

Voices: Why aren't women pastoring Baptist churches?

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I was in my early twenties before I ever witnessed a female have an active role in a worship service.

A college friend and I spent the weekend with another friend in another town, and we attended church together on Sunday morning. The order of service was basically identical to the one I had grown up in, even if the liturgy seemed a bit more formal than my East Texas background had exposed me to.

But this particular church, unlike most I had known, had a variation on the offering and offertory prayer in which the prayer was prayed by the song leader as the ushers came quietly to the front of the sanctuary, rather than one of the ushers saying the prayer after walking up as a group.

The effect was that if you were a good Christian with head bowed and eyes closed during the prayer, you couldn't see who the ushers were on that morning until the "Amen" was uttered.

Luke, the friend we were visiting, sat in between Scott and me, enhancing the comedic value of this story. After the "Amen" came, the scene went down like this:

We all looked up.

About two seconds passed between looking up and assessing that a couple of the ushers that day were female. (It should be noted that there was no indication either in the bulletin or announced in the service that it was a special WMU or GA Day.)

Luke continued to look forward, as he had likely done every Sunday before.

Scott and I, having grown up in similar East Texas churches, dropped our jaws, slowly leaned forward and pivoted our heads toward each other, leaving Luke (who knew us well enough to know what was going on) laughing hysterically throughout the rest of the service.

All that because of a female usher.

Decades without change

Not long after, the same church would make news for being the first Southern Baptist Church in Texas to call a woman as the lead pastor, setting off one of the many skirmishes that culminated in schisms that you, if you are reading this publication, likely are well aware of.

I would eventually, over the course several years, evolve from being shocked at seeing a female usher in a worship service to being uncomfortable if all the leaders on a Sunday morning were men.

I graduated from being a fierce supporter of “women in ministry” to being someone who was careful to say “women in lead pastor roles” when having the conversation about gender and ministry because even many of our estranged Southern Baptist brothers and sisters agree that the sisters can take part in some kinds of ministry. The seminary I attended and graduated from has always been a strong advocate for female preachers, graduating some of the very best.

Yet almost twenty years after that eye-opening experience of mine, and almost that long since one group of Baptists broke away from another group of Baptists over the rights of churches to appoint women as lead pastors, (not to mention the refusal of seminary professors and denominational leaders to sign a document relegating women to

subservient roles,) none of us are significantly more likely to walk into a Baptist church in Texas led by a female now than we were back then.

We are doing ourselves a grave disservice if we aren't asking ourselves why this is the case, and what was the point of our split if the leadership of our churches looks essentially the same as those we split from?

And if we aren't living into the reasons for our existence, do we owe those we split from an apology for not acting on what we said we believed twenty years ago?

I understand and empathize with the tendency of moderates to want to move slowly, even if I want to slip a copy of MLK's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" into the pages of their Bible where Acts 2:17 is located. ("Your sons and daughters will prophesy.")

But c'mon. *Twenty* years?

Past Time

A couple of weeks ago I had the privilege of attending the opening worship service of the "Nevertheless, She Preached" conference just a couple of miles down the road from where my jaw dropped at seeing my first female usher.

The service, led by an (almost) all female worship team, along with women preachers, prayers and Scripture readers, was one of the most evangelical, *good-news*-filled worship experiences I have experienced in years. The experience revealed to me that it isn't just our women who are being hurt by our churches' refusal to call them to preach, it is the big "C" Church that is losing.

If they were both, male *and* female, created in the image of God, then it only makes sense that we are being deprived of knowing God more fully if

we aren't sitting under the teaching and leadership of women who have answered the call of God on their lives to preach and to lead.

As someone who is holding on to his Baptist identity despite all the reasons not to, I pray it is not too late.

In the years between declaring that we theoretically believe women can preach and lead congregations and now, I have watched many of our greatest potential leaders knock on doors of churches, making themselves available to preach and lead, only to be told that it isn't "quite time."

In addition to this, on a denominational level, we have cast votes and passed resolutions that make it less likely that our most gifted female preachers will want to remain in the fold. The result is that some of the greatest female preachers who have graduated from "moderate" Baptist seminaries are now preaching, if they have remained in Texas, in UCC and Disciples of Christ congregations.

It's not time for our most prominent Texas Baptist churches to invite women into their pulpits on Sunday mornings.

It's past time.

It's not time for our denominational and seminary leaders to lean heavily on search committees to invite (and give preference to) female candidates for ministry positions.

It's past time.

It's past time for our young men to hear the word of God, the good news of Jesus Christ, preached with power and tenderness from the mouths of the daughters of God. *In* pulpits. *On* Sunday morning.

It's past time, but it's not too late.

Be courageous, churches. The Spirit that is within you is greater than the spirit that is in the world.

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