

2015/4: Musings On Elisabeth Elliot

by BS Poh

I wrote a tribute to the late Elisabeth Elliot when she passed away on 15 June 2015, at the age of 88.¹ I noted that her name was spelled with an “s” in “Elisabeth”, and not with a “z” as in “Queen Elizabeth”. In the process of writing, I selectively browsed through the tributes and obituaries that were appearing on the internet. I noted down some of these because of the thoughts they were triggering in me, which I knew would need time to ruminate on. By this time, many more tributes would have appeared on the internet, of which I am unable to peruse due to limitation of time. Here, I am putting down some observations of the pieces that caught my attention.

Her theology

Elisabeth Elliot (EE) is said to be a follower of CS Lewis, a writer who is supposed to have downgraded the importance of theology by adopting Platonism.² I am aware that EE has quoted Lewis on the subject of suffering and femininity.³ That is to be expected from a voracious reader like EE, since Lewis was well-known for these subjects, which he tackled head-on. Lewis was not only well-known for his children’s series “The Chronicles of Narnia”, but also for his writings on pain and suffering, which EE would have identified with.⁴ It needs to be noted that Lewis was a humanities scholar. He was never a minister of the gospel. Useful as his writings might be, there would be limitations to his theology.

EE was raised up in a home in which books abounded, notable among which were those by Matthew Henry, CH Spurgeon, and Jonathan Edwards.⁵ Her purist father was instrumental in inculcating in her a love of, and a precision in, the English language. She trained in Wheaton College, Illinois, in the formative years of age 17 to 21. Wheaton was a conservative evangelical college in which gender roles were observed and missions was emphasized. Elisabeth grew up in a Reformed Episcopal church. After Wheaton, she joined a Plymouth Brethren church. Her first husband, Jim Elliot was a staunch Plymouth Brethren. Both of them were sent forth into the mission field by the church. EE’s writings and teaching show that she was a conservative evangelical.

Women’s role

EE was unashamedly conservative, asserting the complementary role of women to men. There are women who admire her but insist on the egalitarian/mutuality role of women instead.⁶ One writer claimed that it was hearing EE “preach” in a chapel meeting at Wheaton College that turned her to the egalitarianism view.⁷ The writer saw no difference between a Lord’s day worship service and the special missions meeting that EE spoke at. She chaffed at the replacement of the large wooden pulpit with the small music stand, regardless of how incidental that was. She questioned why the exception was made for EE, but not to other women, “to preach” although “Ms. Elliot was—perhaps—telling more stories than the average preacher who came our way in a school known for expository Bible teaching.” She opined, “I saw a glaring hypocrisy. Because she was clearly being given an opportunity I’d never be given. And what made it so?”

There are many - very many - women, who hold to EE's Complementarian view. (As far as I know, EE did not use this term to describe her own view. She just taught what she believed to be the Bible's teaching.) One such woman wrote,⁸

"It would be a mistake to look at Elisabeth and only see a bigger-than-life person and think, *This is somebody in another stratosphere*. We forget that the impact of her life flowed out of ordinary choices, day after day, to get to know God, to cry out to Him for grace, to do the next thing—that the big picture of Elisabeth's life was a sum total of saying again and again, "Yes, Lord."

"While I rejoice that Elisabeth is with her Savior, she leaves behind a great void. Not long ago I said to a friend, "As these older servants of Christ pass from the scene, the responsibility is falling on us to lead the next generation in the pathway of faithfulness and truth." Now that she is gone, I feel a stronger than ever call to proclaim the ways and heart of Christ to those who may not be familiar with Elisabeth Elliot, but who need to know and love and trust and serve Him as she did."

Heeding admonition

I am one among many people who have been troubled by John Piper's teaching on "Christian Hedonism", a term coined by him in his 1986 book "Desiring God". The term itself is misleading, and the theology questionable. We fear it has fostered an ethos in his followers that may be described as brazenness that borders on worldly cockiness. A critique of John Piper's teaching will have to await a separate article. Here, we note how John Piper has responded to the death of EE. In the tribute on EE, John Piper wrote:⁹

"At 6:15 this morning, Elisabeth Elliot died. It is a blunt sentence for a blunt woman. This is near the top of why I felt such an affection and admiration for her.

Blunt — not ungracious, not impetuous, not snappy or gruff. But direct, unsentimental, no-nonsense, tell-it-like-it-is, no whining allowed. Just pull your britches on and go die for Jesus — like Mary Slessor and Gladys Aylward and Amy Carmichael and Gertrude Ras Egede and Eleanor Macomber and Lottie Moon and Roslind Goforth and Malla Moe, to name a few whom she admired."

Piper continued,

"Now it's time to reveal a little secret. For seventeen years, I have from time to time spoken of a certain woman on a panel with me about the topic of world missions. This woman had heard me speak on Christian Hedonism. So on the panel she said, "I don't think you should say, 'Pursue joy with all your might.' I think you should say, 'Pursue obedience with all your might.'" To this I responded, "But that's like saying, 'Don't pursue peaches with all your might, pursue fruit.'"

Well, that was Elisabeth Elliot and the panel was at Caister (the EFIC summer gathering) on the east coast of England. She was allergic to anything that smacked of mushy, mawkish, sentimentalistic emotionalism. Amen, Elisabeth! O how I loved sparring with someone I could not have felt more in tune with."

A mother of Israel had spoken. Piper should have heeded. He would have benefited from her admonition. But no, he chose instead to give his incongruous reply. Piper's jauntiness continues to his last take on EE. He writes:

“Finally, I loved her because she never got her teeth fixed. I would still love her if she had gotten a dental makeover to pull her two front teeth together. But she didn't. Am I ending on a silly note? You judge.

She was captured by Christ. She was not her own. She was supremely mastered, not by any ordinary man, but by the King of the universe. He had told her, Do not let your adorning be external — the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear — but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious . . . and do not fear anything that is frightening. ([1 Peter 3:3–6](#))

Whether it was the spears of the Ecuadorian jungle or the standards of American glamor, she would not be cowed. “Do not fear anything that is frightening.” That is the mark of a daughter of Abraham. And in our culture one of the most frightening things women face is not having the right figure, the right hair, the right clothes — or the right teeth. Elisabeth Elliot was free from that bondage.”

I have quoted Piper with some degree of fullness in order not to misrepresent him. Many of us know that there is a gap between EE's upper incisors. Whether the reference to EE's teeth is in good taste, the reader must judge. I winced and shuddered.

Aunty Betty

On a happier note, we find Steve Saint referring to EE as “Aunty Betty”.¹⁰ In an age when children call parents - and even grandparents - by their first names, it is heartening to find an adult referring to EE as “Aunty”. There is no blood tie between Steve Saint and EE. Steve's father, Nate Saint, was among the five men speared to death by the Huaorani people of Ecuador in 1956. (There are indications that Steve Saint is associated with the Church Growth movement, which I do not endorse.¹¹) It is understandable that the MK (missionary kid) in Steve should refer to EE as “Aunty Betty”. He wrote, “Aunt Betty died early this morning.” He continued,

“Besides being a wonderful writer and speaker. Elisabeth (I can hardly call her that because she was also a very dear “aunt”) was a wonderful mother to her one daughter Valerie, and involved, doting and challenging grandmother to Valerie and Walt's eight children.”

We have taught our children to refer to those of the older generation as “Uncle” or “Aunty”. This is consistent with eastern culture, and in accordance to the Bible (Exod. 20:12; Prov. 16:31). Our sons have been known to say to older people in the west, “My parents will kill me if I call you by your first name.” EE's death brought out in Steve Saint's tribute the truth that this is not a matter of eastern or western culture, for “There is neither Jew nor Greek...for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

May the memory of EE live on in the new generations ahead.

Notes and References:

1. “Tribute to Elisabeth Elliot (1926-2015)” by BS Poh, http://www.ghmag.net/index.php?p=1_285_Reformed-Baptist-1689.
2. “Van Til Made Me Reformed” by Eric H Sigward: http://www.opc.org/new_horizons/NH04/10b.html.
3. See, for example, “The Essence of Femininity” in Crossway, <https://www.crossway.org/blog/2015/06/the-essence-of-femininity/> and “An Interview with Elisabeth Elliot” by Sharon J Anderson, <http://www.sharonjanderson.com/articles/elliott.html>.
4. CS Lewis’s books “The Problem of Pain” and “A Grief” have helped many. Whilst a new believer, I was challenged by his book of apologetics, “Mere Christianity”. I was to pass a copy of the book to the then Opposition Leader of Parliament when he was imprisoned under the infamous police operation, code-named “Operation Lalang (a tough weed)”. His comment on the book was, “It is very challenging.”
5. Transcript of audio file in Wheaton College, <http://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/trans/278t02.htm>.
6. *Complementarianism* holds that men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities in marriage, family life, religious leadership, and other spheres of life. *Egalitarianism* claims that redemption in Christ (Gal. 3:28) eradicates any false and sinful distinctions into classes and hierarchy between men and women.
7. A Woman’s Freedom in Christ, <http://www.awomansfreedominchrist.com/elisabeth-elliott-cant-use-a-pulpit-to-preach-but-she-can-share-from-the-music-stand/>.
8. “She Trusted and She Obeyed”, Nancy Leigh DeMoss, in True Woman, <http://www.truewoman.com/?id=3205>.
9. John Piper: Peaches in Paradise, Why I loved Elisabeth Elliot, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/peaches-in-paradise>.
10. “A Good-bye to Aunt Betty (Elisabeth Elliot)” by Steve Saint, in Barbwire: <http://barbwire.com/2015/06/17/1000-steve-saint-a-good-bye-to-aunt-betty-elisabeth-elliott/>.
11. For a critique, see “Faulty Premises of the Church Growth Movement” by Bob DeWaay, in Critical Issues Commentary, <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue89.htm>.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~