

**Man & Woman
In Christian Perspective**
by Werner Neuer

2 The Equality of the Sexes

Jesus bore witness in a striking way through his life and message to the equality of the sexes. His attitude to women is quite unique, so that it stands in stark contrast to the misogynist practice of contemporary Judaism.²⁷⁷ Before we examine more closely Jesus' dealings with women, we intend to clarify the position of women in first-century Judaism, since it is only against this background that the extraordinary attitude of Jesus emerges clearly.

Excursus 3

The position of women in Judaism at the time of Jesus ²⁷⁸

The position of women in Judaism at the time of Jesus is far less favourable than in Old Testament times. Whereas the Old Testament contains significant evidence for the equality of the sexes and the high valuation of women, in later rabbinic Judaism an obvious devaluation of women had set in. In some instances this can only be described as misogyny. For example, the Jewish writer Josephus (AD 37-100) writes that the woman is 'in all things inferior to the man'.²⁷⁹ One of the rabbis said: 'Happy is the man who has male children, woe to him who has female children.'²⁸⁰ Rabbi Judah said

(c. AD 150): 'A man must pronounce three blessings each day "Blessed be the Lord who did not make me a heathen . . . blessed be he who did not make me a woman . . . blessed be he who did not make me an uneducated person"'.²⁸¹ Women were placed by the rabbis on the level of lowly valued children and slaves.²⁸² The low status of women is also seen in the rabbinic interpretation of the fall: Eve is portrayed as the chief culprit, who brought corruption on all mankind.²⁸³ The cited passages, which could easily be multiplied, give some impression of the widespread low status of women in Judaism at that time.

This low status is also apparent in social and religious life. Rabbi Jose ben Yohanan of Jerusalem (c. AD 150) advised: 'Talk not much with womankind.'²⁸⁴ Later wisdom added: 'They said this of a man's own wife, how much more of his fellow's wife! Hence the sages have said: "He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at the last will inherit Gehenna."²⁸⁵ These warnings against talking to women reflect the tendency in the Judaism of Jesus' day to exclude women from public life. This exclusion of women from public life went so far in Jerusalem that the upper-class, pious virgins 'were accustomed to stay within the house before marriage as far as possible'; while 'married women left it only with their faces covered'.²⁸⁶ Such seclusion of women is not found in the Old Testament.

In religious affairs too there operated a tendency to exclude women:

Women were allowed admittance to the courtyard of the temple only up to a certain limit (the 'Court of Women'), they could offer no sacrifice, they did not count when it was being determined whether the quorum of worshippers necessary for a synagogue service was present, and in the synagogues they were kept separate from men.²⁸⁷

Legally women were disadvantaged in various ways. They were not allowed to give evidence in court.²⁸⁸ As in Old Testament times, polygamy was permitted, and that devalued wives. According to the Hillelites (the rabbinic school which followed Rabbi Hillel) a man could divorce his wife for burning his food or if he met a prettier woman.²⁸⁹ This liberal outlook of the Hillelites established itself throughout Palestine and the diaspora.²⁹⁰ That this left wives at the mercy of their husband's caprice and power is very obvious. To sum up. In the Judaism of Jesus' time the woman was valued less highly

than the man in religion, law and in morality. This devaluation led to her religious and social oppression, indeed often to her being despised by men.

Despite the indubitable oppression and disadvantage of women in Judaism at the time of Jesus, we must beware of overpressing the trend towards discrimination. In contrast to Roman and Greek attitudes, the Jews had not grown tired of marriage.²⁹¹ Marriage was regarded as a duty from which no one was exempt.²⁹² So, for example, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus said: 'Whoever does not practise procreation is like someone who sheds blood.'²⁹³ The maintenance of the institution of marriage, which in Judaism was overwhelmingly monogamous, was an important protection for women. With this value placed on marriage went an explicitly high status of the woman as a wife and a widespread honouring of her as mother.²⁹⁴ The rabbis often exhort the man to love and honour his wife, because 'the wife is her husband's good fortune, his life, his wealth and his crown'.²⁹⁵ But the rabbis' positive remarks all relate to the married woman, not to women in general.²⁹⁶ 'As a person in her own right the woman is a nobody.'²⁹⁷ However much at least some of the rabbis praise wives and mothers, they do little to recognize that the woman has value in her own right if she is not actually a wife or mother.

Jesus' behaviour is free from the disdain for women that was then widespread in Judaism. He broke quite consciously with Jewish custom when, for example, he had a long discussion with the Samaritan woman (John 4). How extraordinary his behaviour was then is shown by his disciples' reaction: 'They marvelled that he was talking with a woman' (John 4:27). The content of the conversation shows how seriously Jesus took women. Jesus deigns to reveal to this morally disreputable woman (cf. vv 17-18) his mission and messiahship (vv. 21-6). Cardinal Faulhaber has aptly described this self-revelation of Jesus to a woman as 'the religious coming of age of the female sex'.²⁹⁸ Jesus also let it be known that women were equal to men in God's eyes. In contrast to the practice of Jewish teachers of the law²⁹⁹ he had women among his followers, who were able to share in his teaching, preaching, and

extraordinary deeds. Jesus welcomed it when, like his disciples, women joined in being instructed by him (Luke 10:38-42). His proclamation did not put one sex at an advantage over the other, but it was valid for all without reserve: 'Come to me, *all* who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me . . .' (Matt 11:28). Jesus' parables contain many striking examples drawn from the world of women (cf. Matt 13:33; 24:41; Luke 15:8-10; 18:1-8; Mark 12:41-4). 'This distinguished them from rabbinic parables and miracle stories . . . in which women seldom are spoken of, and then more often in a bad sense.'³⁰⁰

The proclamation of Jesus is completely free from every form of open or concealed disdain for women, such as frequently characterises rabbinic tradition. For example, Jesus breaks with the morally elevated status of men in the Judaism of his time: instead of warning like the rabbis of the danger of men being seduced by women, he warns against the male tendency to seduce women (Matt 5:27-30). He thereby eliminates any basis for the rabbinic tendency to see women as morally less than equal to men. Instead of warning about the dangers of women, he emphasises the wickedness of the *human* heart, which affects both sexes equally.

Jesus does not just address the moral superiority of men in the Judaism of his day (Matt 5:27-30), but also their legal superiority. In Mark 10:2-12 he condemns every kind of divorce, despite the Old Testament permission of divorce, and thereby protects women from capricious discharge by their husbands. For both sexes he underlines the indissolubility of marriage as the valid will of God. In this passage he makes it clear that polygamy does not fit in with his view of marriage; this is based entirely on Genesis 2:24, which speaks of *one* husband and *one* wife. By his demand for indissoluble monogamy he protects the woman from the devaluation that was inevitably bound up with Jewish divorce practice and legalised polygamy. Marianne Weber correctly writes that Jesus' demand for strict monogamy for husbands as well introduced 'a revolution in the relationship between the

sexes'.³⁰¹ In committing *both* sexes to life-long fidelity without the possibility of divorce, Jesus opposed all the legal arrangements of the ancient world which permitted husbands much more liberty with regard to the marriage bond than it permitted women!³⁰²

Jesus shows no trace of the tendency in contemporary Judaism to value men more highly from a religious standpoint. Women are just as much called to submit to God's rule and threatened by divine judgement as men (*cf.* Matt 11:28-9). Jesus' proclamation is addressed to all people, and therefore equally to women and to men. Through his absolute love command (Matt 7:12; 22:34-40 and parallels) he throws out once and for all every kind of male egoism or oppression of women. With this demand, and by making possible love and selflessness, Jesus shows the only way in which the relationship between the sexes, a relationship that has been upset by sin, can be healed. And Jesus himself lived out in exemplary fashion the selfless love which he demanded.

His compassionate and healing love - not mere theories about the equality of the sexes - is the fundamental basis for his unique relationship to women. Jesus did not just take women seriously as people who have the same value as men, but in an unprecedented way he turned his attention to suffering and morally despised women. Women as well as men could experience Jesus' healing power (*cf.* Mark 1:29-31; 5:25-34; Matt 9:18, 23-5; 15:21-8; Luke 8:2; 13:10-17). Jesus even set aside the Jewish sabbath regulations in order to heal a hunch-backed woman during a synagogue service (Luke 13:10-17). Answering the objections of the synagogue president, he described the healed woman as a 'daughter of Abraham', an honorific description which is never found in the Talmud.³⁰³ Jesus adopts a protective attitude towards morally despised women without denying their sinfulness (*cf.* Luke 7:36-50; John 7:53-8:11). In controversy with national religious leaders he is not scared of the scandalous word of judgement: 'Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you' (Matt 21:31). In his teaching Jesus is also not

afraid of pointing to women as spiritual examples. He praises the faith of the widow who places all her money in the temple collecting box (Mark 12:41-4 and parallels), he is amazed by the faith of the Syrophenician woman (Matt 15:21-8 and parallels), he praises the queen of Sheba's quest for truth (Matt 12:41-2 and parallels), and he sets up the importunate widow as an example for his disciples (Luke 18:1-8). It is not surprising that women reacted to Jesus' attention with great trust and love. And so Jesus had to protect women time and again against men's lack of understanding. He defended against the attacks of his disciples the woman who anointed his head with precious oil (Matt 26:6-13 and parallels). He backed up the woman of ill-repute (perhaps a prostitute) who out of gratitude anointed his feet with myrrh, even though he thereby incurred the wrath of his host (Luke 7:36-50). He corrected his disciples when they harshly discouraged the women who wanted to bring their children to Jesus (Matt 19:13-15 and parallels).³⁰⁴

He allowed women healed by him to join his band of followers (Luke 8:1-2), and gladly accepted the hospitality (Luke 10:38-42) and the assistance of women (Luke 8:3; Matt 27:55). Jesus' unique attention to women was met by them with responsive love and support, which put the disciples to shame. Whereas the disciples all fled when he was arrested (Matt 26:56 and parallels), and at his crucifixion only John was present (John 19:26-7), several women among his followers were nearby or within sight during his final hours (Matt 27:55 and parallels; John 19:25).³⁰⁵ The faithfulness of these women continued after his death. They rose on the first Easter morning to anoint his body (Matt 28:1 and parallels) and so were honoured to be the first witnesses of the resurrection (*cf.* Matt 28:9-10; John 20:1-8). In this way not just the earthly Jesus Christ, but the resurrected Christ demonstrated with mighty power that with his coming a new age for women had broken in. In Jesus God's valuation of woman as man's equal companion appears with total clarity, and finally makes obsolete the tendency still present in the Old Testament to regard women as of lesser worth.

3 The Distinction Between the Sexes

If Jesus, unconcerned by the opinion of his contemporaries, decisively proclaimed by word and deed the equality of the sexes, he just as firmly maintained the distinction between them. The gospels leave no doubt that Jesus presupposed a different approach and a distinctive role for men and women. A notable proof of this is his own activity which recognises a quite different commission for the sexes in the service of God. It is striking that Jesus called only men into the circle of the twelve apostles. That is also true for the mission of the seventy (Luke 10:1-16). At the Last Supper only the apostles could have been present (cf. Matt 26:17-20 and parallels), although several women from his band of followers, including his own mother, were present in Jerusalem.³⁰⁶

If one accepts that according to the synoptic gospels Jesus' last supper was a passover meal (cf. Matt 26:17-19 and parallels; Luke 22:15), at which women and children normally participated, the fact that Jesus restricted participation to the twelve apostles is even more striking. Since Jesus was on this occasion instituting the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a regular act of church worship (cf. Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:23-6) the conclusion of the Swedish exegete B. Gärtner is obvious: 'This demarcation at the Last Supper must have a quite defined meaning, namely that the apostles should deal with the mystery that was committed to them during the meal.'³⁰⁷ Jesus' call of men alone and his behaviour at the Last Supper go together: Jesus publicly committed the spiritual leadership of his community to men. This fits in with what he did after the resurrection: he conferred the task of worldwide evangelisation and instruction on men (i.e., the disciples; see Matt 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-15; John 20:21-3).

That Jesus only called men to be apostles cannot be dismissed as mere chance or thoughtless accommodation to the one-sided male attitudes of his time. The call of the disciples was rather a quite conscious and considered act. Mark 3:13 says explicitly that Jesus called 'those he wanted' (NIV). Luke 6:12 reports that this call was the fruit of a night

of prayer by himself. Jesus' decision to call only men as apostles was, then, the result of an intensive spiritual testing in prayer.

The Vatican declaration *Inter insigniores* is therefore to be agreed with. When Jesus called no women into the circle of the twelve 'he did not do this to fit in with the habits of his time, for his treatment of women is uniquely different from his environment and represents a deliberate and courageous break with it'.³⁰⁸ The French New Testament scholar Albert Descamps rightly says that 'Jesus possessed the necessary freedom to have dared to entrust the proclamation of the kingdom of God to women, if he had wanted to and believed that this was part of God's plan'.³⁰⁹ Obviously Jesus proceeded on the assumption that God wanted to entrust the leadership of his community to men.

It is not difficult to see that here Jesus thought and acted completely in accord with Genesis 2, where too the man is entrusted with the task of spiritual leadership.³¹⁰ In fact the gospels make it clear that Jesus recognized Genesis 1 and 2 as a valid revelation of God's creative will and he presupposed it in his preaching. In Matthew 19:4ff. (and parallels), on the subject of divorce, against the law of Deuteronomy 24:1 he appeals to Genesis 1 and 2 as the original creation ordinance, which should now be put into practice, since God's kingdom has broken in with his coming.³¹¹ Jesus' preaching is therefore intended to realise the original will of the creator as it is expressed in Genesis 1 and 2. Against this background it is self-evident that Jesus could not have called any women as apostles, for this would have contradicted God's creation ordinance: 'God created woman as man's helper. That forms the basis of the relationship between the sexes. To the man is ascribed the role of leader, to the woman that of supporting and helping the man. Jesus does not need to emphasise this, as it had long been familiar to the Israelite communities.'³¹² It is therefore not surprising that Jesus does not express himself more fully about the relationship between, and the different tasks of, the sexes. He presupposes in his thought and acts Genesis 1 and 2 as authoritative divine revelation.

This is shown not just by his exclusively calling men to apostleship, but by the service rendered by women who belonged to Jesus' band of followers. Luke 8:2-3 mentions women who provided for the circle of disciples 'out of their means'. The Greek word for 'provide' is in the imperfect tense, which points to a regular task of the women. It describes 'the quite personal service rendered to another person', which covers both waiting at table and also generally providing support.³¹³ The women among Jesus' followers saw themselves as 'helpmeets' in the sense of Genesis 2:18, helpmeets of Jesus and his disciples. There is not a single passage in the gospels which points to women who followed Jesus being entrusted with the task of preaching. In this regard it may be noted that even Luke's gospel, with its bias towards women, restricts the title 'disciple' exclusively to Jesus' male disciples,³¹⁴ though the call to discipleship is valid for both sexes. The women who followed Jesus are also conceptually distinguished from the circle of disciples. In distinction from the disciples, they were clearly not called in a special way: 'The basis of their service [according to Luke 8:2] depended much more on their healing from demons and sickness.'³¹⁵ In sum, we see that Jesus did not just express the equality of the sexes in word and action, but that he also respected the individuality of male and female in the sense of Genesis 2. Certainly the women in Jesus' circle did not feel that their exclusion from the apostleship and preaching was discriminatory, 'for they were happy in the certainty that the Redeemer regarded them as men's equal'.³¹⁶

Jesus did not just see men as the carriers of his movement: the man was 'head' also in the realm of nature. One indication of this is that Jesus retained traditional Jewish phraseology about marriage. He speaks in the active voice of the man 'marrying' (*gamizein*), but uses the passive 'being married' (*gamizesthai*) for the woman.³¹⁷ This way of speaking is quite compatible with the sense of Genesis 2:24, for there too the active is used for the man's role in marriage. He takes the initiative and makes the decision about marital union, for it is he who leaves his parents and enters the bond with his wife:

'Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.' How seriously Jesus takes the man's special responsibility emerges from Matthew 5:27-30. Instead of pointing, like contemporary Jews did, to woman as the dangerous seducer, Jesus warns of the danger of seduction sponsored by the man: 'I say to you that every one who looks at a married woman so that she becomes lustful, has already caused her to commit adultery in her heart' (v. 28).³¹⁸

The New Testament scholar Klaus Haacker has adduced serious philological and contextual reasons for holding that what is meant here is not the spontaneous lustful glance, but the demanding look that leads the woman to adulterous desires.³¹⁹ However, the most striking point about this passage is that Jesus addresses the man as the one particularly responsible for relations between the sexes, and he does not allow the male excuse that they are seduced by women.

The great exegete Karl Bornhäuser must be thanked for bringing out this aspect of Jesus' words. He aptly paraphrases Jesus' teaching: 'Relations between you and women must be pure and remain pure . . . *You, men*, have the duty of bringing this about. The purification and healing of relations between the sexes must begin with you.'³²⁰ In calling men to fulfil their special responsibilities in the spiritual and natural realms, Jesus confirms indirectly the position of the man expressed in Genesis 2 as 'head' of the woman. At the same time he attacks every degeneration of male leadership into chauvinist despotism, as he removes the Old Testament and Jewish right of a man to divorce his wife. Arbitrary male rule of women is abolished by Jesus, in that he binds both sexes to unconditional mutual love and devotion to God, and promises the necessary power to carry it out. God's rule spells the end of all egotistically perverted rule of women by men. In God's new kingdom, initiated by Jesus, there is still both authority and subordination, the man leads and the woman is led. But in place of arbitrary male domination there is a reign of love, a humble leadership which is to be seen entirely as service given to the wife (*cf.* Mark 9:35).