

PREACHING TO WOMEN

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In the light of the special characteristics and spiritual journey of women, I would offer the following advice on speaking to female audiences. I apologize that I use the all-encompassing word, "women," to refer to what, at most, would be the majority of women. I know that the following guidelines would not apply to every woman or even every female audience.

1. Use Inclusive Language where Possible

While church women are used to hearing and translating from male-oriented language, most women in our society are not. Inclusive language has been well accepted by almost everyone and is demanded in most settings (including the education system). When I read books on leadership that exclusively use male pronouns for leaders, it grates on me and seems incredibly old-fashioned. So, where possible, use inclusive language if you don't want to alienate many women.

2. Let the Listeners into Your Life

This is probably true of all contemporary preaching, but it is particularly true for preaching to women. Men may be impressed by the achievements and abilities of the preacher, but women want to know that the preacher understands their life. They want to develop a relationship with the preacher based on knowledge and trust. Rapport is essential. So be open about your feelings and honest about your issues.

3. Use an Inductive Style

Many women are probably more interested in the process of dealing with issues than they are with the final solutions. They are more interested in the journey than the end result. They want to be involved in working through the questions. The inductive sermon facilitates this involvement.

4. Take Time to Tell Stories and Paint Pictures

Many women love stories. While men will often be looking for the punchline of the story, women enjoy the telling. Stories about families and relationships and ordinary life are particularly popular and form the basis of "communion." Jesus not only told stories about kings and judgment, but also about rebellious children and finding lost coins and mixing up the dough. Pictures are also important for women. They like to see things, not just hear about them. A well-constructed verbal picture can communicate far more than concrete propositions.

5. Talk about Relationships

Women usually prefer people to things. Their attachments are to relationships not objects. They are far more involved in deep relationships than men because they like the closeness and security. So, effective communication will require extensive application of God's word to relationships. Of course, God has much to say about

relationships.

6. Emphasis Community

Women prefer to be interdependent. They enjoy the strength and support that comes from close relationships. Community success through the development of relationships is very important to women. So challenges that emphasize individual achievement or strong competition may not find a ready response. The same is true for illustrations. Avoid illustrations that depict someone winning at the expense of others (e.g. some football and warfare stories). Use illustrations that show that individual success can translate into community success.

7. Don't be so Concerned about Rigorous Logic

Many women know the best solution intuitively (by insight), although they may not be able to defend or explain it. They think systemically and don't try to separate the people from principles. This means that rational argument may not be the best way to prove your point. A female audience may gain more from thoughtful ideas, pithy sayings and insightful stories than a seven-point, logical solution. This sounds a lot like the teaching of Jesus to me.

8. Show How the Theory Translates into Practice

Give lots and lots of illustrations of how theory translates into practice. Women want to know the practicalities of following Jesus.

9. Be Gentle

Generally female preachers do this naturally, but male preachers can tend to be assertive and dominating. This is not necessarily wrong as the preacher submitting to the Scripture does have spiritual authority. Jesus was very assertive at times. But women who have been abused in some way by a dominating male (and there are many) will switch off if the preacher shouts or in other ways exhibits assertive behavior. It seems to me that Jesus was particularly gentle in dealing with women, and preachers need to be too.

10. Remember that most women have already Experienced or are Experiencing the Downward Journey

On the positive side, this means that women are open to letting others influence and change them and therefore open to growth. They tend to be dependent on God and committed to relationships. On the negative side, this means that they are more ready to unnecessarily doubt themselves, more vulnerable and open to hurt, and more co-dependent on others. While this downward journey provides an advantage in terms of spirituality (the self-emptying of Jesus), coming so early it produces difficulties in self-worth, autonomy, boundaries and identity. So, in general, preachers to women don't need to focus on issues like pride and rebellion, but more on God's grace and His heart for the vulnerable. Women need to know that they are loved and accepted by God despite their brokenness (or because of it). I'm not saying that these are the only issues that preachers can tackle, but remember that Jesus' approach to the woman caught in adultery was much different from his

approach to the self-righteous Pharisees. I think that this point is particularly applicable to male preachers who may be on the opposite spiritual journey.

I'm sure you can think of other principles now that I've got you started. If you are a male, preaching regularly to female audiences, I would suggest that you ask for feedback from women on how you are communicating and listen to female speakers as much as you can. Of course, females usually communicate more effectively with women than males, so we need to encourage the development of female preachers.