

Emerging or submerging?

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At the historic 1965 Selma to Montgomery march, Martin Luther King Jnr.'s refrain, in his final speech to the thousands gathered before the onlooking hatred of Ku Klux Klansmen, was 'We are on the move...we are on the move...we are on the move. God is with us and He will lead his children to the land of freedom. Glory hallelujah, Glory hallelujah, Glory hallelujah!' Stirring stuff!

This image of God's people on the move struck me with ironic judgement as I sat in our Mainstream North Theology Day a few weeks ago listening to three excellent but troubling presentations under the theme of 'The Glass Ceiling'. We were considering why, having been one of the first denominations to recognise the leadership ministry of women as church ministers, are we now left far behind other Johnny-come-lately denominations, with only about 7% of our accredited list of ministers being women? Is there something wrong, profoundly wrong with our culture, theology and biblical interpretation that permits such a state of affairs to prevail virtually unquestioned amongst us?

The silence of the majority of Baptist pastors on this issue I find ominous and troubling. The lack of interest and concern on the matter I find bewildering and offensive. The smaller turnout for this Theology Day than we have for others I find worrying and if I'm honest sickening, not merely disappointing. It leads me to the conclusion that there is something wrong with our culture, theology and biblical interpretation... profoundly wrong – and it's at the level of the grassroots.

I sat in another meeting of all-male Baptist ministers a couple of weeks later, and when in passing I mentioned my concern, there was no sympathetic shock at the state of affairs, but only it seemed a fixed conviction that the Bible settled the issue for us and that women couldn't be considered for such an elevated office – that's me being ironic by the way! Something inside me twisted but I weakly muttered that this was not the time to open up such a large subject because of time factors, but we needed to challenge such points of view.

I'm coming to the conclusion that unlike Paul, who at his best understood his gospel demanded a reconfiguration of gender relations, generally speaking we see the issue as a second or even third order matter. The real business is mission, evangelism and our busy church programmes. And so we go on blindly walking in the other direction from where our culture is headed into a cul-de-sac of irrelevance in the perceptions of that society. They wouldn't consider that we had anything to offer because our attitude and practice appears reactionary that we have long-since forfeited any credibility of having something worth listening to. What's most worrying is that we use our Bibles to provide reassurance that we are justified in our lack of interest in the subject.

Back to Montgomery. Then there was a similar response by some church authorities as priests and other religious orders were told to get out of Montgomery and not stand with the trouble-makers led by Luther King. Then a Baptist led the way. History and our Bible tell us he was on the right side. Today it appears we re-enter the guards van of society rather than being in the vanguard. We forfeit our role as witnesses to the truth and hope of God's Kingdom order that is coming to meet us.

So worrying questions nag away at me. Are Baptists really 'on the move' at the grassroots, even accounting for the valiant efforts of many of our leaders? When will our pastors and ministers rise up to teach a fuller and more adequate gospel, and our churches reflect such truth? And is our attitude on this issue of women and ministry symptomatic of a much wider set of issues that blunt the cutting-edge credibility of our gospel? For all our talk of emerging church, is the mainstream of our denomination still submerged beneath an inherently conservative and inadequate interpretation of Scripture? Does Mainstream have a role of leadership given its stated desire to have 'a prophetic voice within the Baptist community'? Or is this just words?