

On being a ‘Progressive’

While I rarely tune in to OWL (‘Ordination We’re Listening’), I’m indebted to friends who fill me in on the latest postings. Thanks to them, I’m aware that a recent attack on the LCA’s position on Scripture and women’s ordination has described its adherents, in psychological terms, as a group dominated by fear. We cannot move forward and accept major changes to the church’s teaching and practice because we have insufficient faith.

This is an old psychological tactic, now given a re-run on OWL. I first heard it expounded in the 1980s, at a meal-table conversation in our home at the highlands seminary in Mt Hagen. A dinner guest, in advocating women’s ordination, advised us, ‘Go forward in faith; don’t hold back in fear!’

Our guest’s advice is a close parallel to the Lord’s words to Moses when the terrified Israelites hesitated to march ahead and entrust themselves to the waters of the Red Sea: ‘Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward.’ (Exodus 14:15) But there is a major difference between the case of the Israelites then and our situation today when ‘progressives’ challenge us to venture forward in faith: whereas the Israelites had a command from the Lord through Moses, we are urged to march ahead in defiance of the Lord’s clear command (1 Cor 14:33b-38).

That said, we could also counter-charge that advocates of critical approaches to the Bible and its various manifestations, including women’s ordination, are impelled by fears of their own. ‘What will the world think of us if we don’t ordain women?’ This very question was posed recently by a pastor, a passionate advocate for women’s ordination, when he ran into strong objections during a discussion on the issue. His question says it all.

Progressives fear that if we don’t accommodate emerging trends in our society and culture, regardless of whether these are at odds with the Word of God, this will hamper our ministry and mission. According to Pastor Jonathan Fisk, progressives (wittingly or unwittingly) follow to various degrees the lead of the American philosopher, Herbert Marcuse:

‘Giving the hippies the motto “Make love, not war,” Marcuse undermined foundational assumptions of traditional values, particularly regarding sexuality. He also dismantled the word tolerance, redefining it as “the intolerance of traditional values and the promotion of progressive ones.”’ (*The Lutheran Witness*, March 2015). This last sentence neatly summarises the attitude of Christian progressives in our world today. Instead of being true pastors, evangelists and *Seelsorger* (carers of souls), pastors are urged to be ‘agents of change.’ And so we hear constant calls for change, for tolerance and inclusiveness, coupled with the decrying of anything that smacks of ‘tradition’.

The apostle Paul also applauds progress. But he has in mind a different kind of Christian progress from the form advocated by the agents of change and a social gospel. From his prison cell he writes to the saints in Philippi: ‘I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance (*eis prokopēn* – for the progress of) the Gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ’ (Phil 1:12,13). Paul is convinced that he will be released and stay with the Philippians ‘for (their) progress and joy in the faith’ (1:25). He also urges the young pastor, Timothy: ‘Set ‘the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity,’ and ‘devote yourself to ... Scripture,’ exercising the spiritual gift you have been given, ‘so that all may see your progress.’ (1 Tim 4:15)

The more we depart from the way laid out by St Paul, the more the other, all-too-popular way of being a ‘progressive’ engenders negative, cynical attitudes to scripture and the promotion of ‘doubt’ – as if doubt were a virtue. This is a world apart from the blessed assurance, the confidence, the progress and joy in the faith that is offered to us in the apostles’ teaching. We make real progress as Christians – and the whole church progresses – when we devote ourselves to ‘the old, old story of Jesus and his love,’ and to the Holy Scriptures that convey that precious gospel to us and the world.

Rev Dr Greg Lockwood