



Riding the third wave: Biblical Equality in the 21st Century

Description

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As the final speaker for this conference I am taking a somewhat different approach to the issue of biblical equality. My interests lie in both theology and sociology and I am aware that we have had a plethora of excellent biblical and theological teaching over the past three days. My topic lends itself to spending some time in the sociological world and then offering some reflections as to how this might impact our theological exposition into the future.

My topic is "Riding the Third Wave: biblical equality in the 21st century". What better metaphor than surfing could I use in this land of beaches, big waves and surfies? I invite you join me on an exploration of this new wave that has emerged relatively recently. Join me on the shore as we watch the wave, surfboard in hand – assessing its size, its direction and its rideability. Who knows – by the end we may be ready to venture out and take a ride ourselves.

Let me begin by addressing the link between culture and hermeneutics.

As Kevin Giles has noted in the introduction to the study handbook, the interaction between hermeneutics and culture is often underestimated when we address issues such as biblical equality. Our culture provides a lens, a worldview, through which we read the text of scripture and the text of life.

My own research as to why a small Australian Pentecostal denomination had a dramatic increase in the numbers of women ordained in the 1990s and first decade of the twenty-first century was prompted by the suspicion that the proclaimed reason of a theological shift was not the *only* reason. My conclusion was that a theological shift was only one of three major reasons and the *least* influential of the three. More influential was the desire to recognise the ministry of the pastor's wife and the influence of second-wave feminism on the perceptions and expectations of women within the denomination. While disavowing any link to secular feminism, they were reflecting the societal pressure for equality between the sexes. That led to a reinterpretation of scripture and reformation of theology to accommodate the new realities.

The work of Mark Chaves¹ confirms that the numbers of denominations reversing previously held stances preventing the ordination of women, increases dramatically after each wave of feminism. Chaves' findings note that organisations respond to issues such as this via their closest links – that is, if one denomination makes a stance those other denominations with close links are more likely to adopt the same stance. Likewise, those denominations seeking to be acceptable to the current secular culture or to establish or maintain relevance with the culture are more likely to adopt a stance that is culturally-acceptable. As you will conclude, this creates a tension for Bible-believing Evangelicals.

This analysis reinforces what we intuitively know – as Christians we are far more influenced by our secular culture, and the cultures of other Christian groups, than we care to admit. We claim a biblically-based theology but even at our best we see the scripture text through a slightly-distorted lens. We also have what Gordon Fee calls “a hierarchy of hermeneutics” – we can proclaim 1 Tim 3:1-11 and 1 Cor 11:1-16 as eternally valid and prescriptive while granting 1 Cor 14:39 and 1 Tim 5:1-16 no weight at all.
[2](#)

What might this seemingly obvious and somewhat dispiriting observation have to do with biblical equality in the twenty-first century? I would argue that the future of biblical equality in our churches and Christian organisations hangs not entirely on our ability to come up with even more convincing exegesis resulting in biblical arguments to support our case. I would argue that as much as we need biblical exegesis we need *cultural exegesis*. We must understand the culture into which we take our message in order to ensure we are answering the pertinent cultural questions rather than the questions we assume are pertinent because they were pertinent to us thirty years ago when we first began our journey of exploration into this area.

To this end I propose to spend some time looking at what has been termed the Third Wave of feminism, or Post-feminism in order to understand the worldview held by our daughters, nieces and friends who have grown up in an era different to ours. They too are grappling with issues regarding biblical equality but they approach it from a different cultural angle. The answers will be the same biblically but they may be applied differently.

So let us take a closer look at that big wave we see out there.

We are all familiar with first-wave feminism that was primarily concerned with acknowledgment of women as ontologically equal with men and thus to be afforded the right to be educated, to vote and to own property. First-wave feminists in Australia were not seeking to move out of the domestic sphere – they wanted a voice in society. Emphasis was placed on the differences between men and women and the positive contributions the ‘women's view’ might bring to society (e.g. the Temperance

movement). Theologically, the first wave was concerned to allow women access to ministry traditionally restricted to males – particularly preaching and public ministry.

The second-wave of feminism that began in the 1960s was a more academic movement and the emphasis was on women being granted the same access to all areas of the public sphere as men enjoyed. The introduction of the birth-control pill allowed women to take control of their fertility and thus their personal lives. The demand for equal pay, access to paid work, getting women into positions of power in business and politics, access to abortion on demand, access to child care and access to divorce were all part of this movement. Emphasis was made on the similarities between male and female and differences were explained as social constructs (give boys dolls to play with). Within the church, the push for equality outworked in the movement for ordination of women and in the acceptance of married women and mothers in the workforce. Theological arguments ranged from feminist theology grounded in a theology of suspicion to biblically-based responses.

We could summarise the twenty-first century western culture with regard to women – in five words – change at a dizzying rate. This wave is a fast-breaker.

The term third-wave was first used in a 1992 essay to describe the new movement that had succeeded that of second-wave feminism. That is a mere 30 years after second-wave feminism. In many respects, third-wave and post-feminism are synonymous although post-feminists might argue that their stance does not represent a new “wave” but simply the aftermath of a previous ‘wave’.

Many who grew up during the 60s 70s and 80s find the new wave of feminism bewildering and confronting not the least because it seems to stand in utter contradiction with not only the secular concept of Second Wave feminism but also because it raises theological questions.

Before we look at the characteristics of third wave feminism it is important to note the following

- It is found primarily in Gen X and Gen Y
- It is found in a generation raised and trained in deconstructionism and post-modernity
- It is found among women who have grown up enjoying the changes wrought by Second Wave feminists. One commentator noted, “Third-wave feminists have internalized the ideals of feminism so much that the ideals are perceived as non-political in nature. Well of course women should be paid equally to men. Of course, men should share the childcare responsibility. The expectations of fairness and equality are definitely there”³
- Thanks to technology it is found among a globally and socially-aware generation

Let’s take a look at the characteristics of secular Third Wave feminism as described by a Third Waver.

- Third Wave feminism celebrates women’s multiple and sometimes contradictory identities in today’s world. Third Wave feminists are encouraged to build their own identities from the available buffet, and to not worry if the items on their plate are not served together traditionally. Women can unapologetically celebrate a plate full of entrées choices like soccer mom, career woman, lover, wife, lesbian, activist, consumer, girly girl, tomboy, sweetheart, bitch, good girl, princess, or sex symbol.
- Third Wave feminism encourages personal empowerment and action. Third Wave feminists like

to think of themselves as survivors, not victims.

- Although Third Wave feminists do not reject political activism, the emphasis is more on using one's personal empowerment as a starting point for societal change.
- Third Wave feminism celebrates emotions and experiences that traditionally have been labelled as "unfeminine." Women are invited to be angry, aggressive, and outspoken.
- Third Wave feminism celebrates women's sexuality and encourages women to explore sexual options and express themselves in whatever ways they feel comfortable. The double standard and titles like "slut" are discarded. The female characters from *Sex and the City* can be seen as Third Wave feminist icons who do not apologize for their sexual relationships and adventures.
- Third Wave feminists celebrate diversity. The Women's Liberation Movement often is criticized for focusing too narrowly on the experiences of middle-class, white, heterosexual women.
- As is characteristic of Generation X and Generation Y, Third Wave feminists express themselves through popular culture and use it in their personal journeys to define identity. They look for women, images, and musicians who represent their own struggles. They also take ironic pleasure in outrageously sexist or sexualized representations, like Paris Hilton or reality shows like *America's Next Top Model*.⁴

If those are the characteristics of the wave, what impact does it have on its environment? How does it play out in society? Here are ten markers.

Firstly, individualism reigns! There is no defined path or role that a woman must or should take. Each woman is to determine their own role and path in life resisting value judgments from anyone. One such example I stumbled across was femivores. Femivores who are also known as radical homemakers are highly educated women who have chosen to leave the workforce to look after family. They found work a source of alienation and exercised their choice to leave. It is an anti-consumerist, post-feminist movement linked with environmentalism, feeding family healthily and economically, with some choosing to home school their children.

A commentator noted that "femivorism is grounded in the very principles of self-sufficiency, autonomy and personal fulfilment that drove women into the workforce in the first place"⁵ The same commentator also warned it would only work for women and not drag them into loss of self-esteem and drudgery if they went into it as a genuinely egalitarian relationship with their partner.

Individuality leads many Third Wavers to choose not to be involved in feminism of any form. Many young women are loath to align themselves to anything that could be labelled 'feminist'. They feel they are beyond labels and beyond the need to be politically activist. One critique of the Third Wave is that the intense individualism that characterises it is unlikely to promote social change as social change requires communal action.

Secondly, You can't have it all (at once!). But *you* get to choose. In a survey of 5000 Australia women conducted by Marie Claire⁶ (a women's magazine aimed at the under-30s) 64% of women said they "want it all" in life but believe they *cannot have it all at once*. The survey report noted that many young women were rejecting the idea of "having it all" and returning to "conservative" values.

One woman commented:

Women have seen their mothers become exhausted, and are realising career alone is not the answer to happiness. Many of them think, "I'll have my job until I get married, and then I'll have kids and maybe

slow down to working on or two days a week". Today, society expects you to work. It's more an expectation than a right that women fought for.⁷

Juanita Phillips the female face of newsreaders in the ABC and a trailblazer for other female newsreaders is a high-profile example of this phenomenon. Phillips became convinced that as a later-in-life wife and mother, with a public profile and career, and with a large mortgage she could *not* have it all. In her recently-published book "A pressurecooker saved my life" she relates the inner anguish and guilt that led her to leave her career and embrace the role of homemaker.⁸

Even Julia Gillard, the heir-apparent to the Prime Ministership, once questioned if a mother could ever become prime Minister.

In reality, however, many young women cannot make the choice to quit their jobs and so struggle to juggle family and domestic responsibilities along with a career. The division of domestic duties is a constant source of discussion among Third Wavers.

One of the best things I have ever read on this is the story written by Sey Chessler, a top executive in a large publisher.

One morning about 20 years ago, my wife and I were arguing about whether or not I ever listened to her. It was one of those arguments that grow into passion and pain and, often, to me at least, into a kind of hysteria. This one became one of those that do not go away with the years.

Suddenly, she threw something at me, and said: 'From now on you do the shopping, plan the meals, take care of the house, everything. I'm through!'

I was standing in the kitchen looking at the shelves of food, at the oven, at the sink, at the refrigerator, at the cleaning utensils. At my wife. My reaction as orgasmic. Somewhere inside of me there was screaming, hurting, a volcanic gush of tears flooded my head and broke down over me. I shook and sobbed. I was terrified. No what what, I knew I could not handle the burden. I could not do my job and be responsible for the entire household. How could I get through a day dealing with personnel, budgets, manuscripts, art departments, circulation statistics, phone calls, people agents, management, writers, and AT THE SAME TIME plan dinner for tonight and tomorrow night and breakfast and a dinner party Thursday night and shopping for it all and making sure the house is in good shape and the woman who cleans for us is there and on time and the laundry done and the children taken to the doctor, and the children taken care of?

How could ANY ONE person do all that and stay sane: No one could do that properly. No one. Natalie simply watched for a while. Finally she said: 'Okay. Don't worry. I'll keep on doing it.' She put on her coat and went to her office.

Despite her simple statement that she would go on doing it, I stood awhile telling myself that NO ONE could do all of that. No one. There was a CLICK in my head " and it dawned on me that SHE was doing it.

How invisible my wife's life was to me. How invisible to men women are."⁹

The third of the markers of this wave is that relationships are important! Third Wavers are not focussed

only on getting a career. They are interested and committed to relationships but in choosing the gender-relationship *they* want. Men are not the enemy and whereas Second Wave feminism was determined to find ways for women to have same-sex relationships, Third Wavers want to pursue the relationship of their choice including with men. Emphasis is not on the sameness of the sexes – now the pendulum has swung more to acceptance of differences between the sexes.

Additionally, Third Wavers are interested in having children. The Marie Claire survey showed that 75% of the women surveyed believed “that a happy family and relationship defines success in their life”. The pressure to not only have a career but also a family life weighs heavily on young women. They often hold very idealised views of marriage and what it will hold for them. In the Marie Claire survey a staggering 82% of women said they would opt for love over a career.

Women often focus on their career and then find they reach their late thirties and are unable to find Mr Right. Many young women are now opting to marry in their early twenties and have children young. A columnist noted, “Unlike the feminist generation before, young women today don’t feel duty-bound to pursue a career path or guilty if they prioritise family over work. They’re happy to take time off, or go part-time, to have children without feeling they’re letting the feminist side down”¹⁰

There is also a growing acceptance that personal fulfilment in relationships can come at someone else’s cost. Single women, or women in unhappy marriages, are actively seeking as future partners, married men who are in committed relationships. The rationale is that if this man has formed one committed relationship, he will be able to make the same kind of commitment to another woman – thus making him a perfect partner.

Fourthly, third wavers hold themselves to very high standards. Rejecting the notion of ‘superwoman’ many young women still feel under enormous pressure. Of the 5000 women surveyed, 78% believed that women today are pressured to have a perfect family life as well as a great career and 50% believed they were more stressed than their mothers at the same age.

Some of the major stressors include too much choice which leaves them wondering have I made the right choice? Another stressor is that their role models are impossibly perfect because you never see their downsides. The Marie Claire survey revealed Cate Blanchett was voted the ideal Australian woman. She was seen as beautiful, famous, having a young family, hardworking, and able to juggle everything in her life with apparent ease. What is not revealed is the role of nannies, housekeepers and botox in Blanchett’s world. Third wavers are surprised to learn that raising children is stressful particularly when there are so many experts to say what is right. Add to this the stress brought about when the unrealistic expectations of marriage are not met including finding out their prince, their Mr Right, their perfect soulmate, is only human.

Another marker of the Third Wave in society is women seek to be free to be women in the workplace. Gone are the days of the 1980s powerdressers! The little girls who watched their mothers go to work in drab business suits and adopt male language and characteristics to fit into the male culture are not prepared to do the same.

They are convinced that no longer is the male the ‘norm’ and female ‘the other’. Instead individualism allows women to express themselves in whatever way they desire and be accepted in that. One Third Waver declared, “We want to change the yardstick. That doesn’t mean making the standard female-biased, or declaring that “women’s characteristics” are in fact superior to “men’s”. Why not discourage

the overemphasis of gender differences and instead celebrate valuable *human* qualities.”¹¹

Sometimes the ideal and the actual do not match as this story that appeared in a weekly magazine shows:

Rebecca Smith, as we'll call her, because she's keen to keep her job, is a junior associate in a small city law firm. She's bright, committed, ambitious. The men who run the company love her and she loves the company. And no, she decides early on in the chat, she hasn't found that being female has held her back, "If you're the right personality, you do advance at the same rate, maybe even faster, depending on what you can demonstrateâ€¦ If you're the right personality and they like you, that's the most important thing."

So what is the "right" personality?

"Well, in my firm, they love it that I can sit there in the boardroom on a Friday night and we can watch the cricket or the tennis and I'll swear and talk badly about people and things like that â€¦ It's a really big part of it. They've said to me a number of times that when they're looking for partners, they want someone they can get along with. Drinking in the boardroom and having the time to do that, not having to leave early, is really important."

They like her being one of the boys, but within limits. At a commemorative dinner recently, she was fixing her collar and caught one of the senior partners staring at her across the table.

"Stop staring at my collar," she chided.

"I'm not staring at your collar," he said. "I'm staring at your tits."

She was taken aback, but not astonished. There's a steady stream of comments like that in the firm, she says. Usually the women try to ignore it or take it as a joke. "Mostly, the men don't mean anything by it. They just say the first thing that comes into their heads," Rebecca explains mildly.

"Does she ever object? "One time I did say something and afterwards I walked into the boardroom and the managing partner said, 'Uh-oh, here she comes, the fun police.' It's like you're some sort of extremist.

"I also want to become an equity partner of the firm one day and I worry that they would site there and say, 'Well you know, Rebecca is a bit of a femo. If we made her a partner, she might start throwing her weight around and saying we have to do everything differently.' So the more I can play the game, the better it is for me. I know that sounds like a complete sell-out.”¹²

Sixthly, third wavers believe women can be top of their field *if they want to*. Young women have been told they could do anything they wanted to. No doors are closed to them. The choice is theirs.

However, I hate to break the bubble but the statistics would suggest otherwise. Women remain significantly under-represented in most influential roles in Australian life. Women do not form the majority in any category of senior job position in any industry in Australia. In 2008 there were only 4 female CEOs in top ASX200 companies which works out at 2%. Female CFOs and COOs earn 50% of male equivalents. Female CEOs earn 66% of male CEOs. Female Senior HR managers earn 43% less than male managers. At the end of 2009 of the 1474 board directorships for ASX200 companies 128

were filled by women and 106 boards had no woman director. Women make up 27% of lower house MPs and 35% in the Senate which puts us on par with Afghanistan, behind Rwanda and Sweden, but ahead of USA at 16%.¹³

Just to complicate it more, sociologists have noticed that men and women [also] view success and failure differently because of ingrained ideas about gender. “Because the professions are perceived as requiring masculine abilities and traits—a successful man can reasonably credit himself with the abilities and traits that are necessary for success — and feel masculine in the bargain. A man’s success and his masculinity reinforce each other.

[But] if a woman is professionally successful, she must either see herself as having masculine traits — and thereby run the risk of seeming unfeminine to herself and others — or as having compensated for lack of masculine characteristics [maybe she was ‘lucky’ or just ‘worked hard’] Unlike a successful man, a woman has something to lose from success: her gender identity or belief in her ability. Conversely, failure and femininity reinforce each other—a woman who fails is seen as more of a woman than one who succeeds.¹⁴

Eight on the list – sexuality can be expressed in any way you choose. In 2006 Ariel Levy wrote the book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the rise of raunch culture*. In this book she argued that women are now exploiting themselves — essentially becoming female chauvinists. Whereas, thirty years ago, women were burning their bras and demonstrating against the exploitation of women through Playboy, now young girls are dressing like Playboy bunnies, getting breast implants, taking part in sexually-explicit reality TV shows and claiming they are exercising their girl-power. Sex and the City characters are lauded as Third Wave icons. Eight-year-old girls mimic the sexualised actions of Britney Spears and Miley Cyrus and demand a ‘bra’ while shopping. While Levy condemns these developments as a continuation of the exploitation of women, young women regard this as merely exercising their right to express their sexuality.¹⁵ One critic of Third Wave noted that *individual* sexual empowerment does not lead to social change but rather simply promotes the sexualisation of women.

The ninth marker – The world is the arena. Third Wavers live in a global village and they condemn the Second Wave as being too little interested in the plight of the non-western, non-white, non-middleclass woman. Social activism on behalf of poor women is a hallmark of Third Wave feminism.

Lastly a marker of the third wave is consumerism and pop culture as a source of identity. High individualism has resulted in young women claiming the right to establish their own identity, independent of societal norms of gender. They seek to establish their own identity through pop-culture and increasingly through online social networks. *Finding yourself* is the catchcry. Finding yourself often takes place via overseas travel, the collection of experiences, choice of music, adoption of celebrity role-models. Once ‘found’, your identity can morph or change according to time, place and audience. One critique of Third Wave feminism is that exploring and establishing a personal identity is a privilege of a few rather than a universal concern. The woman who is concerned about feeding her children or surviving domestic abuse is unlikely to be concerned with ‘finding herself’

So these are the ten markers of the Third Wave playing out in secular society.

But surely none of the above has anything to do with a conference for Christians for Biblical Equality? It might be interesting to learn about the secular culture but young Christian women are not going to be influenced by the Third Wave. Young Christian women (and even older Christian women) are, of

course, basing their worldview, their identity and their expectations upon Scripture alone!

It is impossible to make assertions about all Christian young women because each person and each context varies. However, we would be extremely naive to assert that Christians are immune from the culture that surrounds them. The sociology of religion suggests that the location of a Christian group with respect to secular culture will be a determining factor in the influence that culture plays upon the belief and practise of that group.

Thus, we mostly likely have a spectrum of Christian young women ranging from those who are heavily influenced by Third Wave feminist thought to those who are relatively little influenced.

I invite you to think of your Christian daughters, nieces and other young females. Can you see some of the factors I have just outlined present in their lives? Permit me to make some observations.

I meet young Christian women all the time who express quite intense individualism. They tell me that they have a call on their life to ministry and expect to have no issues with fulfilling that call. The church was there to empower them and ensure their aspirations were met. When I was running a course on Women in Ministry at a training college, I was often told by young students that they had no need of study in that area because times had changed and the church would completely accept them for who they were and the gifts they had. In fact, some expressed irritation at a course that would speak about biblical gender equality because *clearly* this was only a continuing issue in 3rd world settings. During my research, many young women displayed a thinly veiled contempt for the, in their words, 'pushy', 'strident' women who had been the first to agitate for and gain admittance to leadership positions in the church.

Many Christian young women are seeking the same kinds of relationships as their secular sisters. They expect that marriage will be a coming together of equals who will share domestic duties and child-raising on an equal basis. Their husband will be a perfect soulmate who will enable them to attain their full potential as women and allow them to pursue whatever choices they make. These choices can include pursuing motherhood and a career, being a stay-at-home mother and not having children at all. Many, also, are prepared to make a compromise on their Christian values in order to form and keep a relationship. Many young women see nothing wrong with sleeping with men using the rationale that God gave me a sex-drive, he would not want me to deny that, and living with their partner before marriage rationalising – it's OK because we are committed before God. And, unfortunately, some young Christian women are viewing married men as potential partners.

Acceptance of the differences between people is a basic tenet for these women. They acknowledge and embrace the differences between men and women and are keen to embrace their own expression of femininity. They want to work together with men and to contribute equally in mixed teams. For many, there is a strong cognitive dissonance when it comes to homosexuality and for some this has resulted in acceptance of homosexuality as a legitimate, God-ordained lifestyle or at least a questioning of the current evangelical stance.

Perhaps as a reaction to their observance of the lives of their mothers, some have expressed a desire for a simpler lifestyle based around community, family and respect for the environment. I cannot resist noting however they are often as consumeristic and materialistic as the rest of their generation.

That this group of young women is embrative of social justice cannot be denied. As one Christian

young woman wrote, “Most of us didn’t need to be convinced that justice matters. We can’t recall having an “Ah ha!” moment like Rick Warren did when God’s concern for the poor suddenly jumped out at him from the pages of Scripture. Justice is native to our understanding of God and the world.”¹⁶

Interestingly, this commentator placed the reason for this awareness not as a result of Scriptural revelation but rather as a result of being what she calls “the Jumbo Jet Generation”. This is the generation that has travelled extensively and viewed the poor firsthand. She claims “the rapid globalization of culture that has marked the four decades since the 747’s first flight helps explain why global justice is dominating the conversation among my generation in the church”.¹⁷

Finally, permit me a brief comment on the sexualisation of women. Occasionally, I have had the dubious distinction of being the one who has had to tell a young woman that she needs to be more modest in her dress. I would like a dollar for every-time I have heard in response “I can dress however I like. If men have a problem with that it is their issue”.

Thank you for sticking with me on this journey through the 21st young woman’s culture. I think you will agree it indicates a dramatic change from the society and culture most of us over the age of 40 grew up in. If you are still unconvinced, read some of the books, magazines and blogs young Christian women are reading and writing and make your own assessment.

But mere knowledge is not enough! It is not enough to simply stand on the shore and observe the wave, noting its characteristics and its effect on the shoreline and the shape of the environment. We have a surfboard in hand “how are we going to respond?

Firstly, I want to suggest ways in which the Western Church has responded and then I want to make some suggestions on the kind of responses CBE should be making. To speak of “The Church” is, of course, impossible as there are so many expressions of the church in the Western world “each located at a different distance from the secular culture. So these observations are made with a clear eye on the Australian church scene and with some influence from what I understand from the US scene.

My first observation is that some sections of the church have embraced some different Third Wave norms. Intriguingly this is being played out in two quite opposing church camps. One group that has embraced aspects of the Third Wave culture is that of many of the larger, more vibrant Pentecostal and charismatic churches that have a higher than normal percentage of young female attendees. Women are encouraged to find their own individual calling and to become empowered to achieve personal fulfilment. Identity is sometimes linked to cultural norms of beauty. Gender differences are embraced and women are depicted as princesses, god-chicks and powerful people who can make a difference. At the other end, but still embracing some *different* Third Wave norms are the Mark Driscoll-type churches. Full of young people, these churches strongly embrace gender-differences. They have tapped into the desire for a simpler lifestyle, one that revolves around relationships, particularly family. They have also tapped into some of the backlash against the Second Wave that is so-often expressed by Third Wavers. However, this all comes at a cost because individualism and choice are muted for women.

My second observation is that the rest of the church is still trying to catch up. I would contend that the majority of the church has an almost complete lack of comprehension regarding current cultural norms. Many are still grappling with the results of the Second Wave of feminism and how that outworks in the

church let alone trying to contend with a new wave. In the Australian context the church is facing some stark realities.

Firstly, the church is rapidly declining in Australia and in particular the under-30's generation is missing from the pews. Secondly, every Christian organisation and church wants to know how to connect and attract Gen Y but few are having lasting success. Third, power and position still resides in the hands of the baby boomers and discussions regarding future trends take place there. In addition, despite over 20 years of women in leadership in the church, the number of women senior leaders remain paltry – a mere 4-5% in most denominations. Fifthly, as the church population shrinks, competition for leadership roles will increase, inevitably favouring males and therefore decreasing the numbers of women. Sixthly, the church has not made much progress in shifting from an entrenched male-culture, indeed use of inclusive-language bible translations is appalling low. Seventh, the church has been very slow in adopting family-friendly practices that would encourage young mothers to stay in ministry positions. And finally, there is an astonishing bible-illiteracy in churches. Statistics show less than 10% of church-going Christians read their Bible daily and only 15% at least once a week in Australia.

In addition to these realities, the Christian community must recognise the ways in which Christian young women under 30 have responded. Those who are in ministry are sometimes unsettled when they discover their personal dreams and desires may not be fulfilled in the manner they anticipated. These same women often struggle with the male-culture of the church. Their voice is not always heard and personal empowerment is not always possible. Some young women have decided not to enter leadership within the church because they are convinced it will result in them simply working to make the males in the organisation look good. Along with many others of their generation they have left the institutional church and are seeking ways to express their gifts in other settings. Young women are looking for teaching and help from the church in how to juggle motherhood and career. They are seeking role models of those who have successfully navigated this path. And, in the confusion of too many choices and the uncertainty in our society, some have chosen the clearly-defined gender roles, the minimising of choices and the safety of a sector of the church.

And so we come to the last part of our journey. We stand on the shore, surfboard in hand. We understand the nature of the wave, we have seen its impact, we recognise young women already trying to stay upright as they surf the wave and we have a decision to make. Is it too dangerous, too scary, too costly for us to get into the water and join the surfers? Will they miss us if we don't join in? Have we got any surfing skills to offer those young women who look as if they are about to go under? We learned to surf riding different waves – can we surf this one too?

CBE was born during the second-wave but its basis has always been rooted in biblically-based arguments formulated in the first-wave of feminism. The Second Wave acted as a trigger to reignite the discussion with CBE providing invaluable input. We are now facing the Third Wave with its peculiar philosophies and positions.

With this in mind can I offer the following reflections? The wave may look scary but it's not all bad. We should not be afraid of Third Wave understandings because not all are antithetical to Christianity. In fact, some are more aligned to CBE values than those of the Second Wave! I am sure many of you have been undertaking a theological reflection as I have shared this material. Even a cursory theological reflection is helpful in formulating a response. Here are some brief thoughts.

Women, along with all people, must find their own unique identity – however, this identity is found in

Jesus Christ rather than society or pop culture. Empowerment is necessary to live this life, – however, rather than coming from within self and through self-actualisation, it comes through the resident Holy Spirit. Individualism encourages us to find our unique giftings, personality and calling – however, there is also the need for dwelling and participation in the Christian community where, and through whom; God is able to form and transform us into the image of Christ. Exercise of choice can be God-inspired and result in activities and ministries that are innovative and exciting – however, the Christian life does not allow unfettered choice that may lead to personal and communal harm.

The desire for women to work together with men and vice versa is what this conference is all about – however this teamwork is on the basis of mutual submission rather than the exercise of power and authority. Seeking to have it all and to reach maximum potential in life and ministry can enrich the body of Christ – however, it must be tempered with mutual submission and a sober judgment of ourselves. The pursuit of relationships is central to the teachings of Jesus and a refreshing antidote to our work-driven culture – however, these relationships must have a firm foundation in God's word and expressions of mutual submission. Expression of sexuality is a healthy correction to the 'veil of silence' too long drawn by the church – however, sexuality as a gift from God must be conformed to biblical values and practices. Concern for social justice, the environment, the poor is at the heart of the Christian gospel – however, its basis must be revelation of Scripture rather than a faddish experience-based rationale.

In all of these areas, CBE has an important role to play. The need for teaching on biblical equality is as strong as ever. We know that one of the key factors in the formation of women in leadership is a conviction that this is biblically mandated. There is no substitute or short cut – women must grapple with the Scriptures and come to their own understanding.

However, as this brief survey has shown, the issues and questions facing Christian young women today are in some ways different from twenty years ago. Hear me, I am not saying that the Bible message has changed. What I am saying is that the message that needs to be communicated has to answer the questions being asked now. CBE is uniquely placed to offer biblical teaching on many of the areas that these young women are grappling with. CBE can offer an answer to the need for identity from the standpoint of biblical equality. Likewise, healthy empowerment, appropriate expression of individualism, relationships and ministries built on mutual submission, social gospel actioned through the understanding of the dignity and equality of all human beings, choice and sexuality bringing glory to God – all are the province of CBE.

I often hear from young people that "equality is no longer an issue". Perhaps, we can simply reframe the message and ride the wave with them rather than wait on the shore peering to the ocean, hoping that one day they will come back to us.

My challenge to CBE is – let's grab the surfboard, plunge into the water and ride the wave together! There are plenty of young women and men out there who are just waiting for us to join them, teach them and guide them safely to shore.

Endnotes

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