

'Jenny Baker's *Equals* is as lively as it is profound, and as practical as it is idealistic. She paints a powerful vision of a world where both women and men are strengthened and freed by the practice of true equality, and offers us positive and encouraging examples and ideas to help us imagine how to get from here to there. This book won't just make you want to change your life, it will tell you how.'

Steve Holmes, Senior Lecturer in Theology, University of St Andrews

'What I love about Jenny is how honouring and encouraging she is towards both men and women . . . My hope is that we can see future leaders catch on early to the freedom and fullness of living in equality that [*Equals*] so brilliantly articulates.'

Miriam Swaffield, Student Mission Developer at Fusion UK

'[*Equals*] will prove really helpful for couples looking to 'do life' on the basis of equality rather than power.'

David Westlake, Integral Mission Director, Tearfund

'Jenny Baker doesn't just teach on equality – she thoroughly lives it out. This book provides a much needed challenge for Christians to rethink the complex issues of gender and to restore people to their God-ordained equality and freedom.'

Vicky Beeching, writer and broadcaster

'This is a bold and beautiful book on a key issue. Jenny has read widely and reflected deeply, and draws on insights from many different disciplines to argue that when women and men regard one another equally, both are enabled to reach their full potential – an idea that is backed up by loads of practical examples, all of them illustrated by personal stories and informed by her own Christian faith.'

Professor John Drane, theologian and author

'Jenny Baker clearly presents her case that gender equality is not about eliminating difference, nor about diminishing men in order to promote women, but about rethinking traditional roles so that every person fulfils their true potential. With her characteristic warmth and wisdom, she offers research and experience, stories and statistics, to show that at work, in society, at home, and in the Church, egalitarian relationships are not a threat, but the promise of a better world in which men and women flourish.'

Maggi Dawn, author and Professor of Theology and Literature, University of Yale

'Jenny is without a doubt one of the foremost thinkers and commentators on the issues of faith and gender. You may not agree with all she says but I guarantee that you will be hugely challenged and enriched by engaging with this book. Whatever your stance on this key area you simply must read this much needed contribution to the debate.'

Carl Beech, General Director, Christian Vision for Men

Jenny Baker has been an advocate and activist for the equality of men and women for many years. She has spoken about gender equality in various contexts, and is a host of the Gathering of Women Leaders in London. She has an MSc in Gender Studies and is an accomplished author. Jenny works as Development Manager at Church Urban Fund, and is a marathon runner and keen cyclist. www.jennybaker.org.uk

EQUALS

*Enjoying gender equality
in all areas of life*



Jenny Baker



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*For Jonny
I couldn't have done this without you*

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Introduction

I was brought up in the Brethren Church, where men made decisions and women made the tea. One Sunday morning, during the breaking of bread service, a woman called Audrey stood up and started reading the story of Rahab from the Bible. A number of people hurriedly left in protest, chairs scraping as they went, with Audrey raising her voice to be heard. When she reached the end of the passage, she started to say something about it, ‘This was a woman . . .’, only for one of the elders to say, ‘That’s enough, dear.’ Her courage failed her and she sat down. The aftermath was horrible: a tense atmosphere, another elder saying something to try and draw people together, small groups of people talking urgently afterwards about how to address the problem. It felt like something terrible had happened. I had just accepted that men and women had different roles to play, with women being silent in public but influential behind the scenes; this was the first time anyone had challenged that and it felt very uncomfortable.

But it did get me thinking. The people at the church were God-fearing and Bible-believing, but their vision of the way life should be organized between men and women was in stark contrast to the stirring sense in my spirit that somewhere within me was a leader waiting to emerge. During my teenage years I swung like a pendulum between thinking ‘If that’s what God wants for women, then I don’t want anything to do with God,’ and ‘If that’s what God wants, then that’s what I’ll become.’ When I got to know Jonny at university, it seemed even more important to sort it out. I read books on Christian marriage that I ended up throwing at the wall. Did we need to squeeze ourselves into these patterns of behaving that didn’t come naturally, or could we both somehow be ourselves, develop our gifts and work things out between us?

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We started asking questions at our church, St Matthew's in Bath, and the vicar and his wife organized a series of Bible studies. We discovered a liberating theology of the whole of life redeemed, including relationships between men and women, and a very different understanding of what the Bible said about women and men. Jonny and I got married and set out to do life together, committing to share everything equally, including work, parenting, housework, and the challenge of working out our callings. We were able to job-share when our boys were little and so also shared hands-on parenting. Now our boys are men and seem to have survived the experiment very well.

In the UK, where only a fifth of MPs are female, where women are paid less than men and one in four will experience violence from their partner, where men comprise the vast majority of the prison population and boys are underperforming at school, that biblical vision of the full equality of women and men is needed now more than ever. It seems to me that the Church should be leading the way, with restored relationships between men and women because of the amazing redemption that Jesus brings to every area of life, but instead we're still arguing over women bishops and male headship. I thought we would have sorted all that out by now.

There is no blueprint for sharing life more equally but I hope that this book will provoke many discussions about how it might be done so that both women and men can thrive. More than that, I hope that it will be a catalyst for some creative explorations for doing life together differently, creating communities and churches where the fantastic diversity of women and men is released and celebrated, and the liberating truth of Christ's redemption is experienced.

Some things to note

There is always more that could be written on a subject. This is a book about men and women which talks primarily about heterosexual relationships. I know that life is more richly complex than that, that not everyone fits into a neat gender binary and

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that there's an urgent need for Christians to understand issues of equality and sexuality. I don't think I'm the person to write on those issues, not because I don't care about them but because I know and have experienced too little.

This book is written on the foundation of an egalitarian¹ theology. As an evangelical in my early twenties, it was really important for me to study the biblical material on women and men, to understand how to interpret it, and to realize that what I had imbibed as a teenager was not the only or the most accurate way of understanding the texts. Not all Christians feel the need to justify their passion for equality with their reading of the Bible, but if you are from a tradition that does I would encourage you to do that work.

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Exploring equality

One hundred years ago, Emily Davison fought hard for women to have the right to vote. She was jailed and force-fed numerous times and eventually died from injuries gained when she stepped in front of King George V's horse at the Epsom Derby with the hope of bringing more attention to the cause. Emily and her fellow campaigners saw winning the vote as a vital step for women in gaining equality with men. I wonder what kind of society they imagined as they looked into the future, and what they would think of the way we live now.

Because in spite of men and women having the same rights under the law, we still experience significant inequalities in different areas of life. Nearly a hundred years after Nancy Astor became the first female MP to take her seat in the House of Commons, barely more than one-fifth of our MPs are women.¹ A recent survey of contributors to serious public debate through newspapers, radio and TV found that, again, just over a fifth of them were women. Women are in the minority in business leadership as well, and the recession has hit women the hardest with more of them losing their jobs as a result of cuts. Women still earn less than men, over 40 years after the Equal Pay Act, with those working full time earning 85p for every £1 earned by a man.

And it's not just women who are disadvantaged through inequality. Men are significantly more likely to die from cancer than women, and three-quarters of those who commit suicide are male. Men make up 95 per cent of the prison population. Girls are outperforming boys at every level of the education system, and more of them go on to higher education. There are considerably

more women than men in the congregations of our churches, although the majority of church leaders are men.

Alongside these examples of inequity, many relationships between women and men are seriously damaged and damaging. Female MPs, presenters and campaigners are subjected to threats of rape and violence on social media. A 17-year-old girl who set up a feminist society at her school received an appalling and abusive backlash from the boys in her wider peer group, and her school's response was to silence the girls rather than target the boys' behaviour. Two women a week are killed at the hands of their partner, while men who suffer from domestic violence are much less likely to report it than women.

It seems that women and men are not doing life together very well.

These inequalities are damaging the quality of people's lives, harming relationships between men and women, limiting the effectiveness of businesses and institutions and restricting the freedom our children have to reach their full potential.

And yet when I read the Bible, I see a completely different vision of how things could be. God created both men and women in his image and together gave them the task of exploring and developing the world he had made as equal partners. That harmony and co-operation was disrupted when people disobeyed God, and conflict and competition entered the scene. But God always had the intention of redeeming everything that was spoilt by sin, including the distorted dynamics between women and men. Jesus related to women in a radically different way from the culture around him, treating them with respect, welcoming them into his wider community of disciples, taking time to teach them and allowing them to bear witness to his resurrection. He modelled a profoundly different form of servant leadership that didn't lord it over others or depend on hierarchy. The early Church wrestled with how to enable these restored relationships between men and women to flourish, and women took their place alongside men as leaders and teachers in the community. As followers of Jesus we are called to work out the redemption he offers in every area of life, allowing his spirit to transform our brokenness, demonstrating

the wisdom of walking in God's ways and modelling something profoundly different from the damaged relationships between men and women in the rest of the world.²

I've also seen the liberating impact of women and men who value equality and are proactive about dismantling the barriers that stand in its way – the churches that take time to nurture all the gifts that both men and women have to offer; the parents who make it a priority to share work and the care of children so that both can pursue their calling; the households where everyone does their fair share of the domestic work; the workplaces that root out sexism and aim to open up opportunities to everyone. Equality is not just a nice concept or an interesting idea, it's foundational to women and men doing life together well. It's the environment that enables true human flourishing, where people experience life in all its fullness and pass that on to others.

But it seems to me that equality is easily misunderstood and can be a slippery concept to grasp. For a start, are men and women really equal? We're clearly different in lots of ways. We have different body parts, grow hair in different places and the difference in our chromosomes is reproduced in every cell of our bodies. In almost all sports, whether it's running, cycling, swimming or jumping, men are consistently faster than women: they jump higher, lift heavier weights, throw further and score more. That pattern of men and women achieving differently is repeated in lots of different spheres of life. How can we say that women and men are equal?

And then, aren't the differences between men and women a good thing? Wouldn't it be dull if we were all exactly the same? Where's the harm in men loving football and women preferring shopping? If women were really equal to men, wouldn't there be as many of them leading businesses, taking part in government and writing opinion pieces by now? Maybe the fact that they're still in the minority proves that actually they're just not cut out for it?

Instead of going round in circles with these types of questions, we need to explore what equality is, and what it isn't, what it means

to say that women and men are equal and what stops that equality being experienced in every area of life.

What equality is . . .

Equality is the belief that all people have the same value, regardless of any other defining characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and age. A society or community that values equality will work to eliminate discrimination, disadvantage and barriers to opportunities so that everyone can reach their full potential. Equality is about treating people fairly without prejudice or assumptions and it's the essential foundation on which all fruitful relationships are built. Equality, particularly when we're talking about women and men, is about being free to choose the direction your life takes and having the encouragement and opportunities to enact that choice, rather than being constrained by stereotypes or cultural convention. It's about everyone being able to flourish.

I've found, in conversations about equality, that there are few people who would disagree that men and women are equal but there are lots who want to qualify that in some way. People are very quick to add a 'but' and to jump ahead to focus on difference, which is where their real interest lies. 'Of course men and women are equal but they have different roles or functions . . .' or 'but their brains are wired differently' or 'but men are natural leaders'. We'll look at difference in lots more detail later because you can't discuss equality without exploring and understanding diversity and difference, but I want to pause here and spell out in more detail the ways in which women and men are equal.

Men and women are equally human

Again, this seems a very obvious thing to say but early thinkers taught otherwise. Aristotle said that women were a lower form of life, and Ambrose, one of the original doctors of the Church, was convinced that because Eve was created from Adam's body rather than his soul, women were not made in the image of God. Our understanding of the world and how it works has, of course,

We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal. *Thomas Jefferson, 1776*

An equal society protects and promotes equal, real freedom and substantive opportunity to live in the ways people value and would choose, so that everyone can flourish. An equal society recognises different people's different needs, situations and goals and removes the barriers that limit what people can do and can be. *Leeds City Council, 2012³*

Equality is treating people fairly regardless of any differences between them. *Neil Thompson⁴*

Equality is about creating a fairer society, where everyone can participate and has the opportunity to fulfil their potential. *Department of Health*

Equality means being afforded the same rights, dignity and freedoms as other people. These include rights to access resources, the dignity of being seen as able and the freedom to choose what to make of your life on an equal footing with others. *Danny Dorling⁵*

Your equality policy reflects your commitment to equal opportunities. It is your promise to treat all employees, and potential employees, fairly and considerately. *ACAS⁶*

changed since then, but I wonder how persistent and influential this kind of thinking is and how much it has shaped current beliefs about men and women. As recently as 1993, in response to the discrimination that so many women face around the world, the UN World Conference on Human Rights found it necessary to confirm that women's rights were human rights,⁷ that women are fully human. Clearly the fact that such an affirmation was required shows that the humanity of women is contested in many places, in the way they are treated if not in an articulated theory. In contrast, the creation story tells us that both women and men bear God's image: 'God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created

