

### **Study 3. Jesus, the best friend women have ever had.**

Before we look at what Jesus said and did in regard to women, four introductory points need to be made.

1. There are compelling arguments for beginning any study of what the Bible says on the man-woman relationship with Genesis chapters 1 to 3. There are equally compelling reasons when coming to the New Testament for beginning with the Gospels. They are placed first in the New Testament because they are of first importance. They give an account of the life and teaching of Jesus and define the Christian faith. We should not set Jesus and Paul in conflict, but if we find tensions between Jesus and Paul, we should read Paul in the light of what Jesus says. We are followers of Jesus Christ, not of Paul. Beginning with the Gospels, I would argue, is where every biblical scholar seeking to articulate what the New Testament says on any question should begin.
2. Jesus was a man of his age. He did not drive a car, watch TV or go to supermarkets and never imagined a time when more women than men would have university qualifications, be leaders in all spheres of society, and be able to support themselves. In his day, a woman was dependent on a man (father, husband, eldest son, guardian) all her life. Jesus took for granted the social realities of his day. He never questioned arranged marriages or even the law that a brother of a deceased man should take his wife as his own and have children by her (Mark 12:18–23). We should therefore not think that Jesus advocates the kind of agenda a modern-day feminist might adopt.
3. How Jesus responded to the prevailing view of women in his day is similar to how he responded to other controversial matters. What he usually did when seeking profound change was not to attack what the Jews held dear, but subtly subvert the status quo. He did not directly attack the central institutions of Judaism. He did not tell people to keep away from the temple nor did he denounce its worship, but what he taught on the temple

undermined its centrality and significance for Christians. He never told his hearers not to observe the Sabbath; but what he said about and did on the Sabbath led the early Christians to abandon Jewish Sabbath observance. He never abrogated the Law of Moses, but Paul summed up early Christian belief when he wrote, “Christ is the end of the law” (Rom 10:4). It is the same with women. Jesus never denounced the patriarchy of his day; but what he said and did subverted the prevailing social norms, opening up new possibilities.

4. Jesus said not one specific word about how the church was to be organized after his departure to heaven. Church leadership structures were worked out as the church gradually took institutional form in the culture of that time and later.

Given this information, we cannot, with our twenty-first century minds, ask of the Gospels questions such as, “Would Jesus approve of women going to university or working outside the home?” What is reasonable to ask, for the purposes of this study, are questions such as, “Did Jesus endorse patriarchy – the rule of the oldest man in the family?”; “Did he teach male “headship” – men should lead in the home and outside the home?”; “Did he believe that men and women, are distinguished by their “differing roles” allocated by their gender?” And, “Did he say anything to suggest that women should not be leaders in the Christian community?” We now turn to the Gospels.

### **Women disciples.**

In contrast to his Jewish counterparts, Rabbi Jesus had female disciples. His call, “Come follow me”, was in the first instance addressed to the men who travelled with him as close companions. He called them “the twelve”, “the twelve disciples” and on a very few occasions, “the apostles” (Mark 1:16–20, 6:7 c.f. 6:30). However, Jesus also gave the same invitation to men and women without distinction (Mark 8:34). In the Synoptic Gospels, those who accept his invitation to become his disciple are said to “believe” (Mark 1:15, Luke 8:12–

13, Matt 18:6). In John's Gospel, a "believer" and a "disciple" are synonymous terms (John 1:12, 2:11, 6:28–29, 21:23). The historic disciples were not a "men's club" on a male-only walking excursion: women disciples were numbered among them.

### **Jesus and his relationship with women.**

How Jesus related to women, given the cultural context, is astounding. In first century, Judaism, men were not to talk to women in public – let alone touch them. Jesus freely did both. He healed the woman who breached the purity laws by touching him, offering not one word of criticism of her. Rather than chastising her for her actions, he sent her away with his blessing, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease" (Mark 5:34). Another time, he went gladly to a sick little girl's home, "took her by the hand" and healed her (Mark 5:41). When a Syrophenician woman begged him to cast out a demon in her daughter, he first rebuffed her because she was a Gentile by saying, "Let the children [of Israel] be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and give it to dogs". To this hard reply to her request she daringly says to Jesus, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:27-28). Jesus took no offence at her bold response to his words. His ego was not dented by the woman answering him back. Rather, he commends her and heals her daughter as she has asked (Mark 7:29). At another time, when he met a grieving mother, "he had compassion on her and said, "Do not weep". He then raised her son (Luke 8:11–17).

### **Jesus on marriage.**

Jesus' teaching on marriage is also startling (Matt 19:3-9). When he was asked the androcentric question, "Can a man divorce his wife *for any cause*", he replied by pointing his questioners to the original creation. For Jesus, this gives the God-given ideal before sin entered the world. First, he quotes from Genesis chapter 1. He asks them, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female'" (Gen 1:28).

Then he quotes from Genesis chapter 2, “What God has joined together let no man separate” (Gen 2:24). This was revolutionary teaching. It made marriage equally binding on the man and the woman. Men have no special privileges or freedoms. His questioners then asked him, “Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of dismissal and divorce her?” – alluding to Deuteronomy 24:1–4. In reply to this question, Jesus says, “it was because you were so hard–hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives but from the beginning it was not so” (Matt 19:8).

How Jesus deals with this question on divorce is hugely significant. He answers in terms of the God–given nature of marriage. In doing so he makes a contrast between the creation ideal and the realities of fallen existence, and gives priority to the creation ideal. The creation ideal he locates in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. God has created us man and woman and marriage is a lifelong union. This means that neither a man nor a woman should divorce. Men have no special privileges. Moses was simply giving guidelines on what to do when a marriage fails, not endorsing divorce.

What is to be carefully noted is that Jesus quotes from Genesis chapters 1 and 2, presupposing that the two chapters are teaching the same on the man–woman relationship. Nowhere in either chapter, as we saw in chapter 3 of this book, is there any suggestion that the woman is subordinated to the man in creation before the fall, or specifically that the man rules over the woman. It is after the fall that the man begins to rule over the woman (Gen 3:16) and marriages begin to break down. Neither male “headship” nor divorce are conceivable before sin entered the world.

We should also note the hermeneutic Jesus uses. He allows that not every text in scripture has the same theological weight. He makes the creation ideal given in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 weightier than a comment given by Moses dealing with the realities of life in a fallen world.

Jesus' teaching on divorce explains so much. He wants his disciples to make the creation ideal their ideal for marriage; a lifelong union between a man and a woman who have the same responsibilities, rights and privileges.

### **Jesus and women – four telling encounters.**

When a woman cried out in the crowd, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you,” Jesus replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:27-28). In Jesus' eyes, as important as mothering might be, the highest calling for men and women is to hear and obey the word of God.

The longest narrative of an encounter between Jesus and a woman is in John 4, which takes place by a well in the village of Sychar, which you can visit today. I have drunk from that well. Jesus spoke with a woman about her life and “living water”, revealing himself to her as the Messiah. When the male disciples who had temporarily left him returned, John says, “they were astonished that he was talking with a woman” (John 4:27). Jesus does not discuss with her the weather, the weight of the water jars, or what women should wear. He had a theological conversation with her. This woman goes to her village and tells the men what Jesus had said. John adds, “many believed in him [Jesus] because of the woman's testimony” (John 4:39). In this passing comment, John allows that women can lead men to faith by preaching. Jesus had no reservations about talking theology with, or evangelizing women, or about women evangelizing men!

Another meeting between Jesus and women was in his visit to the home of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42). When Jesus entered the home, Martha greeted him and got busy with domestic chores. Her sister in contrast “sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying”. She took the male *role*, where men sit and listen to guests, while women prepare food in the kitchen. This is what happened, I discovered when visiting a home in a rural setting in Lebanon or Jordan. Nothing much has changed. Not surprisingly, Martha became

quite angry. She said to Jesus, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” Instead of rebuking Mary, as the first readers of Luke’s Gospel would have expected, Jesus commended her for choosing “the better part” and chided Martha for being “worried and distracted by many things”. This is a story about ‘role reversal’. Joseph Fitzmyer says this story

makes listening to the “word” the “one thing” needed. Priority is given to hearing of the word coming from God’s messenger over preoccupation with all other concerns. Martha wanted to honor Jesus with an elaborate meal, but Jesus reminds her that it is more important to listen to what he has to say ... Moreover, Luke in this scene does not hesitate to depict a woman as a disciple sitting at Jesus’ feet.<sup>1</sup>

One sits at a teacher’s feet to learn, and one learns in order to teach others.

Another significant episode is the account of Jesus’ anointing by a woman. This was an important story in the early church, and one of the few stories in all four Gospels, albeit in variant forms.<sup>2</sup> Mark sets his version of the story immediately before the Last Supper – thereby adding significance to it – and he has the woman anoint Jesus’ head. In the Old Testament, a prophet anointed the head of a Jewish king. The implication is that this unnamed woman prophetically recognizes that Jesus is the long-awaited Messianic king. Jesus is not embarrassed by her action, and allows no criticism of her. He is in fact so taken by her action that he says, “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (Mark 14:9). Has this been done? No, she has been forgotten. Of the three disciples that figure most prominently in Mark’s passion story, one of them, Judas, betrays Jesus. He is remembered today and demonized. Another, Peter, denies him. He is remembered today and lionized. The third, a

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2, New York: Doubleday, 1985, 892.

<sup>2</sup> Matt 26:6-13, Mark. 14:3-11, Luke. 7:37-50, John 12:1-8. There may have been more than one anointing.

woman, who publicly anoints him as the Messiah and is commended by him, is not remembered or even named in the church today.

### **Jesus on leadership.**

In the all-too-often heated debate about women in leadership in today's church, many evangelicals argue that women should not be allowed to exercise authority over men, because God has given headship/leadership to men. We therefore ask what would Jesus say to such people? On seven occasions, we hear his verbal answer: "those who would lead in my community are to be servants, not rulers" (Matt 20:26-28, 23:11, Mark. 9:35, 10:43-45, Luke. 9:48, 22:24-27), and observe his personal demonstration (John 13:4-20). He said, unbelievers like to "lord it over others...but it is not to be so among you." A leader in my community is "one who serves" (Luke 22:25-26). Evangelicals who seek to exclude women from exercising authority in the church, and thus ordination, have completely misunderstood the nature of leadership in the Christian community. They think it is about exercising authority over fellow believers, whereas Jesus taught it was about costly, humble service. The right question to put to Jesus is not "Can women exercise authority in the church like men customarily do?", but rather, "Can men and women be servant leaders in the church?" Seven times he answers in the affirmative.

### **Jesus commissions women as "apostles to the apostles."**

Surprisingly, the risen Jesus chose to appear first to women whom he then sent to tell the frightened male apostles that he had risen from the dead (Matt 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-12, John 20:1-18). St Thomas Aquinas called these women, "apostles to the twelve apostles."<sup>3</sup>

### **Luke and women.**

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<sup>3</sup> For the reference to Thomas and the endorsement of Thomas' words by Pope-John Paul II see, *On the Dignity And vocation of Women*, Homebush, NSW: St Paul's, 1988, 60 and note 38.

All four Gospels say something distinctive on women; they all confirm the fact that Jesus had the highest possible view of women.

For centuries it has been noted that Luke is particularly concerned to emphasize Jesus' positive and affirming stance towards women.<sup>4</sup> He names thirteen women who do not appear or are not named in the other Synoptic Gospels;<sup>5</sup> he has three parables that positively mention women not found in the other Gospels;<sup>6</sup> and he gives women a very prominent place in the birth stories.<sup>7</sup> He depicts Elizabeth and Mary as women who speak in the power of the Spirit and explicitly calls Anna a "prophet" (Luke 2:36-38).<sup>8</sup> For him, Mary the mother of Jesus is always strong in faith (Luke 1:26-56, 8:19-21, Acts 1:14). She "a model believer."<sup>9</sup> In Acts, Luke has the Spirit poured out on men and women believers alike, and as a consequence they alike speak in the power of the Spirit (Acts 2:17-18).

In material unique to Luke's Gospel, we also find a consistent and deliberate pattern of pairing male and female characters,<sup>10</sup> something also found in the Book of Acts. I The list of fourteen examples from the Gospel.<sup>11</sup> We see this pairing in parables (11:5-13 and 18:1-8, 15:3-7; 15:8-10; 13:19 and 13:21), and in healings (4:26-27 and 4:31-39; 7:11-17 and 8:40-56; 13:10-17 and 14:1-6) and also in word ministry. Luke wants to make it clear that both

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<sup>4</sup> A huge amount has been written on Luke and women. The general consensus is that Luke is consistently positive about women, yet constrained by first century parameters. Some, however, have challenged this consensus. The most comprehensive bibliography on Luke and women and the most balanced assessment of the debate just mentioned is given by Craig Keener, "Luke's Perspective on Women and Gender", in his, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012, 597-638. For a positive view of Luke and women by two Australian scholars who use narrative criticism to show how the many Lukan stories and comments on women cohere, see G. W. Forbes and S. D. Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity: A Narrative and Theological Study of the Characterization of Women in Luke-Acts*, Oregon: Pickwick, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:5, 2:36, 3:19, 4:26, 7:11-17, 8:1-2, 10:38-42, 11:27-28, 15:8-10, 18:1-8, 24:19.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 13:20-21, 15:8-10, 18:1-8.

<sup>7</sup> He makes no mention of "the wise men" but he has three "wise women", Elizabeth, Mary and Anna. They are key players in the Christmas story according to Luke.

<sup>8</sup> "The Magnificat" is a prophetic oracle (c.f. Luke 1:67). On prophecy in Luke's Gospel see Forbes and Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity*, , 40-41

<sup>9</sup> Forbes and Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Köstenbergers, *God's Design*, 113

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 114. Luke 1:15-23/1:26-56; 2:25-35/2:36-38; 4:27/4:26; 4:31-37/4:38-39; 6:3-16/8:2-3; 7:11-17/8:40-56; 10:25-37/10:38-40; 11:5-13/18:1-8; 11:32/11:31; 14:1-6/13:10-17; 19:9/13:16; 15:3-7/15:8-10, 13:9/13:21; 24:13-35/24:1-11.



men and women spoke the word of God in the power of the Spirit (Luke 2:25–38; Acts 2:17–18, 21:9–11). They conclude that this pairing suggests something “similar to Paul’s reference to ‘no male and female’ in Galatians 3:28”, which for them, only relates to equality in salvation; the spiritual dimension.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the German theologian, Helmut Flender, says,

Luke deliberately extended and developed male-female parallels to emphasize that in the new community founded by Christ man and woman stand side by side before God. They are equal in honor and grace, they are endowed with the same gifts, and they have the same responsibilities.<sup>13</sup>

What Luke says on women is of critical importance. He goes out of his way to mention women and to extol their leadership in deed *and word*. In any discussion of what the New Testament says on women, Luke is a very important voice. He champions the equal status, dignity and leadership potential of men and women. A doctrine of male headship not only cannot be found in Luke-Acts, it is antithetical to his whole way of thinking.

### **What is not said in the Gospels.**

What we *do not find* on the lips of Jesus, or on the pages of any of the four Gospels, is one word on “male headship”. The idea is never mentioned explicitly or implied by any of the teaching or stories we have just discussed. What is more, a fair reading of the Gospels shows that much of what Jesus said and did implicitly excludes this idea. When it comes to church leadership, Jesus again says not one word on who should or should not lead but in prescribing leadership in his community in terms of lowly, costly service he undeniably threw open the door to women. They seem to be better at serving than men! In reply complementarians cry

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>13</sup> *St Luke: Theologian of Redemptive History*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967, 10.

out in anguish, “But Kevin, what about the twelve apostles, they were all men?” To this matter we now turn.

### **The twelve apostles were all men.**

The twelve apostles were all men; this is an historical fact. The dispute is over the significance of this fact. What should be *inferred* from this moot fact?

In the many books I have on my shelves written by complementarians almost without exception they say little if anything on Jesus and women, except for one matter, the twelve apostles were all men.

No one ever has disputed the twelve were all men. What evangelical egalitarians dispute is that this *infers* the principle of male “headship.” They think the appointment of twelve men *infers* rather a patriarchal culture. In the ancient world and up to very recent times, men were leaders in the home, the church and the state. They therefore think that there is nothing noteworthy in the fact that Jesus chose twelve men to be leaders of the community he was founding.

What complementarians need to do to substantiate their distinctive *inference* is some evidence that Jesus assumed this principle – and that is what they cannot do. Jesus never said, “I am choosing twelve men to be my apostles *because* I believe men should be leaders.”

What he said and did, *infers* rather that he believed men and women were of the same dignity and status and had the same leadership potential. Not once does he mention, “male headship”, and much of what he said and did suggests he did not endorse this idea.

What needs to be recognized is a clear distinction between what Jesus did *and* taught. Jesus travelled mainly by foot, but this does not indicate that he was opposed to other forms of travel. Jesus dressed like other men of his day but this does not mean we must dress like him. Jesus chose twelve men who were all Jews, but this does not prove that all priests/pastors must be Jews. What Jesus did is not prescriptive; his teaching is. If Jesus wanted his future

followers to understand that only men should be leaders in the community he founded, we would expect him to *say* something on this. He never does; not one word.

There are nevertheless concrete reasons as to why Jesus chose twelve men and no women? I give a number of them, all of which I think played a part.

1. To be numbered among the twelve, Luke says, one must have followed Jesus from the time of his baptism until his ascension (Acts 1:21-22) - to have been his constant companion throughout his ministry. In the cultural context of first century Judaism, it was not possible for women to travel for weeks on end and to sleep, often in the open, with men. Luke, it is true, speaks of women literally following Jesus (Luke 8:1-2); but possibly this was only while he was in a town or moving from one town to another.
2. Luke says the most about the twelve apostles, asserting that their primary work was to bear witness to the ministry, teaching, death and resurrection of Christ (Luke 24:48, Acts 1:21-23). In Judaism, the witness or testimony of women in support of factual matters was generally rejected.<sup>14</sup> Thus Paul, when recounting the resurrection witnesses in 1 Corinthians 15:5-11, does not mention the women who were first to the empty tomb and first to see the resurrected Christ. For this reason, to appoint women as factual witnesses was not an option for Jesus.
3. The twelve apostles had to be men because, for Jesus, the number twelve indicated that he was calling into existence the new or restored Israel, the church (Matt 19:28, Luke 22:30). If his Jewish audience were to see this symbolic paralleling, the twelve had to be men like their Old Testament counterparts - the twelve sons of Israel. He appointed men for this reason, but it was not their maleness which was central to his choice; it was that they were

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<sup>14</sup> See Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 163-166.

*twelve* in number. The men themselves do not seem important. The Gospel writers cannot even agree entirely on their names.<sup>15</sup>

4. Lastly, I raise a somewhat humorous objection to the argument that the maleness of the twelve is prescriptive of which gender should be in church leadership. In Acts 6:3, Luke says that the apostles recommended that seven *men* (Luke uses the specifically male term, *anēr*) should be appointed to manage the food for the Hellenist widows. If the maleness of the twelve apostles is prescriptive for church leadership, then is the maleness of those who were to look after the food supplies also prescriptive? Should men and men only *man* the church kitchen?

Any appeal to the fact that the twelve were all men to prove that Jesus endorsed the principle of “male headship”, is special pleading. This *inference* runs counter to what Jesus plainly says and does in regard to women.

### **The restoration of Eden.**

What we have learned from our study of the Gospels is that Jesus related to women as if the fall had never taken place. He saw them standing side by side with men, head erect, with the same dignity and leadership potential as men. The idea of male “headship” never appears in his teaching; rather, there is much to the contrary. The theologian Helmut Thielicke explains why:

According to the Synoptics [the first three Gospels] Jesus dealt with women as human beings or sisters. When he addressed them, as they were originally meant to be in God’s creation, he was looking beyond the disturbed relationships spoken of in the story of the fall. ... The despised status of women in rabbinic Judaism, as well as in the

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<sup>15</sup> The names given in the four Gospels are not the same.

contemporary Greek world is actually a kind of paradigm of this disturbance of the created order of the sexes, and Jesus' attitude to it is really a protest against it.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*, 8.