

Women Pastors, Women Preachers, and the Looming Test of the Southern Baptist Convention

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"Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea." That was the message the prophet Elijah heard from his servant. Then, "And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain."

That's the way issues often arise. At first, there is only a small cloud. Soon thereafter, here comes the downpour. Well, here it comes.

The issue of women serving as pastors and preachers in churches roiled the Southern Baptist Convention from the 1970s until the Conservative Resurgence in the Convention clarified the question conclusively in the Baptist Faith & Message revision of 2000. There never was a moment when more than a handful of women served as pastors of SBC churches, but the mainline Protestant denominations were rushing headlong into the ordination of women as pastors and (Episcopal) priests, driven by two major energies – first, the demands of second wave feminism and, second, the impulses unleashed by liberation theology. In both cases, the main obstacle was the Bible, but, already compromised by theological liberalism, these denominations deployed revisionist arguments to defuse any argument from Scripture. The strategies of biblical subversion also took two basic forms. The argument was proffered that either the Bible was misread by Christians for nearly 2,000 years or the Bible is just hopelessly mired in patriarchy and oppression and the biblical authors were flat wrong.

Usually, the arguments went together. Comparing the Apostle Paul to the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale (a preacher of little

theology but much positive thinking), Sen. Adlai Stevenson famously quipped, "I find Saint Paul appealing and Saint Peale appalling." Well, the theological liberals and feminists found St. Paul appalling. The LGBTQ theorists are in full agreement.

The result has been the feminization of liberal Protestantism. Put bluntly, there are just not that many males left. Actually, there are not many *people* left in those churches. Liberal theology is the kiss of death for any church or denomination. Little remains but social justice activism and deferred maintenance.

Among leftward-leaning evangelicals, the arguments of the day were slightly more tame, but they arrived at the same conclusion — the church has been wrong in restricting the teaching office of the church to men. Women must be called and ordained and placed in pulpits and invested with full and equal recognition of teaching authority. The small but influential left wing of the Southern Baptist Convention was enthusiastic about advancing women as pastors back in the 1970s, and by the 1980s the establishment "moderates" in the SBC became theoretically committed to women as pastors. The moderates had a great deal to say about their support for women in the pastorate, but the vast majority of their churches were (and remain) adamantly certain that *their* pastor should be a man. Prior to the Conservative Resurgence, the seminaries were highly supportive of women studying for the pastorate, but relatively few churches were actually open to the idea.

In truth, the issue of women serving as pastors fueled the Conservative Resurgence in the SBC. The question was instantly clarifying. The divide over women serving in the pastorate served as a signal of the deeper divide over the authority and interpretation of the Bible. Simply put, the only way to affirm women serving in the pastoral role is to reject the authority and sufficiency of biblical texts such as 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2. There is more to the picture, but not less. Furthermore, the Christian church in virtually every tradition through nearly two millennia

in almost every place on earth has understood these texts clearly. In most churches around the world, there is no question about these texts even now. Furthermore, there is the testimony of God-given differences in the roles of men and women in the church and in the home throughout the Bible. The pattern of revealed truth is not hard to follow.

Southern Baptists codified the convictional issues as part of our confession of faith in the year 2000. The Baptist Faith & Message was revised to make clear that, "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture." Again, the statement is quite clear, and that statement is part of the confessional foundation that allows Southern Baptist churches to cooperate in mission and ministry. Every single seminary professor teaching in our six seminaries is obligated to that teaching, and had better be clear about it. The same is true for every missionary and worker with the International Mission Board and the North American Mission Board — and for every SBC convention work. The BF&M is the summary of Baptist beliefs that define what it means to be a cooperating Southern Baptist and a church "in friendly cooperation with" the Convention.

The Constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention includes this crucial statement: "The Convention will only deem a church to be in friendly cooperation with the Convention, and sympathetic with its purposes and work (i.e., a 'cooperating' church as that term is used in the Convention's governing documents) which (1) Has a faith and practice which closely identifies with the Convention's adopted statement of faith." There are two additional criteria listed, but the first criterion is agreement with the convictions of the Convention.

More recently, less than twenty years after that clear statement, some Southern Baptists have sought to distinguish between the office of pastor and the act of preaching, thus allowing women to preach to the congregation, but arguing that the role of "senior

pastor" is still reserved for men. A similar argument has advanced among some Presbyterians, who argue that a woman should be allowed to perform any act of ministry open to an unordained man. I honestly doubt that the argument works even for Presbyterians, but I will have to leave the Presbyterian argument to Presbyterians. In any event, the argument certainly does not work for Baptists for two glaring reasons. First, we have no theology of an ordained ministry. We have no theological basis for making ordination the determinative issue in anything. You will find no evidence of an ordination theology in any historic Baptist confession of faith. You will also find no reference to a "senior" pastor. A pastor is a pastor and "the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

The second reason is just as simple. In Baptist ecclesiology, office and function are precisely the same thing. Question: Who is your preacher? Answer: Whoever is doing the preaching. Baptists rightly resist any distinction between office and function, believing such a distinction to be foreign to the New Testament.

Even more recently, some churches have started designating (and even ordaining) women as pastors. In some cases, it is not certain what this means, and whether it invokes the teaching office. In other cases, it clearly *does* mean a woman in the teaching office. This past week, Saddleback Community Church in California ordained three women as pastors. In a development described by the church as "historic," the church posted a photograph of the ordinations with the text: "Saddleback Church Pastor Rick Warren and others pray over the first three women the church has ordained as pastors."

Given just that limited text, it would be difficult to know exactly what the church meant by the action, but it would certainly include the identification of the three women as pastors. Since each was already on the church ministry staff, the news would only make sense if the ordinations mean something quite significant.

The full picture comes into focus when one of the women, identified as Pastor Cynthia Petty, explained in an interview format that "this change in philosophy for 'women in ministry' was revolutionary." She continued: "I was honored and felt extremely humbled. And the thing I believe meant the most to me was how this would be groundbreaking for all the younger women ministers on staff who really did have the desire or dream to be a pastor one day!" Later in the document, she suggested that "the role of women in the church has evolved" and concluded: "This is a new day for women in ministry and I am honored and blessed to help carry the mantle of being a Pastor and have the title as NextGen Ministries pastor at Saddleback Church!"

In other words, there is no doubt that these three women are considered to serve as pastors and in the teaching office. Southern Baptists are clear, through the Baptist Faith & Message, that this is contrary to Scripture.

Southern Baptists are now, yet again, at a moment of decision. This is no longer a point of tension and debate. These moves represent an attempt to redefine and reformulate the convictional foundation of Southern Baptist faith and cooperative ministry. The theological issues have not changed since the year 2000 when Southern Baptists spoke clearly and precisely in the Baptist Faith & Message. More importantly, the Holy Scriptures have not changed and cannot change.

The convictions of the Baptist Faith & Message — *all of them* — describe the doctrinal basis for our Convention and for our cooperation together. Any use of the term "pastor" for women in church leadership is, at best, unwise and confusing. In an increasing number of cases, it is now clear that some churches, including quite large and well-known churches, are placing women in the office of pastor in direct violation of our confession of faith. Further, a number of churches that are at least listed as Southern Baptist welcomed and advertised women preaching in the morning service.

The Southern Baptist Convention must not be unclear about our theological convictions and the ground of our cooperation. We cannot afford to be. Attempts to deny the issue will not work. Right now, Southern Baptists will decide if we will redefine the doctrine of the Southern Baptist Convention. I do not believe that Southern Baptists will allow this to happen. I do not believe that Southern Baptists will retreat from the truth.

But, this is no longer a cloud the size of a hand.

Opening text is from 1 Kings 18:44-45, ESV.

["Interview with Pastor Cynthia Petty"](#)

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