilled her call to serve people rather than her class.

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) was used by God to bring justice and healing to a world besieged by corruption, violence and the plague. Deen describes an exchange between Catherine and God in her book, in which He audibly called her to public service.

Upon hearing God's voice, Catherine replied: "Who am I, a woman, to go into public service?" God said: "The word impossible belongeth not to God. Am I not He who created the human race, who formed both man and woman? I pour out the favor of My spirit on whom I will.

"Go forth without fear, in spite of reproach. I have a mission for thee to fulfill. Wheresoever you go, I will be with thee.

I will never leave thee but will visit thee and direct all thy actions."

Catherine served the ill and those dying from the plague. She comforted the imprisoned and those condemned to execution.

God led Catherine to confront the spiritual leaders of her day, who were oppressing the people. She wrote to the clergy denouncing their greed and spiritual poverty. According to Deen, Catherine said to one church official: "Those who should be the temples of God are the stables of swine... Those who rule must above all be able to rule themselves."

Catherine boldly entered the pope's palace and called him to remember the church's highest mission, that of saving souls. After she had delivered her message, the pope said to his cardinals: "Behold my brethren, how contemptible we are before poor woman puts us to shame... It is she who now encourages us."

Catherine was poor and uneducated. Without an official position in the church, she obeyed the voice of God and challenged its mighty leaders.

THE REFORMATION Anne Askew (1521- 1546) was a Protestant reformer who, during the bloody English Reformation, was imprisoned, tortured and burned at the stake for her faith. When questioned about her beliefs, she defended her right to read, study and argue her interpretation of the Bible.

Askew remained calm and bravely faced torture, and she refused to name other reformers. She challenged male authority and out-reasoned her interrogators. Her comments revealed the biblical knowledge some women possessed, though most were denied a theological education.

Although Askew attributed her strength to God, she did not feel that her actions were more heroic because she was a woman. Rather, she viewed herself as a warrior in defense of

her faith. Her gender was secondary to her call as a Christian.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BRAVE AT HEART There is a single quality that characterizes brave-hearted Christians. No job description holds more appeal to them than the words of Jesus: “Come, follow Me!”

Brave-hearted women are passionate about Christ’s claim on their lives and their gifts. They embrace completely the biblical teaching: “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, NKJV).

Church history records many godly men and women who have fought great battles to advance a great beauty—the gospel. Both men and women have counted their lives as nothing for the sake of Christ’s church.

These are only a few of the extraordinary women whose contributions to the church of Jesus Christ should not be overlooked. Along with others like them, they are indeed role models for us. As we reflect on their lives, let us celebrate the way they served Christ above all else.

Women, created in God’s image and born of His Spirit, embark on a gospel adventure of epic proportion. We are endowed with spiritual gifts that, according to Paul, are never delineated along gender lines.

We are all risk-takers when called by Christ’s name. And we can all be brave-hearted if we are submitted to our Lord Jesus.

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