

E-QUALITY



A PUBLICATION OF CHRISTIANS FOR BIBLICAL EQUALITY

I TEACH FROM A TANGENT

Dr. Beulah Wood

New Zealander Beulah Wood has been in and out of India much of her adult life. She first went there, newly married, in 1968, and taught for eight years with her husband Brian at a school for missionaries' children. As her four daughters arrived, she changed to part-time teaching. Later they served in Nepal for about four years, and there her husband died in the mountains. Self-taught as a writer, Beulah worked for Christian papers in New Zealand and for World Vision there, and returned to India 10 years ago when her daughters were grown.

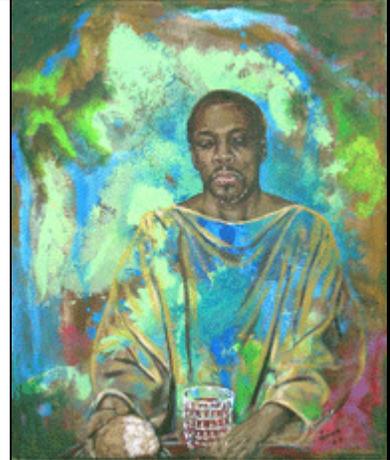
I was asked to write on teaching and preaching on gender issues, but I have to confess I rarely do it, at least not head on. On the other hand, the fact that I am a woman is rarely far from my thoughts as I teach or preach on any topic. Whatever the sermon is about, one wants both women and men to understand how to carry out the goal you are giving, which means that illustrating from both the lives of women and the lives of men is important.

I hope my preaching style readily reaches both women and men, so I use many more case stories from the Bible, history, and present day, and these include up to half about women. This in itself makes a statement, as, from my observation, many preachers use abstract ideas with fewer on-the-ground examples, and may forget to include things of interest or relevance to women.

Gender issues are sensitive and easily cause antagonism, so I try to stay sensitive to my audience and avoid confrontation so that people will listen and invite me to speak again. The result is that I often teach equality of women and men by my actions, by the models and illustrations I use, and as a tangent to another theme. I do teach on the equality of men and women, when that is part of the invitation, and some of those times have left me 'walking on eggshells' to teach from the Bible in such a way that people will listen and shift their thinking, without being affronted or believing my teaching is unbiblical and un-cultural for India.

Teaching through the Act of Preaching

Sometimes the very act of standing up to speak says I believe in equality and will act on it. Years ago, in my home country of New Zealand, I mustered up all my courage in my conservative Open Brethren Assembly to join the time of 'open worship' (open to men) by standing and saying four sentences and reading three verses. I made a statement. Nothing happened the first time, but the second time the



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people were numb with shock, my mother walked out, and my father cried. Nobody noticed that I was a returned missionary and had obtained my BA and BD (Bachelor of Divinity, the equivalent of North American M.Div, Master of Divinity), while the only other person with a college degree in the whole group was one man with a Bachelor of Agriculture. I did not repeat the attempt, as I did not want to upset my parents again.

Later, in a different denomination, or in non-denominational circumstances, I still felt when asked to preach that the very act of standing up to teach from the Bible said that those who invited me thought I could be a messenger of God's word. In congregations where the speaker on the other 50 or 51 Sundays of the year were men, this silently said, "Women are okay. They are not lesser creatures. They too can hear from God and offer us something of value." That felt encouraging to me, and other women said they appreciated it.

Developing Teaching from a Tangent

People do not often ask me to preach on gender. One can preach about, and raise money for, justice for the poorest of the poor, but preaching that the poorest of the poor are female and that Christians must work for justice for them whether high class or low class—that is often a no-go area in my own country and in India. Neither does it bring financial support. I have to go round the back or from the side. That is what I call teaching from a tangent.

Once I taught on the theology of widows, in the chapel at the seminary where I teach. The Old Testament says much on care for widows, and widows in India, even Christians, fear others believe they bring of bad luck, and that they should not remarry. I wanted to challenge this assumption. Of course evangelicals agree when I teach this. They just never stopped to consider it a matter to discuss. It is a gender issue, especially since widowers, in contrast, do not bring bad luck and can remarry.

Another time, as part of a sermon, I preached against female abortion based on sex selection after ultra-sound technology. Christians know this is against the law, but doctors and technicians have ways around it. "The sky is blue," they say if it is a male foetus, or, "Pink is the color of the month," or "I see you celebrating with laddus." (Laddus are the sweetmeat to celebrate the birth of a baby boy.) Some Christians, and only some, are caught in this abortion of baby girls, but I have never heard a sermon on it. The serious results tell the size of the problem. The proportion of women to men declined all through the last century, and the disparity has only worsened in recent years. Because of this, I loved it when a colleague whose wife had given birth to a baby daughter this past year provided laddus to the rest of us at afternoon tea time.

Singleness is another issue for women. Some would have preferred to remain single, but parents overrule and arrange a marriage. Both men and women commonly think that a woman is nothing without a man, though an unmarried man is valued in his own right. In contrast, there is plenty of Bible evidence for a rich and valuable single life.

I did not dare preach on violence in the home. What right have I with my white face to say there is anything wrong with the

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home life of my Christian acquaintances in India? They can simply say, "Look at your levels of divorce in the West. What have you got to teach us? We have our strong family life." I mentioned in a couple of articles the Bible verses that condemn violence and left it at that. Then one year a student came to me to say two or three husbands on the campus were beating their wives. I chose to confront the issue rather than let it pass. I was dean of women. Pent-up and apprehensive, I pulled out all the Bible teaching against violence that I could find and unloaded it to the chapel that was 80 percent men, explaining why I had to do it. I am sure nobody liked it, but it had to be done. I hope I never have to do it again.

Preaching using Models of Bible Characters

One sermon on the nature of prophecy gave me the opportunity to imagine myself into the life of Huldah the prophet—how she and her husband Shallum observed the shocking desecration of their much-loved temple, the debris lying around, and the prostitutes in the precincts. I described how Huldah must have brought God's word to her people until she was recognized as a prophet, and then she was called on by King Josiah. God's people went to her, not her husband, and not Jeremiah who was a prophet at the same time. She was recognized as a prophet in her own right.

I had fun thinking about the gender aspects of Mary the mother of Jesus as God respected her own ability to make decisions. Why had God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary and not to her father or her husband-to-be? Perhaps she was only 18. Should she not ask her father's permission to take on this task, a greater task than anyone else ever faced in all history? She would usher into the world the Son of God. It seems God expected to deal with the person concerned—Mary, rather than turning to those who are typically considered persons in authority over women in that culture. Do people talk about this at Christmas time?

Then Mary decided to travel to her cousin in Jerusalem about 80 miles away. That was four or five days of walking. Perhaps she asked a cousin to come to protect from bandits. We do not know. Yet going there seemed to be her decision. She did not have to submit to the permission of a male family member.

Similarly, Joseph took on a lesser role than his wife. Not once in all the gospels do we have his actual words, and for most of history he is known as the husband of Mary, not for his own achievements. He was spiritually sensitive. Four times in two years he recognized the visit of an angel and four times he obeyed the angel. That is a higher ratio than most Bible characters. The common thread through Joseph's obedience was that he acted not for himself but for his wife and child. There must have been enormous tenderness, great protection, and huge focus on his task as husband and father. Significantly, he left his carpentry shop and traveled to Egypt in order to help his wife carry out her task for God. What had he done? He gave up his vocation for two years. Earning a living came second to being a good husband and father. Can we learn from this model?

Joseph was also the model to Jesus of an earthly father. Perhaps because of Joseph, Jesus grew with a wonderful model of a father's role. The word "father" for God appears 11 times in the Old Testament. In John's gospel alone the word Father, usually used by Jesus, refers to God 122 times. Joseph's life must have fed into the

view Jesus had of a loving father.

Preaching on Family Life

I feel comfortable when I preach on family life and parenting. I had a good marriage while it lasted, I raised a family of four, much of the time as a single parent, my daughters are steady citizens, married, and providing me with the experience of grandparent as well.

One year the principal asked us to each give our testimony of the path we had taken to reach our current position at chapel sessions. For many of my colleagues, wives, parents, and children hardly figured in the big decisions after they were married. I chose to tell my story in the context of how my husband and I made decisions about our calling, what training we would do, and especially in receiving together a sense of guidance. I told how in one big decision I felt God guided us to move to Nepal and my husband accepted the verses I received for both of us. Students came to tell me during the rest of the week how they liked my testimony because I brought to it the real-life dynamics.

I like preaching on parenting too. Most preachers in India have the disadvantage of few Christian books written for their culture, and although books from North America are available, they are often unhelpful because of the cultural differences between Christians in India and Christians in the West. For example, because parents often sleep with their children in India, it is irrelevant to read books which advise otherwise. Some believe that preaching on family life is not a serious spiritual issue deserving of a sermon. This is where, coming from another culture, my preaching can be helpful. I like to preach on how God's treatment of Adam and Eve offers much by way of good parental relationships.

Asked to Teach or Preach on Gender Issues

People do ask me occasionally to teach on gender topics directly, but I take the greatest care. "Gender" is not a word that Christians like. It smacks of secular feminism. I offer to talk on "Issues of Women and Men," and that is appropriate anyway, as the issues are part of the whole of society, not just the problem of women. "Feminism" is not a good word for most people either. I used to proudly say I was a feminist and define it as believing men and women should be equal and are equal in the sight of God. That did not work in India. People stick on the word feminist.

Often I start a series by explaining I had a good marriage, I have brothers and sons-in-law, and I do not hate men. In India, people like to know that I still hold great respect for my husband who died 25 years ago. They perhaps feel the fact I have not remarried shows my loyalty. Some like to see a photo of him.

At a neighboring Bible college, the dean asked me to teach gender issues for a small M.Div class. They listened attentively and did the assignments, but the more difficult challenge was the three public lectures I had to give for the whole student body. In three, one-hour sessions, I tried to convey my message in an environment so conservative that the women students were only allowed out of their hostel for lectures. Standing up in front of 100 people in that environment took much prayer. I elaborated in the first lecture on the oppression of women in their own culture generally. They did know

that was there. The next evening I taught from the scriptures the equality that Jesus promoted and that was practiced in the New Testament. Okay so far. If I based my argument on the Bible, evangelicals could not argue back.

On the third evening, after more examples and biblical teaching, I asked men to help teach change and work to bring equality to both men and women. It was only the beginning of the journey, but none of the young men or the lecturers voiced objections, and the young women surrounded me like a small swarm of bees to tell how they had never heard that equality for women could be a biblical concept.

Two more opportunities came earlier this year. At my own institution eight M.Th. students were to write an extended paper during February. They heard a speaker for two days on environmental issues, another for two days on caste issues, and then me on gender issues, and this time with a straightforward approach. All eight chose to write on gender issues. That told me I had touched a chord they knew they needed for their future ministry.

Then a mission annual conference in Bangladesh invited me to speak on gender issues. That too was hard, for some would come for refreshment, not controversy. A retreat needs to offer encouragement. I offered the example of the courage of the bold women leaders in the house churches of the first century. What a great model we have in a woman like Mary, mother of John Mark, holding a prayer meeting in her home (Acts 12) when her friend James was martyred that week. Nympha in Laodicea ran a house church in her home while surrounded by pagans who would object to her actions (Colossians 4), and Phoebe traveled and taught as a deacon of the church in Cenchraea.

Being a woman is intrinsic to my preaching. I want both men and women to relate to the teaching and apply it readily, and I want all my listeners to see women and men as equal in the sight of God, both at home and in society.

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