"Strength for the Journey": Feminist Theology and Baptist Women Pastors

Judith Anne Bledsoe Bailey

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“Strength for the Journey”: Feminist Theology and Baptist Women Pastors

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation grows out of an interest in the women who are pastors in formerly Southern Baptist churches. Because they continue to face opposition to their role as pastors I wanted to know the sources of their strength and determination. Specifically, how did feminism and feminist theology influence their decision to be pastors and their continuing ministry?

I interviewed twenty woman pastors in five different states representing two generations of pastors. These women are among the very few who grew up in Southern Baptist churches and are now pastors, since the Southern Baptist denomination has officially banned women from the pulpit since 1984. I found that their experience of call was nurtured in the church and their plans for ministry were encouraged until the plans included being pastors of churches. Faced with opposition, the women claimed their calling, joined networks of support and turned to feminist theology for alternative biblical interpretations, validation of their role as ecclesial leaders, and inspiration for non-hierarchical models of theology and ministry. These pastors embody feminist theology.

This dissertation explores Southern resistance to evangelicalism, the gendered and racial dynamics in the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention, as well as the post World War II changes wrought by the civil rights, women’s movement and women’s ordination movements; documents the ways Baptist women employed feminist theory and theology to counter the backlash and Southern Baptist controversy of the 1980s; and relates these women pastors’ narratives of call, ordination and ministry.
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This Ph.D. dissertation is dedicated to the women pastors who shared their stories with me.
Introduction

Feminist theology gives strength for the journey. It reminds you that no matter what, you are doing it. You are doing the right thing; you are doing what God calls you to do. And it helps give you strength to walk the sometimes irritating and lonely, sad path.¹

Jessica

My experience as a Baptist began in 1970 when I joined Bridgewater Baptist Church after my husband David became pastor. Having grown up and gone to Union Theological Seminary in New York as a Methodist, it was not an easy decision to make. There was not much difference in the basic evangelical message between the Methodists and Baptists, though church polity was decidedly different. In contrast with the Methodist connectional system and hierarchy of pastors, district superintendents and bishops, Baptists believed in the autonomy of the local congregation and voluntary membership in associations of churches. I also learned that Baptists stressed missions, soul competency, the priesthood of the believer and the separation of church and state.² The emphasis on personal freedom allowed me to participate, even when I might disagree.

Virginia Baptists were different from the west Tennessee Baptists of my youth who were influenced by Landmarkism to believe they were the only true church,

² Walter B. Shurden, The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms (Macon: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1993), 25. Soul competency is the belief that the individual responds to God directly and freely, and “affirms the centrality of the individual over the institutional, the personal over the sacramental and the preeminence of direct access over indirect access to God.” The idea of the priesthood of the believer also assumes an individual’s direct access to God without a priestly mediator, and includes the responsibility associated with being a Christian believer.
direct descendents of John the Baptist. Virginia Baptists were involved in evangelistic outreach as well as efforts to address the material and social needs of people. During our six years in Bridgewater, the Virginia Baptist Mission Board supported our church’s summer-long outreach in the community with sufficient funds for a variety of programs as well as the purchase of a used station wagon. In addition, when our Woman’s Missionary Union organized a pre-school for children of migrants who picked apples in the Broadway, Virginia area, for several years the state mission board provided funds for hiring part-time teachers and purchasing equipment.

After we moved to the Richmond area in 1976, Virginia Baptists hired me to be the Director of Baptist Campus Ministries at the University of Richmond and J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, Parham Road Campus, a position I held for twenty-one years. In 1982 Four Mile Creek Baptist Church ordained me, the first woman ordained by the two-hundred-year-old church and the first in the Dover Baptist Association, also two hundred years old. In the past few years I have been co-pastor of Taylorsville Baptist Church with David, and then interim co-pastor of Oakland Baptist Church. In all the years since 1970 my experience with Virginia Baptists has been multifaceted and very positive. Virginia has more women pastors of churches than any other state, and a very active association of ministers, Virginia Baptist Women in Ministry.

My ordination in 1982 was a celebratory occasion with students, church members, old friends and family in attendance. The Sunday after the service, an older male friend said to me with a smile, “Judy, I can’t believe that you, a liberated
woman, would be ordained by the most oppressive institution of all.” I thought he
was wrong, but his words turned out to be more prescient than either of us knew.

Through my research I realize that I became a Baptist during the most
progressive period in Southern Baptist history. The political and cultural changes in
the 1960s and 1970s along with advanced educational opportunities and the
development of feminist theology opened doors for women to become ecclesial
leaders in the church. Southern Baptist seminaries, publications and agencies,
including the Woman’s Missionary Union, were adapting to the changes and
becoming more aware and supportive of the gifts of women for ministry. Baptist
women were studying theology and being ordained. As self-defined daughters of the
church, women claimed their call to ministry, established networks of support and
developed strategies for defending and expanding their professional identities.
Churches were ordaining women as ministers and in the 1980s there were a few
women who were pastors of churches.

When the so-called “conservative resurgence” erupted in 1979 with the stated
objective of taking over the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) to save it from
liberalism, I thought it was an aberration, that this group was not representative of
Southern Baptists. I soon learned that this new manifestation of fundamentalism,
while contrary to my understanding of Baptist beliefs in freedom, had the support of
enough people in the churches to pass a resolution in 1984 that prohibited women
from being pastors and blaming them for evil in the world. In the ensuing years this
supposedly non-binding resolution became policy. Not only were women denied any
role that required ordination, a 1998 addition to *The Baptist Faith and Message*
further "enshrined male hierarchy" by stating that a woman should "submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ." 

The controversy that erupted in the 1980s exposed the theological and denominational polity contradictions in Southern Baptist life, including the contradiction of local church autonomy versus associational authority and the desire for an educated clergy yet a distrust of biblical scholarship. The most pertinent contradiction for women is the belief in personal freedom posed against biblical authority. When women expressed their belief in soul competency and calling that led them into the pastorate, conservatives insisted that since women were second in the "order of creation," they could not be in authority over men. The battle over women’s ordination exposed the gendered understanding of soul competency.

The history of evangelicalism in the South, the institution of slavery and the patterns of racial and gender order offer some explanations for how Southern Baptists, in contrast to other leading denominations in the country, decided to take their stand against women pastors. In the 19th century when egalitarian Separate Baptists united with the order-focused Regular Baptists in the South, women’s leadership roles diminished. Then Baptist and Methodist preachers tempered their opposition to slavery in order to convert white southern men. The result was an

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3 Susan B. Shaw, *God Speaks to Us, Too: Southern Baptist Women on Church, Home and Society* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 185.


evangelical message of individual salvation and relationship with God that had personal moral implications but limited practical application in terms of equality for everyone. When northern Baptists refused to appoint missionaries who were slave owners, southerners rebelled and formed the SBC in 1845, a distinctive blend of southern culture and religion in a hierarchical system of men in control over women and enslaved people.

The new wave of fundamentalism that surfaced in the late 20th century was also a reaction against societal changes that challenged the white Southern sense of order and morality. The attempt to maintain order took the form of insisting on "biblical inerrancy" in the SBC as conservative leaders argued against the "liberalism" that had invaded SBC seminaries and agencies. Early on in the controversy the debate centered on the role of women in the church, specifically ordination for the pastorate. For example, popular televised Baptist preacher Charles Stanley described the negative consequences of having a woman pastor: "Let's take in the average church. Sitting out in that congregation week after week, young boys growing up, young men growing up who are being called into ministry. They've got a mother image of a woman in the pulpit. Not a manly image. Not a prophet of God."

Despite the conservative turn of the SBC, one analogous to the Southern Baptist turn to conservatism in the 19th century, Baptist women ministers and their supporters exerted power by developing strategies for support and to effect change,

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7 FOLIO 3, no.1 (Summer, 1985): 3.
especially through their speech and writing, and the establishment of associational
groups separate from the SBC. Baptist women created their own identity as ministers
through organizing national and state groups, holding conferences, continuing to
preach and teach. Especially in the pages of *FOLIO, A Newsletter for Southern
Baptist Women in Ministry*, and *Synergy, Journal of Virginia Baptist Women in
Ministry*, women employed feminist theology in a counter-narrative to conservative
biblical interpretations and arguments against women clergy.

As conservatives took control of the SBC and in their fundamentalism resisted
all attempts for compromise, moderates began to form alternative associations, the
Southern Baptist Alliance in 1987 and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1991.
Along with traditional Baptist emphasis on missions, these two associations affirmed
Baptist belief in the autonomy of the local church, the priesthood of the believer and
soul competency - thereby supporting women ministers.

The women I interviewed in this study were supported by the groups that
broke from the SBC. Formerly Southern Baptist churches continued to ordain women
as ministers and pastors. Since 1964 when Watts Street Baptist Church of Durham,
North Carolina ordained Addie Davis, the first woman ordained in an SBC church, in
2011 the number of ordained women had grown to over 2,000. By an informal count,
in 2013 the number of women who are senior pastors has grown to at least one
hundred fifty. One hundred seven are pastors and forty-three are co-pastors. Though

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Commissioned by Baptist Women in Ministry, Presented June 2011.
9 Pam Durso, Executive Director, Baptist Women in Ministry, e-mail message
to author, April 5, 2013. Southern Baptists did not maintain a system of calculating
the number is small, it is a sign of significant opposition to the conservative agenda. Young women continue to graduate from seminary and seek pastoral positions even though their chances of being called to pastor a church are relatively slim. I have asked "What factors fuel this resistance to the systematic attempts to exclude women from leadership and specifically, what roles do feminism and feminist theology play? To what extent does feminist theology play a role in resisting institutional exclusion?"

My methodology for this dissertation was to interview twenty white women who are Baptist pastors with questions that address their experience of call and their patterns of ministry. After asking several women I know for an interview, from a list of women pastors in several states, I sent e-mail requests for an interview. In my message to them I introduced myself and said: "My dissertation has to do with feminist theology. Specifically, I am interested in knowing the ways in which feminist theology might have played some role in your decision to become a pastor and in your experience of being a pastor." The interviews were done in person or by phone, with each interview lasting for two hours or more. I have changed their names for confidentiality.

In addition to the interviews, textual research on Southern Baptist history, the SBC Controversy and feminist theology, I also conducted qualitative content analysis of organizational publications: *FOLIO, A Newsletter of Southern Baptist Women in the numbers of ordained women or women pastors. Either by default or design, the denomination was not interested in those statistics.

11 See Appendix.
12 See Appendix.
Ministry, and Synergy, Journal of Virginia Baptist Women in Ministry to determine the use of feminist theology and feminist theory.

I did not know what to expect from the women I interviewed. As I heard their narratives of call and ministry, I wanted first of all to tell their powerful stories of faith and ministry. I became acutely aware of the piety of their Southern Baptist origins and the cruel irony that not one is pastor of a Southern Baptist church. Regarding feminism and feminist theology, I found a great deal of diversity. While I expected there to be a more intense support for feminism and feminist theology among the generation that lived through the women’s movement and the SBC controversy, I discovered the limits of my expectation. Some of the youngest women were stronger advocates than a few of the older women. Having achieved the position of pastor, several women expressed the feeling that they embody feminist theology, and do not relish being drawn into controversy over their positions and do not want to be “flag wavers” for women in ministry. Because of the history of southern hierarchy and the negative interpretations of feminism, contemporary Baptist women are often reluctant to own the benefits of the women’s movement and feminist theology. There is a tendency (among moderate and conservative women) to depend upon feminism while disallowing the feminist.

My work is among those focused on gender in the SBC, distinctive in its focus on women pastors and ministers who continue to preach, act as pastors, and remain Baptists in the South, but no longer “Southern Baptist. My argument is that feminism and feminist theology are essential in the movement of Baptist women into positions as pastors. Feminist theory supported the women ministers who organized networks
of support on national and state levels, and affirmed their experience of call. Baptist women employed feminist theology in published counter-narratives to the conservative arguments in the 1980s that denied women’s ordination. Feminist theology counters the belief that God behaves in gendered ways and produces hermeneutical tools offering liberating biblical interpretations that challenge the historic racial and gendered hierarchies of Southern Baptists.

I argue Baptist piety and feminist theology coalesce in the lives of the women pastors I interviewed. From their early years in Southern Baptist churches they learned to expect an experience with God and a calling for what they were to do with their lives. They committed their lives to Christ as Savior and to following him into ministry. In seminary theology courses the women learned about liberation theology and feminist theology and their views on the nature of God expanded and broadened. When the Southern Baptists decided that having women pastors was against biblical mandates, these women turned to feminist theology and its inclusion of women in the biblical story to give a “theological and educational ground to stand on,”\(^\text{13}\) a foundational tradition, a new frame for understanding the Bible, religious institutions and gender, and “strength for the journey.”\(^\text{14}\) Convinced of their calling, these women embrace the goals of feminist theology to include everyone, particularly women, in the liberating message of the Bible. In their lives of preaching, teaching, leading and caring for their congregations these women embody the reality that Baptist women are pastors; it is not a suppositional issue or one to be debated. And they function as

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\(^{13}\) Elaine, interview with author, May 13, 2009.

pastors with the authority of those who have been tested and challenged in many ways.

There are few books on women in the Southern Baptist Convention, though the controversy in the SBC is well documented by historians as well as from the viewpoint of moderates and conservatives. My dissertation is among recent attempts to explore the cultural and historical aspects of the SBC controversy, not just the theological and policy implications. My work joins those focused on gender in the

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SBC, but distinctive in its focus on women pastors and feminist theology; and distinctive in moving the story forward from the controversy to the lives of contemporary women who persisted in their claim to the pastorate.

The most thorough treatment of gender in the Southern Baptist controversy is Elizabeth Flowers' book, *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II* (2012). Within an analysis of American culture and Baptist history, Flowers argues that while inerrancy was an important focus of the debate, "the issue over women's changing roles and their bid toward greater ecclesial power moved from the sides to the center of the controversy."\(^{17}\) Noting Anne Braude's insight that "women go to church," Flowers explores the participation of both conservative and moderate women in the years of controversy and the production of resolutions about women's roles. Barry Hankins included a chapter on women in his 2002 book, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture*, and concluded "the gender issue has become the central focus for SBC conservatives."\(^{18}\) These two books were particularly helpful in my understanding of the SBC controversy. Elizabeth Flowers includes a brief discussion of feminist theology in her treatment of Southern Baptist Women in Ministry; my discussion of feminist theology in *FOLIO* and *Synergy* expands her work.

While a discussion of soul competency is important in my dissertation, two recent publications, a dissertation and a book, focus on the belief in soul competency as understood by contemporary Baptist women. In her 2009 dissertation, Eileen


Campbell-Reed wrote an analysis of the "schism" in the Southern Baptist Convention and how it is interpreted by the eight clergywomen she interviewed: "Anatomy of a Schism: How Clergywomen’s Narratives Interpret the Fracturing of the Southern Baptist Convention." Using the theories of Edward Farley and object relations theories of D.W. Winnicott and Jessica Benjamin, Campbell-Reed concluded clergywomen reinterpreted soul competency, rejecting the history of sexism and incorporating their experiences and vocations. I am indebted to Eileen Campbell-Reed’s insight that belief in soul competency can mask assumptions about race and gender.

Susan M. Shaw’s book, God Speaks to Us Too: Southern Baptist Women on Church, Home and Society (2008), prioritizes soul competency among other Baptist beliefs from the viewpoint of more than one-hundred-fifty women she interviewed – both lay persons and professional ministers. Shaw found that even though several women interviewed do not support women pastors, they also know the church depends upon them, and they claim the authority of their personal relationship to God. Shaw interprets the interviews in the context of a thorough discussion of Baptist history and traditional beliefs from the earliest history into the present. She argues the Southern Baptist women’s construction of identity in terms of soul competency may be what distinguishes them from other conservative Protestant women. Though Shaw includes sections on feminism and the contradictory views of women interviewed, she does not address feminist theology directly.

Several recent publications by Baptist scholars serve to reinforce the importance of Baptist women ministers by establishing their professional
credentials. Assuming underlying feminist goals in these recent publications, my study explicitly explores the importance of feminism and feminist theology in the lives of Baptist women pastors.

Feminist theology is a theology in process, developing in new areas as women write from their own contexts. The feminist theologians most referenced in this study (Rosemary Radford Ruether, Letty Russell, Phyllis Trible, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Sallie McFague) are among the Roman Catholic and Protestant pioneers writing during the years of the SBC controversy. These early feminist theologians have been criticized for holding essentialist views of women that do not adequately address the differences among women.20 Southern Baptist women were faced with the argument that as women, as female, they are excluded from pastoral leadership in the church, and this argument has a long tradition within the institutional church.21 For Southern Baptist women, early feminist theologians addressed the most basic arguments against their participation and leadership in the church by exposing how

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21 Sheila Greeve Devaney, “Continuing the Story, But Departing the Text: A Historicist Interpretation of Feminist Norms in Theology,” in Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition and Norms, eds. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Devaney, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 198-214. Letty Russell, in Feminist Interpretations of the Bible, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza in Bread Not Stone and Mary Daly in Gyn/Ecology argue that an essentialist notion of tradition paralleled the essentialist notion of the female self. Thus the biblical tradition was a unified whole that was liberating if correctly understood.

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traditional Christian theology pretends to be objective, ignores the experiences of women, uses sexist language, and advocates a male God. Other theologians have subsequently added to the body of knowledge from their context - womanist, black feminists, mujerista, Asian “two-thirds-world” feminists as well as lesbian voices - contributing valuable insights and understandings that reflect the diversity in women’s experience.

In the dialogue among feminist theorists between “essentialism” and postmodern feminism, or a “materialist” approach and one that is “linguistic,” my concern is that in order to enact social change one needs a “subject” to express agency and achieve political power. While it is true that we understand the world linguistically, “dogmatic adherence to linguistic constitution cannot account for the reality and agency of that world.” As Sheila Briggs notes, theologian Beverly Harrison argued in *Making the Connection: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, one cannot separate subjectivity from embodiment, that performative ontology is central to feminist theology: “Just as do-ing must be central to a feminist theology, so too be-ing and do-ing must never be treated as polarities.” This dissertation celebrates women who embody their theology and calling.

The dissertation unfolds in four chapters. Chapter One explores the historical context for the conservative backlash of the 1980s. I argue the SBC controversy and

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schism reflect a long history engendered by the conflict between Baptist tradition and southern political and social conventions, resulting in the unique formulation in the South especially in regard to racial, class and gender hierarchies – and thus the “Southern Baptist” hierarchical tradition was born and formally organized in 1845. By the post Civil War period to speak of “Southern Baptists” was to speak of a white group generally supportive of the “Jim Crow” system and distinct from “Black Baptists,” or other white Baptists elsewhere in the country.

Southern Baptist women challenged southern hierarchy and defined the role of women in Southern Baptist churches for nearly a century. These women did not openly join the woman’s rights movement, but expressed their agency by forming their own missionary organization, defying attempts to squelch their networks and silence their public speech. This organization became the main network for Southern Baptist women to lead, speak publicly and exercise their leadership skills for nearly a century.

In the years following World War II the civil rights movement began to break down the Jim Crow system. The ensuing women’s movement and the women’s ordination movement created a sea change in cultural norms of the South and challenged conventional structures of southern society and theology, setting the stage for controversy and division in the 1980s.

Chapter Two deals with backlash and feminist responses. In the 1980s Southern Baptist women had reached a critical point in their ability to access theological knowledge and gain agency in the institutional structure of the Southern Baptist Convention through their seminary training, ordination, employment in
churches and organized networks of women. As conservatives were successful in gaining control of the denomination, women in ministry pushed back with their networks of support. In their publications (*FOLIO* and *Synergy*) Southern Baptist Women in Ministry and Virginia Baptist Women in Ministry employed feminist theology to challenge theological constructs that God ordained the subjugation of women by the "order of creation."

Moderate Baptists, unable to find compromise with the conservatives also formed new networks, the Southern Baptist Alliance in 1987, and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1991. Women ministers were active in the formation of these associations, pushing for greater roles for women in their churches.

Chapter Three focuses on the women pastors' narratives of call and ordination. I argue Southern Baptists who resist women in ministry contradict their own claim of soul competency and direct experience with God. Despite the gendered understanding of soul competency operative among many Baptists, other Baptist congregations exercise their autonomy and ordain women. In their narratives of call, the women in my study responded to their experience with God that came through the nurture of Southern Baptist churches. Even though Southern Baptists rejected the validity of their experience in 1984, the women I interviewed, informed by feminism and feminist theology, evidenced a strong sense of confidence in themselves and their experience.

Through the explication of interviews, in Chapter Four I argue feminist theology influences the twenty women pastors in my study by supporting their sense of call as their source of authority, by providing hermeneutical tools for
understanding the Bible, their view of God, the role of Jesus and the church as well as resources for worship, especially preaching and pastoral leadership. Most of the women enjoy preaching, the public role so jealously guarded by many southern men in the past and present, and so hotly contested in the SBC. By interpreting the Bible from a woman’s experience and “standing in” for God in the pulpit, women challenge the notion that only men can preach and God is male.

Even though women pastors are chosen and supported by their local congregations and networks, the ongoing divisions between conservative and moderate Baptists are evident in local and state associations. Churches that employ women pastors are often excluded from the local and state associations still fighting the battles over Baptist identity.
Chapter 1: The Southern Baptists and Women’s Power

From the angle of service, we depend on you; from the angle of ministry, we fear you; from the angle of missions, we follow you; from the angle of Scripture, we puzzle over you; from the angle of history, we ignore you.25

Leon McBeth

Susan was in seminary in the early 1980s before the fundamentalist26 takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. It was a time, she said, when people were focused on inclusion and bringing people in, when the seminary (The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky) allowed students “to have joy and fun! Ministry wasn’t this burden and this hard yoke that we all drug around but that there could be great fun involved in ministry.” She noted the contrast between then and now by relating a conversation with a very conservative pastor about what it means to be Baptist.

He was concerned that Baptists are confused about their identity and thus needed to narrow their focus, perhaps excluding some people. Picking up on his insinuation that as a woman minister she is not a true Baptist, Susan asked him,


26 The question arises concerning what to call the different factions of the Southern Baptist Convention. Conservatives did not like to be called fundamentalists and preferred the title “conservative resurgence” to “fundamentalist takeover.” Moderates did not like to be called moderate or liberal because they insisted they also were conservative. The clearest expression would be that of “fundamental-conservative” or “moderate-conservative,” terms used by Charles Fuller who chaired the Peace Committee, in giving his report in 1987. (“Fuller: Committee Has No ‘Policing’Power”, The Religious Herald, June 25, 1987, 8.) However, I will use the simplest terms of “conservative” and “moderate” except in situations where the person is an avowed fundamentalist or when the actions taken are clearly fundamentalist.

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“Well, are you looking for a definition of Baptist?” He said, “Yes I am, I think we need to know who we are.” “Well,” she said, “I’ll give you one.” She told her story, a Baptist minister’s daughter, living and working in the Baptist association in which she grew up, called to ministry within the Baptist association, attended Ridgecrest Baptist Conference Center, received scholarships and a preaching award in seminary.

“So,” she said, “if you want to know who a Baptist is – I AM ONE.” 27

The controversy among Southern Baptists erupted in the 1980s over the question of what it means to be Baptist, over exclusion and inclusion, the Bible, soul competency and the autonomy of the local congregation. Gender issues, particularly the role of women ministers became main points of contention. These conflicts intersect in the lives of the women pastors in my study.

Throughout their history Baptists have claimed their radical belief in the freedom of the individual to make her or his own choices about biblical, theological, religious, moral, ethical and social matters, 28 in the context of an autonomous congregation joined with other Baptist churches in an association for support and theological consistency. Insisting on believer’s baptism, the churches were composed of regenerate members characterized by emotional religious piety. From the beginning in 1609, 29 however, spiritual equality did not fully apply to women in the organizational structure of the congregation. Challenged by the radical nature of their

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theology in contrast to societal notions of gender in different historical periods, 
Baptists have traditionally chosen to moderate their beliefs and relegate women to 
secondary status, particularly in terms of preaching and being pastors.

In this chapter I argue that the 1980s controversy and schism in the Southern 
Baptist Convention reflects a long history engendered by the conflict between Baptist 
tradition and Southern political and social conventions. The revivals of the First and 
Second Great Awakenings that fueled the expansion of Baptists' radical ideas 
questioning religious hierarchy, asserting soul competency and the autonomy of the 
individual congregations meant to question the social, economic and cultural 
hierarchies of southern society. Resistance to evangelicalism was formulated uniquely 
in the South, especially in regard to racial, class and gender hierarchies – and thus the 
“Southern Baptist” tradition was born. In an effort to convert white men and establish 
churches, Methodist and Baptist clergymen weakened their egalitarian message to 
conform to the social and political structures that kept women and slaves in a 
submissive role. Southerners broke with their northern counterparts over the issue of 
slavery and formed the Southern Baptist convention in 1845. After the Civil War 
“Southern Baptists” were recognized as a white group, distinctive from “Black 
Baptists” or other white Baptists elsewhere in the country.

Southern Baptist Women expressed their agency by forming their own 
missionary organization, The Woman’s Missionary Union, Auxiliary to the Southern 
Baptist Convention. The post World War II civil rights movement, the women’s 
movement, and the women's ordination movement again challenged the cultural and
religious structures of the Southern Baptist Convention and helped set the stage for the controversy and division in the 1980s.

Baptists and The Great Awakenings in America

The revivals and the outpouring of emotion and religious zeal of the First Awakening (1730-1760) in New England challenged the social hierarchy of the established churches by valuing personal experience over the distinctions of education, class, race or sex. Meetings were held in unconventional places - outdoors, in barns, in homes - and perhaps most challenging, led by itinerant preachers, not the established minister. Not only were uneducated white and black men preaching, women (white and black) joined the emotional appeals for repentance and impending judgment by giving testimony to their conversion experience, exhorting others to confess their sins and preaching. During the First and Second Great Awakening (1740-1845), there were at least one hundred women who participated in the revivals, traveling in New England and the Middle States.\(^{30}\) One evangelist, Nancy Towle, between 1821-1832 traveled as far west as Pennsylvania, north to Canada, south to Richmond, Virginia,\(^{31}\) and east to England. At the heart of the revivalist message was the agency of the individual to acknowledge sin and the judgment of God, to repent and accept divine forgiveness and to enter into a new life, a rebirth.

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\(^{31}\) Judith Bledsoe Bailey, “Faithful Child of God: Nancy Towle 1796-1876,” (M.A. Thesis, The College of William and Mary, 2000), 51. In Charleston, South Carolina Nancy Towle offered to conduct a series of services in 1832, but was politely refused by the leading clergy. Women preachers were not welcomed in the South.
The revivals of the First Awakening served as a turning point for Baptists in America. Prior to the late 1720s Baptists had established only thirty-two churches with 1,699 members and had organized only one association. They had not organized any societies for missions or evangelism nor had they founded any theological schools or colleges. As a result of the revivals, by 1790 Baptists had organized 978 churches with 67,320 members. Out of the Awakening came the Separate Baptists who embraced the revival spirit and organized churches in the mid 1700s in New England.

Though the initial formation and expansion of Separate Baptist churches occurred in New England, the greatest growth and impact was in the South. As Separate Baptists moved into the backcountry of Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina in the mid 18th century women were active participants. Women opened their homes for Baptist meetings and were known for their spiritual leadership as well as their willingness to suffer persecution for their faith. Margaret Meuse Clay (1737-1832) who lived in Chesterfield County, Virginia was known for her spiritual gifts, for her preaching and her powerful prayers. Arrested and tried with other Baptists, Clay was saved from a public whipping by an unknown man who paid her fine. Another Virginia woman was not so fortunate. Around 1750, Eunice Marshall,

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33 Ibid., 21.
34 Ibid., 51.
36 Ibid., 165.
Daniel Marshall’s sister, began to “exhort and preach Baptist doctrines, was ordered to desist, but not obeying, was (although pregnant at the time), thrown into jail.”37

Hannah Lee Hall, an outspoken advocate of the American Revolution and the rights of women, left the Anglican church to join the Morattico Church in Virginia, a congregation formed by the Separate Baptists. A woman of means, Hall left her estate to her daughter and son equally,38 not just to her son as was customary. Two other Baptist women in Virginia were responsible for the formation of the Nomini Church (1783), Westmoreland County, having invited Henry Toler to preach there.39

Martha Stearns Marshall was the most well known white Baptist woman preacher. After a brief time of organizing churches in Virginia, Shubal Stearns, Martha Stearns Marshall and Daniel Marshall, along with five other couples moved farther south and organized the Sandy Creek Baptist Church in Sandy Creek, North Carolina in 1754.40 Martha Stearns Marshall was known as a gifted exhorter and leader,41 “a lady of good sense, singular piety and surprising elocution, in countless instances melted a whole concourse into tears by her prayers and exhortations.”42

38Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South*, 166.
40Lumpkin, 28.
Martha Stearns Marshall “set the pace” for Separate Baptist women who prayed and spoke in public.43

Separate Baptists were known for their enthusiastic, spontaneous and emotional worship that resulted in dramatic conversions and spirited singing. Their preachers were intended to alarm and convert, not educate. They were highly individualistic, suspicious of alignments that might threaten congregational autonomy and liberty of the individual soul. Their theological approach was literalistic regarding the Bible, making them ardently opposed to confessions of faith, especially those that had evolved into binding creeds that became substitutes for the authority of the Word of God. Though heirs of Calvinism, Separate Baptists (so named because many “New Light” Separates from Congregationalism joined the Baptists), were closer to Arminian theology regarding general atonement and free will.44 In contrast to the Calvinist belief in predestination, that God pre-ordains and limits those who will experience salvation, Arminian theology (espoused by Dutch Reformed theologian Jacobus Arminius 1560-1609) emphasized free will and the ability of persons to accept or decline God’s grace in salvation.

43 McBeth, Women in Baptist Life, 44. Catherine Brekus refers to Martha Stearns Marshall as an exhorter; McBeth names her a preacher. The difference between exhorting and preaching seemed to be that a preacher would select and expound upon a Biblical text, while an exhorter would mainly plead with people to consider the state of their lives and submit to God in conversion. For contemporary women it is a moot point. Baptist Women in Ministry has designated February as the Martha Stearns Marshall Month of Preaching – and asks pastors to invite a woman to preach at least one Sunday during the month.

The Particular (Regular) Baptists, who had settled along the east coast, and had formed the First Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina in 1682, were more known for their devotion for order - theological, ecclesiastical, liturgical and ministerial. Orderly services led by educated ministers were the opposite of the more emotional and freewheeling Separate Baptist services. Particular Baptist services were not revivalistic like those of the Separate Baptists. Rooted in English Calvinistic Puritanism, these Baptists held to the ideal of a “pure church filled with regenerate saints” along with the centrality of religious experience and the sole authority of Scripture. While Particular Baptists supported local congregational autonomy, they believed it must be balanced with connection to the larger association of churches, and eventually with the larger denomination. Believing that “rationality should pervade human existence, these gentlemen theologians” believed in an educated ministry and founded numerous colleges.

Despite their differences, there was considerable interaction between these Baptists and others in the spiritual, social and geographic fluidity of frontier settlement. Theological lines were not strictly drawn, and when the Separates, whose numbers rose dramatically in the South Carolina back country, organized churches within one hundred miles of Charleston, the churches were drawn together in the

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48 Shurden, *Not An Easy Journey*, 202-203. These Baptists founded Furman, Georgetown, Wake Forest, Richmond and Mississippi Colleges, and later the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1859, the denomination’s first seminary.
Congaree Association in 1771. Proposals were made in 1773 and again in 1775 for the union of the two Baptist groups, but the differences were too great.

One of the major differences and obstacles to union between the Particular and Separate Baptists was the role of women in the churches and the acceptance of African Americans. The Separate Baptists allowed women to be “eldresses and deaconesses,” as reported by John Leland, to speak and testify in church and to preach. Women participated in the rituals of the Lord’s Supper and baptism, love feasts, laying on of hands, washing feet, anointing the sick, the right hand of fellowship, kiss of charity and devoting children or “dry christening,” as the ritual of laying hands on a newborn infant was derisively called. Women’s participation in the male ritual sphere and the physical intimacy symbolized the Separates’ universal moral outlook and vision of a moral community that transcended all social, economic, gender and racial divisions.

Separate Baptists accepted men and women, black and white, as spiritual equals. In the emotional sermons of the preachers, the informal services and belief in a conversion experience as a chief means of entry into the Christian fellowship, African Americans avowed an affinity to their African traditions. In 1790 women, slave and free outnumbered the men in Virginia Baptist churches by at least 4 to 5

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49 Lumpkin, Baptist Foundations in the South, 54.
51 Ibid., 101.
52 Ibid., 102
53 Ibid., 101.
54 Ibid.
percent, and African American women represented a clear majority in most evangelical churches, bi-racial as well as all black.\textsuperscript{55} In 1791 the Dover Association of Separate Baptists voted to grant membership to the 500 member strong African church constituted under the preaching and leadership of black preachers Moses and Gowan Pamphlet.\textsuperscript{56}

The women in the more orderly and traditional Particular Baptist southern congregations did not have the privileges of the Separates, and where there was a formal union of Particular and Separatist Baptists, women suffered. The Baptists in North Carolina, for instance, merged under the name of United Baptists in 1787.\textsuperscript{57} Kentucky Baptists followed with a merger in 1801. As a result, women lost their influence and "extensive ministry."\textsuperscript{58} In the combination of Regular Baptist concepts of ministry and doctrine, the warm, fervent evangelism and informal worship of the Separates, the Separate tradition of the role of women in leadership was minimized or lost.\textsuperscript{59} Women leaders in the United Baptist congregations in the South in the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century found that the professed belief in egalitarian Baptist fellowships was subject to traditional gender divisions.

\textsuperscript{55}Frey and Wood, \textit{Come Shouting to Zion}, 163. Women were also the majority of members of Baptist churches in South Carolina, the Welsh Neck Church and the Low Country Baptist churches.

\textsuperscript{56}\textit{Ibid.}, 115.

\textsuperscript{57}William L. Lumpkin, \textit{Baptist Foundations in the South}, 142. The terms of union were simply stated: 1. We think that none but believers have a right to the ordinance of baptism; therefore we will not hold communion with those who plead for the validity of baptism in unbelief. 2. We leave every church member to decide for himself whether he has been baptized in unbelief or not. 2. We leave every minister at liberty to baptize, or not, such persons as desire to be baptized, being scrupulous about their former baptism.

\textsuperscript{58}Leon McBeth, \textit{Women in Baptist Life}, 45.

\textsuperscript{59}\textit{Ibid.}, 46.
The American Revolution, influenced by the revivals that celebrated individual freedom, came through the efforts of women and men, yet women and African Americans did not emerge from the struggle with the same political or spiritual rights as white men. For a time Methodists and Baptists addressed the most glaring inequality of slavery. The Methodist Conference in 1784 ruled that slavery was "contrary to the laws of God, of men, and of nature," and all members should free their slaves within six months or in Virginia, two years. The negative reaction was so strong by their "southern friends," the Methodists suspended the emancipation rule in 1785. Many people did free their slaves, especially in Upper South states of Maryland, Northern Virginia and Delaware.

Several resolutions presented to the Virginia Baptist General Committee from 1785 through 1796 condemned slavery as being "contrary to the word of God." Baptists in the South considered slavery a political not a religious question. For the next twenty years individual ministers spoke out against slavery but with little success. Evangelical ministers of all stripes eventually compromised their challenge to the institution of slavery in the interest of achieving their higher goal of gaining converts.

In the new era following the Revolution, churches began to restrict the role of women and blacks in congregational life, aligning with cultural norms instead of their

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62 Ibid., 247.
belief in spiritual equality. For example, in 1802, The Dover Baptist Association of Virginia expressed concern and dismay that some of its member churches “admitted to their church meetings, even for discipline and government, all the members of the church, male and female, bond and free, young and old. Others admitted all members whether slave or free.” They were particularly concerned that some churches allowed enslaved members to sit in judgment on their white brethren. After some debate, the delegates recommended that all members should have privileges, but none but free male members should exercise any authority in the church. Elsewhere in the South other congregations had already reached a similar decision.

As the revivalist fever subsided and the camp meetings moved indoors, churches returned to the prior gender and racial boundaries in participation and in seating arrangements that reinforced the racial divisions. Churches constructed after 1800 had balconies for their black members. Some churches refused to ordain black male clergy, and denied the right for black members to take communion with the whites. Several African Americans formed their own congregations in Baltimore, Maryland, Washington, D.C., Wilmington, Delaware and Charleston, South Carolina. After the Denmark Vesey Revolt in 1822 and the Nat Turner rebellion in 1831, enslaved and free blacks were prohibited from worshipping separately from whites.

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64 Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830, 187.
65 Ibid.
66 Frey and Wood, 212. Both Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner were religious men and found inspiration for freedom in biblical passages. As a result of the Vesey rebellion in Charleston in 1822 and the Nat Turner rebellion in Virginia in 1831, a white backlash resulted in new restrictions on black worship, including laws prohibiting slaves from preaching without permission or from attending unsupervised worship.
The enforcement of racial and gender distinctions came at a time when Methodists and Baptists were effective in bringing people into the evangelical fold, particularly African Americans. Along with migration and an effective itinerant system, Methodists surpassed Baptists in number by 1813. By dividing and starting new churches, there were approximately 90,000 Baptists in Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky and Tennessee, 40,000 of whom were black, compared with 114,849 Methodists, 30,161 of whom were black. By 1830 Methodists led all churches in total membership.67

Southern Resistance to Evangelicalism

Despite the impressive numbers of Methodists and Baptists in the Upper South, Christine Heyrman argues the numbers are small in comparison with the total population of the South. In 1810 less than one-fifth of all southern whites over the age of sixteen and fewer than one-tenth of all African Americans had joined Baptist, Methodist or Presbyterian churches. By the 1830s evangelical churches could claim only about half of the white adult population.68 The reason for the relatively small number, Heyrman found, was the uniqueness of southern culture in which white male hierarchical authority is expressed in four key areas of life. The evangelical vision of spiritual authority collided with the centrality of white male authority in the South in which a hierarchical filial arrangement applied authoritarian structures of deference of

67 Ibid., 150.
youth to age, submission of children to parents and women to men, loyalties of family and kin among any other group, and the rule of reserve over emotion.69

In the early Methodist and Baptist evangelical fellowship of spiritual equals, in which old and young, men and women, blacks and whites participated, leadership was not restricted to white men - the only setting in the South where these men were required to compete for standing.70 White men were put off by the expanded roles of women and slaves, as well as by the evangelical insistence upon submission to God in conversion, the emotional context of worship, the clergy’s condemnation of masters’ treatment of slaves, and many of their leisure activities. While southern white men were not necessarily lacking in religious concerns, many had devised their own theologies, unwilling to cede authority to clergy. Those who chose to attend worship services, both in evangelical churches and Anglican, would gather for gossip and trading in the church yard, come to worship late, interrupt the minister, and make sure everyone witnessed their grand entrance, especially if their status permitted them to have pew rentals up front.71 In extreme cases, men would physically assault the preacher.72

In order to convert white men, a younger generation of Baptist and Methodist preachers, some veterans of the Revolution, began to accommodate their message and worship styles in order to be more acceptable to the norms of patriarchal southern

69 Ibid., 26.
society. Preachers wanted to both keep their female converts, and also enlist the men who had the power to refuse access to their homes and bar their wives from attending services. Unlike practices in the North, a woman’s baptism could be delayed if the spouse objected. In 1809 one North Carolina Baptist association recommended that a woman who wanted to be baptized should “wait patiently, hoping that God in his Providence may make a way for her to come into the church by the husband’s consent.”

Gradually ministers changed their expectations of their female converts from speaking before public, sexually mixed religious gatherings, to encouraging them to be more private in their religious expression. As Heyrman points out, however, even though the clergy focused more of their praise on women whose piety was most often expressed at home, they knew better than to try to completely shut the women out of vocal participation in worship.

Eventually the evangelical preachers won over the white men, advancing the power and prestige of the ministers and their cause. During the Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian revivals (1831-1833), at the time of the critical Nullification debates, 

73 Eventually Baptists were so successful in evangelizing men that by 1964 two Baptist historians wrote that it was a rare son of the Old south “who doubted God’s existence or his own responsibility to ‘get right with God’ before death. Nor has he been averse to throwing himself in the path of a conversion experience. Until recently it was ‘socially impossible’ not to be a Christian.” Samuel S. Hill, Jr., and Robert Torbet, Baptists North and South, 84.
74 Christine Heyrman, Southern Cross, 191.
75 Ibid., 105.
76 Ibid., 197.
77 Stephanie McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country (New York: Oxford University Press,) 1993, 150. Nullification is the term used by advocates for radical states rights - that the state can refuse any federal law it
large numbers of men responded to preachers like Reverend Daniel Baker who
admittedly wanted to convert “Men of preeminence in society.” The conversion of
influential men such as plantation owner William Barnwell and legislator Robert
Barnwell Rhett helped move evangelicalism from margin to center in Low Country
society and political culture, and these evangelical converts began to dominate local
and regional political culture.

The evangelization of white men, according to Stephanie McCurry’s study of
Low Country Baptist churches, contributed to the “sacralization of the secular
order.” Participation in Baptist churches always followed the gendered, racial and
class lines of southern social life. Even though women had to articulate their
experience of conversion and faith, one of the few acts of public witness permitted
women in Low Country churches, they were always discouraged from preaching. In
her research of more than sixty churches over the course of sixty years, McCurry
found only one woman who dared to preach. In February 1839, in a Primitive Baptist
church in rural Beaufort (South Carolina) District, “Sister Roberts, styling herself a
preacher” seized the pulpit. She was forcibly removed by a deacon and his friends
and was excommunicated from the church.

There was no clear victory for spiritual equality, even when Baptist
congregations wrestled with the inherent contradictions in the treatment of female
members – commitment to spiritual equality and individual moral sovereignty versus

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78 Stephanie McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds, 153.
79 Ibid., 157.
80 Ibid., 136.
81 Ibid., 185.
commitment to the familial model of Christian social order. Women could bring their complaints before church disciplinary committees, but the rule of men prevailed – yeomen over their households, elite planters over yeomen. Enslaved church members also had access to disciplinary committees that examined and disciplined church members. The best they could count on was to be heard, though there was virtually no protection for them except in the expectation that Baptist slave owners would fulfill their “familial” obligations as heads of households and heads of churches – an expectation that was rarely realized. 

Considered equal in the eyes of God by the evangelical congregation, slaves could not expect equality anywhere else.

One white southern slave owner expressed the tension between the promise of spiritual equality and the reality, exposing the ethical limits of the Baptist fellowship as well as the spiritual zeal of the African American women. Two of Mary Moragne’s enslaved women shared their conversion experiences with her and prayed for her conversion. Eventually, she too, experienced conversion. She described how she felt: “I was struck dumb. I felt that I was but a ‘babe in Christ’ before two old ignorant Africans. God had revealed himself to them.” For a moment she felt a bond of sisterhood, but she quickly rejected the idea. She could not accept these women as her equals, even spiritually. And yet, there was the realization that something was amiss. She wrote that every day she “wept and mourned” that she could do nothing

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82 Ibid., 201.
83 Sylvia R. Frey, Water from a Rock, 297. Early Black Christians often embraced the faith before their masters and were the instruments of their owners’ conversions. In addition, in parts of the South, evangelical Christianity was first implanted by African Americans or by white churchmen among the African American population.
84 Stephanie McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds, 199.
for the souls of these women, concluding, "Our religion is not sufficiently practical. It does not mingle with our daily affairs, but seems rather an abstract principle than a familiar spirit."^{85}

The congregation was constituted as a family, a "household of faith" in which God was head of the heavenly household as husbands and fathers were of the earthly ones.^{86} In the household, however, there were rules of conduct, especially for dependents - women, children and slaves - that kept spiritual equality from being realized in social expression. The gender identity yeoman women managed to create out of evangelicalism had a "fundamentally contradictory character, caught as it was between the church's promise of spiritual equality and moral sovereignty and their articulated commitment to an organic or familial Christian social order."^{87}

The family model was hierarchical, patriarchal and proslavery.^{88} Although marriage was not completely involuntary like slavery, slavery was compared to marriage – gender and race were linked. Presbyterian pastor Frederick A. Ross wrote, "Do you say the slave is held to involuntary service? So is the wife. Her relation to her husband, in the immense majority of cases is made for her and not by her . . ." and wives, like slaves, are "under service" and "bound to obey" their husbands in all things and "to submit passively to the will of God, the ultimate Patriarch."^{89}

Though complicit in maintaining the system, not all southern evangelicals supported slavery. Four fifths of the membership of abolitionist societies established

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^{85} Ibid.
^{86} Ibid., 171.
^{87} Ibid., 195.
^{88} Ibid., 179
before 1827 were in the South. Many who opposed slavery left the South, or had to resign their jobs. Some remaining southern slave owners were uncomfortable with an institution they seemed to feel powerless to change. After reading an antislavery pamphlet in 1847, Rev. Basil Manley, Jr. told his father that he longed for the "cessation of slavery for the south and Negroes and for ourselves," and hoped God would soon give us "a way of escape from it."

With similar misgivings about slavery yet committed to the Confederacy, Robert Ryland, Baptist pastor and first president of the University of Richmond, embodied the complexities of the struggles of his time and place over slavery and race. In 1841 Ryland was chosen to lead the First African Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia, a position he held until 1866. In keeping with Virginia law, since the Nat Turner Rebellion in 1831, the church could not have a black pastor, even though the size of the congregation was more than 3,000.

Ryland took his role as pastor seriously, and in his opinion treated the congregation with "respect." As pastor, Ryland would receive letters to the congregants and distribute them at the close of the worship service. When it was discovered that some of the letters detailed escape routes for enslaved Richmonders, Ryland wrote in his *History of the First Century of the First Baptist Church of Richmond*, that he was "mortified to perceive that a few of the congregation had

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91 Ibid. Howard Malcom, president of Georgetown College in Kentucky was among those who had to resign.
92 Matthews, *Religion in the Old South*, 182.
abused my confidence and caused me unwillingly to desecrate the pastoral to purposes foreign to its design."94 When white leaders insisted that Ryland open each document before delivering, Ryland resisted: "I had not the least intention, should have had none, when I became the pastor of the colored people to degrade my office to a police to detect and to apprehend runaways."95 Ryland was equally mortified to think he would be expected to turn in people or that he would aid people running away from slavery. He was unable to "relax this tension, this fundamental contradiction in this work."96

By focusing on an individual’s conversion experience with God while ignoring the social and ethical implications of Christianity, southern evangelical preachers helped provide the rationale for the continuation of the slave system. Women in the South were shut out of business meetings and lost much of their vocal participation in Baptist congregations by the 1830s, and blacks were legally not allowed to meet separately from whites, the latter fearing that the evangelical message of equality of souls, and congregational autonomy fostered rebellion against slavery.

Formation of The Southern Baptist Convention - 1845

Baptists in the South were part of The United Baptists or the Triennial Convention, formed in 1814 primarily to support foreign and home missions but also to promote Sunday schools, publications, state conventions and educational

94 Ibid., 20
95 Ibid., 21.
96 Ibid.
Increasingly the unity of the Baptists was threatened by regionalism and a difference in organizational policy. Southerners were more rural and wanted a centralized structure in contrast with the small independent societies in the north. These concerns were genuine, but the deciding issue in the separation of the southerners was their support of slavery.98

Already a distinctively “southern” group of Baptists in their hierarchical familial organization, Baptists in the South accepted slavery as an economic necessity, and defended the system. In 1838 Richard Furman, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Charleston, first president of the Triennial Convention, and first president of the South Carolina Baptist Convention, wrote perhaps the most detailed religious defense of slavery. Addressing the Governor of South Carolina, Furman argued “that the holding of slaves is justifiable by the doctrine and example contained in Holy writ; and is; therefore consistent with Christian uprightness, both in sentiment and conduct.”99 Reiterating the idea of mutual obligations, Furman tempered the right to own slaves and keep them in subjection with the understanding that they should not be treated cruelly. Slaves were to be dutiful and obedient, and did not have the right

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to revolt. Furthermore, Furman argued that African slaves were fortunate to have come to the South and benefit from the teachings of Christianity.\textsuperscript{100}

Furman’s defense of slavery was in stark contrast with the abolitionists in the northern Baptist community. After 1844 both the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions and the American Baptist Home Missionary Society refused to appoint missionaries who were slaveholders. The decisive test case occurred when the Georgia Baptist Convention guaranteed the support of James Reeves, a slaveholder of Villa Rica, Georgia, if the Home Mission Board would appoint him as missionary to the Cherokees. Following five meetings of at least three hours each, the Board, split along regional lines, refused to appoint him. In the second test case the Alabama Baptists asked for clarification from the Board of Foreign Missions of the General Missionary Convention as to the rights and privileges of slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike under the constitution of the Convention. Solomon Beck, foreign secretary of the Convention responded: “One thing is certain, we can never be party to any arrangement which would imply approbation of slavery.”\textsuperscript{101}

Southern Baptists accused their northern counterparts of letting what they called “political concerns,” meaning the issue of slavery, stand in the way of evangelism and decided to form their own convention. They felt they were saving the faith from dictatorship and considerations irrelevant to the main task of saving souls.\textsuperscript{102} At a meeting in Augusta, Georgia, May 8-12, 1845, two hundred ninety-three white Southern men, of whom 273 were from Georgia, South Carolina and

\textsuperscript{100} I\textit{bid.}, 18.
\textsuperscript{102} Ellen M. Rosenberg, \textit{The Southern Baptists}, 31.
newly formed Southern Baptist Convention did not,\footnote{Catherine Allen, \textit{A Century to Celebrate: History of Woman's Missionary Union} (Birmingham: Woman’s Missionary Union, Auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention, 1987), 18.} even though by 1845 there were 100 female societies in the South.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 17.}

With the melding of southern culture and evangelical Christianity, it is not surprising that the First Baptist Church of Columbia, South Carolina, was the location on December 17, 1860, for the secession convention to write the first Ordinance of Secession that began the journey into the Civil War. Southern Baptists offered ten resolutions championing the southern position in 1861, and in 1863 passed a resolution that condemned the United States government for “the war which has been forced upon us” and expressed opposition to a reunion with the United States “on any terms whatsoever.”\footnote{Bill J. Leonard, \textit{Baptist Ways: A History} (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003), 198.}

\textbf{Women’s Rights and The Woman’s Missionary Union}

After the Civil War southerners refused to admit their cause was wrong, preferring to believe that God delivered the slaves not because God opposed slavery, but because “southerners neglected their calling to evangelize the blacks properly.”\footnote{Bill J. Leonard, \textit{God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention}, 21.} Baptist preachers delivered jeremiads of God’s judgment on the South, warning that the only way to redemption was through faithful and evangelistic living. Unwilling to accept that slavery was wrong and the cause of the war, and unwilling to challenge the system that supported Jim Crow laws and continued racial injustice, Southern
Baptists concentrated upon individual piety and evangelistic zeal. Southerners’ second chance was to be better than the rest of the country in their individual lives.\textsuperscript{111} The predominant view was that only individuals born of the Spirit could change society. There was a desire to return to the gendered and racial hierarchies that existed before the war.

More than any other group, the Woman’s Missionary Union, Auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention (WMU), challenged southern hierarchy and defined the role of women in Southern Baptist churches for nearly a century. For many years the WMU was the only place women could lead, speak publicly and exercise their leadership skills.\textsuperscript{112} The history of the WMU confirms the ongoing conflict in Baptist life between spiritual equality and gender-defined roles. Southern women, committed to family and community, had to negotiate their sense of calling to a broader exercise of their abilities and beliefs within a hierarchical system that tried to limit them at home, church and society. The journey from small mission groups to a denominational mission organization shows how Southern women were accommodating at times and yet determined to succeed. Paul Harvey’s descriptive phrase, “saints but not subordinates” is accurate.\textsuperscript{113} Ironically, because they could not achieve more than auxiliary status in the Convention, they kept their independence when women’s mission groups in other denominations were taken over by the men, and when the new leaders of the SBC wanted to take over in the 1980s.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 109.
\textsuperscript{112} McBeth, Women in Baptist Life (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), 126.
Southern Baptist Women focused their organizational skills on mission endeavors, having organized their first mission society in North Carolina in 1810. The Civil War interrupted the mission efforts, but gave birth to Ladies Aid Societies. Ladies Aid Societies rescued many local congregations financially. They repaired dilapidated buildings, paid off mortgages, bought stoves and lights, raised money for the organ fund and helped ministerial students. Because of their extensive work in Texas, particularly in raising the $500 needed to obtain a pastor and laying the foundation for the First Baptist Church building in Dallas, the Ladies Aid Society, in 1874 was made adjunct to the Baptist General Association of North Texas, a singular honor.

The war also disrupted gender assumptions about women, including their role as church leaders. During the war and afterward, in the midst of all the devastation, poverty, grief and loss of male family members, southern women had to develop skills for survival and leadership they had not exercised before – make their own living, seek education and marketable skills. With the men gone from churches, women assumed the roles of deacon, Sunday School superintendent and conducted

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114 McBeth, *Women in Baptist Life*, 70. In addition, women formed a group to pray for missions in Richmond, Virginia in 1813 with the blessing of the pastor. In Georgia women formed a group in 1817, in Kentucky in 1822 and Alabama in 1823.  
116 Ibid., 20. Dallas First Baptist pastors in the 20th century include W. A. Criswell who absolutely rejected the notion that a woman could be called to be a pastor.  
church business.\textsuperscript{118} On occasion women served as supply preachers. Not surprisingly, southern women expressed gratitude for the self-reliance and self-confidence learned by necessity during the war.\textsuperscript{119}

After the war, southern women were expected to return to their roles as models of godly behavior and personal piety, focusing their lives around family and remaining within a “private sphere” of domesticity. But southern women were determined to continue their version of the reform work of the 1830s and 1840s that came out of the evangelicalism of the Second Great Awakening. Southern Baptist women focused their energy on resuming their work on missions.

Their mission work took shape in the context of the societal debates on women’s rights, particularly in terms of public work and speech.\textsuperscript{120} Rather than publicly work for women’s rights Southern Baptist women adopted a kind of “soft feminism”\textsuperscript{121} that accepted limits to public speaking and preaching but continued to participate in the acceptable work of church, and temperance through the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. In those church mission societies and women’s groups,

\begin{itemize}
  \item Leon McBeth, \textit{Women in Baptist Life}, 103.
  \item Speaking publicly for abolition, Sarah and Angelina Grimke met strident opposition from northern clergy, prompting Sarah to write \textit{Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women} (1838), arguing for the equality of women based on her feminist biblical interpretations that accorded women equal status with men in creation.
\end{itemize}
natural leaders had a chance to lead, to learn to make speeches, to keep records and organize.\(^{122}\)

In the 1860s Southern Baptist women began to broaden their focus from their local congregations to foreign missions. Each church needed a “missionary plank,” to assist pastors and keep women from growing selfish and too centered on themselves, wrote Mary T. Corbell Ganbrell of Texas.\(^{123}\) Women began to build mission organizations structured to create awareness and provide money for the support of missionaries, particularly single female missionaries and converted women of other cultures. Their efforts fall into two major phases. The first phase was establishing local mission groups. Second, after several years of organizing, the women petitioned the SBC for approval of a national woman’s mission organization that would be part of the denominational structure. Throughout the years of organizing, these women had to distance themselves from women’s rights advocates – while at the same time embodying the rights of women to organize.

First, organizing. Baptist women joined in the national “woman’s mission to woman” movement that began in 1861, its purpose to provide funds to send single women into the mission field. Opportunities for single women were limited by the policy that females had to accompany a family (with male head) of missionaries to be appointed; and it increasingly became evident that women would have greater access to teach women in other cultures.\(^{124}\) By appointing single women, not only could they

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\(^{124}\) Ibid., 25.
realize their professional goals and have the freedom to teach and lead their converts, the effectiveness of the mission movement would be enhanced.\textsuperscript{125}

By 1872 there were mission organizations in every corner of the convention, with a permanent women's organization in Baltimore "mothering" them all and building an intricate system with deep roots.\textsuperscript{126} The women gained the support of Henry Allen Tupper, head of the Foreign Mission Board, and reversed the policy against sending single women as missionaries. In addition, Tupper agreed to keep the women's financial contributions, which were considerable, separate from other funds; and the women would control their contributions. From the beginning the WMU proved especially effective in raising money, small portions from many dedicated women. By 1873 contributions to the mission board increased by 75%, the first fiscal sign of life since the Civil War.\textsuperscript{127}

Having been successful in appointing female missionaries, the second phase of organization, to include men in their efforts and institutionally broaden the scope

\textsuperscript{125} Lottie Moon, the most famous Southern Baptist missionary, and the one for whom the Christmas offering for foreign missions is named, went alone to China and evidently carried out all the duties of a pastor.

\textsuperscript{126} Catherine Allen, \textit{A Century to Celebrate}, 27. Mrs. Ann Graves of Baltimore, whose son Roswell Graves was a Southern Baptist missionary, organized a group to pray and lend financial support. Widely known author of theology and philosophy of women's roles in the tradition of Catherin Beecher, Ann Graves was a member of First Baptist Church of Baltimore, known because all of its active members were women and because women were permitted to vote and serve on committees.

\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Ibid.} Each woman was given a "mite box" (named after the "Widow's mite" in Luke 21:1-4), and encouraged to put in money each week. Women's mission groups in other denominations used mite boxes as well, prompting sustained, sacrificial giving as opposed to sporadic offerings. See Susan M. Yohn, "‘Let Christian Women Set the Example in Their Own Gifts’: The ‘Business’ of Protestant Women’s Organizations" in \textit{Women and Twentieth-Century Protestantism}, eds. Margaret Lamberts Bendroth and Virginia Lieson Bereton (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 216.
of their work, was seen as a political move toward women's rights and suffrage.

Women leaders and female missionaries were speaking to mixed audiences, and their activity was seen as an abandonment of their primary duties as homemaker and thus against the will of God. In 1884, when the meeting was held in Baltimore, Joshua Levering, a supportive pastor, noting that women were ready to evangelize the South, proposed that the Home Mission Board employ a woman to superintend and organize women's societies. His proposal brought condemnation by J. William Jones, pastor, Confederate veteran, and chief evangelist for the religion of the "lost cause,"¹²⁸ who classified this move as the "cutting wedge of women's rights."¹²⁹ He further declared that southern women did not want such work. J. B. Gambrell, pastor and editor of the Baptist Standard countered with the accusation that the convention men were "old fogies." J. W. M. Williams moved that the proposal be referred to the Home Mission Board - where it died.¹³⁰

During the next three years, the women continued to meet and hear women speakers, deflecting criticism for speaking in public (at one point banning men from their gathering) and in the process absorbing a Convention vote against having women as delegates. In 1885, SBC leaders refused to seat two women registered as authorized delegates - Mary Eagle and Margaretta Early - leaders of the state woman's committee of Arkansas, both married to ministers.¹³¹ The SBC constitution did not specifically state that delegates had to be men – until that meeting. In spite of

¹²⁹ Catherine Allen, A Century to Celebrate, 37.
¹³⁰ Ibid.
¹³¹ Ibid., 36. By this time the number of societies had grown to 642 and the contributions by women had grown by 68%.
support from several male delegates, and the fact that the two women withdrew their names as delegates, the men voted to change the constitution, replacing the word “members” with “brethren.” The main opposition voice belonged to famed orator J. B. Hawkins who declared:

I love the ladies, but I dread them worse. If ladies were admitted as delegates they will be qualified for any office. If one should aspire to be President of the Convention (no man) would allow his name to be used for that office. The women would get all the offices, it is all wrong. We are not prepared for such a revolution. Our southern women do not want it.132

The rather odd salute to the power of women carried the day. Women were not welcomed as delegates until 1918.133

Still fearful of women’s speech, leaders of the Convention did not allow the WMU leaders to verbally give their reports to the Convention until 1929. Until then men read the report. When Ethelene Cox was the first to give her report in 1929, several men walked out, displaying what Leon McBeth described as a kind of “irrational fear of women even standing in the pulpit whether they were preaching or not.”134 To avoid this controversy, for the next ten years the messengers left the church sanctuary for another meeting room when the WMU president gave her report. Not until 1938 did women regularly present the WMU report to the entire Southern Baptist Convention meeting.135


133 Ibid.


The women finally achieved their national organization, Woman's Missionary Union, Auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention.\textsuperscript{136} In 1888, at Broad Street Methodist Church, about 200 hundred women (32 delegates, representing 12 states along with about 100 Virginia women), having spent the day before in prayer, gathered for their meeting to finalize their organization. Two men, a missionary and a prominent orator, gave the devotionals and then left to attend the convention of over 800 men being held at First Baptist Church. The orator, F. M. Ellis, noted it was absurd for people to think this was a woman's rights meeting. He continued, "All fear ought to be put aside before the overmastering thought of divine command for service."\textsuperscript{137} Indeed, one woman declared, "We have our rights, the highest of which is for service."\textsuperscript{138} By distinguishing political rights from the rights of service, women in the WMU undercut the arguments against them and achieved their organizational and leadership goals.

While the women were organizing, the nearby SBC focused on a report that included the resolution from the women that they organize on a national level, sending their money to the mission boards for distribution. With no recorded debate, the resolution passed, causing one of the women to observe that the Convention basically said, "Do as you please, only send us the money."\textsuperscript{139} The women had achieved their goal — but as an auxiliary to the SBC.

\textsuperscript{136} The official name was adopted in 1890.
\textsuperscript{137} Catherine Allen, \textit{A Century to Celebrate}, 44.
\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Ibid}.

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Always under scrutiny for their possible feminist leanings, WMIU members displayed what Elizabeth Flowers called both prophetic and traditionalist impulses.\(^{140}\) By organizing and speaking in public, raising their own funds and working for a more powerful role in the SBC, the women were breaking out of the submissive role of "southern lady." They lobbied for advances in denominational power and authority for women under the guise of missions and service. In 1918 the WMU pushed the Convention toward accepting women as messengers, and in 1921 the WMU presented a convention resolution requiring greater representation on denominational boards.\(^{141}\) Leaders of the WMU advocated for the establishment of the Cooperative Program,\(^{142}\) and incorporated principles of the social gospel into its local personal service programs.\(^{143}\) They maintained leverage in their ability to raise money, insisting on the power to choose how the mission offerings were spent. The WMU saved the mission boards from bankruptcy and crippling debt in 1933.\(^{144}\)

\(^{140}\) Elizabeth Flowers, "Varieties of Evangelical Womanhood: Southern Baptists, Gender and American Culture," 71.

\(^{141}\) Elizabeth Flowers, Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II, 45.

\(^{142}\) E. Glenn Hinson, "The Background of the Moderate Movement," in The Struggle for the Soul of the SBC: Moderate Responses to the Fundamentalist Movement, ed. Walter B. Shurden (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1993), 13. The Cooperative Program became the funding mechanism by which churches would contribute a percentage of their offerings to the work of the denomination. The Executive committee became the fiscal agent of the denomination.


\(^{144}\) David T. Morgan, Southern Baptist Sisters: In Search of Status, 1845-2000 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), 136. The Home Mission Board and the Foreign Mission Board had a collective debt of three million dollars. The WMU used
On the other hand, the WMU assumed a more traditionalist non-threatening role, downplaying women's work for women and focusing on educating other women and children so they would give to Southern Baptist missions. They would not form an independent missions board but would be a “helpmate to the male-led boards” through publications, fund-raising and missionary recruitment. They did not push for women’s rights in an era when suffrage campaigns occupied northern women, choosing to focus solely on missions while accepting the self-sacrificing rhetoric of their foremothers. When asked repeatedly about suffrage, Fannie Heck, first WMU president, responded that her only interest was missions.

Through the years the WMU developed mission organizations and materials for all ages and founded the Woman’s Missionary Union Training School to train female missionaries in 1907. The WMU gave the school to the Southern Baptist Convention in 1957 (property valued at $1,146,000), and it eventually became a part of Southern Seminary as the Carver School of Social Work with C. Anne Davis, a graduate of the WMU Training School, as dean. As part of the seminary, women could take a variety of courses including courses in Christian education and theology.

surplus funds from the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering of that year to pay salaries of the missionaries.

145 Elizabeth Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, 70.
In a move to both limit and expand their focus, the WMU gave up their control of the mission offerings in 1956.\textsuperscript{149} Originally the offerings were considered women’s offerings, and the WMU had maintained control, partly to supplement the women missionaries who salaries were less than their male counterparts. While giving over control to the mission boards, the WMU focused on involving the entire congregation in promoting the offerings.\textsuperscript{150}

The WMU membership began to decline in 1966 as more women entered the workforce and had less time and perhaps less interest for an organization of women to support missionaries,\textsuperscript{151} though it remains the “largest body of organized laity in the Southern Baptist Convention.”\textsuperscript{152} At the same time, the women who had been nurtured in mission groups went to seminary to study theology, not just social work or Christian education. Some of these women who had been taught to listen for God’s call began to respond in unforeseen ways. They began to hear a call to preach and be pastors, to request ordination and officially stand in the pulpit and claim their power to speak.

\textbf{Post World War II Challenges to Southern Baptists}

\textsuperscript{149} Elizabeth Flowers, \textit{Into the Pulpit}, 46.
\textsuperscript{150} By the end of 1998 the two offerings for missions, The Lottie Moon Christmas Offering and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering, the WMU has led SBC congregations to contribute nearly $2.5 billion for missions. Woman’s Missionary Union, Southern Baptist Convention, \url{http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/WMU.asp} (accessed September 30, 2013).
\textsuperscript{151} Flowers, \textit{Into the Pulpit}, 47. The membership settled at 1 million in the early 1970s.
\textsuperscript{152} Woman’s Missionary Union, Southern Baptist Convention \url{http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/WMU.asp} (accessed September 30, 2013).
After World War II the civil rights movement, the women’s movement and the women’s ordination movement challenged the cultural and religious structures of the SBC and helped set the stage for the controversy and division in the 1980s.

*The Civil Rights Movement – 1950s and 1960s*

The Civil Rights Movement forced social and political change upon the South, through efforts that included countless marches, demonstrations and boycotts, through “freedom riders” on buses headed south, voter registration workers, the legal action by National Association for the Advancement of Colored People lawyers as well as charismatic leaders and members of the Black churches. Beginning with the legal desegregation of schools in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling, the 1950s and 1960s were two of the most politically significant decades in American history. Despite violent southern resistance, The 1964 Civil Rights Act; the 1965 Voting Rights and Higher Education Acts; and the Medicare/Medicaid Act of 1965 were passed and created a new reality in the South and elsewhere in the nation.

During the civil rights struggles most of the leaders in opposition to desegregation and the dismantling of Jim Crow laws were Southern Baptists. 153 W.A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas was among Southern Baptist pastors who openly supported religious and racial segregation. A minority of pastors and students were outspoken in support of integration and participated in civil rights events but most are unknown and remained on the margins of Southern Baptist power structures. 154

154 Among the supporters of civil rights were pastors Carlyle Marney, Henry Langford and Will Campbell. In addition, Clarence and Florence Jordan along with
The story of two men who attended The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary illustrates the continuing focus of Southern Baptists on individualism – the ability to separate faith and social ethics, or in their words “evangelism” from “politics.” Douglas Hudgins was pastor of the influential First Baptist Church of Jackson, Mississippi, during the 1960s. Hudgins refused to get involved in the civil rights struggle, and was not open to having African Americans worship in the congregation. His classmate, H. Hansel Stembridge after leaving Southern Seminary had studied at Graduate Theological Union, joined the American Baptists and become active in the civil rights movement. The summer Medgar Evers was murdered Stembridge paid a visit to Hudgins in Jackson hoping he could persuade his former colleague to use his influence to help end the violence. He asked Hudgins: “How can it be, Doug, that you are here in this town preaching the gospel and there’s all this hatred and violence?” Hudgins answered with the old Southern Baptist refrain, “You simply don’t understand. You know Baptists have no business tinkering in political matters.” In his over-emphasis upon individual spirituality, Hudgins could claim civil rights for blacks had nothing to do with the Gospel. Stembridge commented that

Martin and Mabel England founded *Koinonia* Farm, an interracial community in Americus, Georgia in 1942. In 1964 three students from Southern Seminary in Louisville marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Frankfort, KY. David Bailey was one of them.

Samuel S. Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis Revisited* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 112. The only areas where Southern Baptists got involved in social issues were those involving drinking, gambling and other moral evils.

Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 104. Samuel S. Hill argues the Southern Baptist pastors were unprepared to help in the civil rights movement because of the focus on individual piety that did not apply to a wide range of
Hudgins seemed to believe white Mississippians were the last to save the "Southern Way of Life"—"even to save America itself."\(^{157}\)

With few exceptions, integration did not take place within the churches in the years following the civil rights movement, though Southern Baptist leaders like W. A. Criswell changed their views on segregation and welcomed blacks into their congregations. By the end of the 1960s more local Southern Baptist churches held open policies than closed. In 1963 polls revealed more than 60 percent of white southerners opposed school integration; by 1966 only 24 percent did. And letters to state convention newspapers had tipped in favor of those declaring opposition to Jim Crow.\(^{158}\) Baptist conservatives no longer argue the merits of segregation or slavery based on biblical passages.

When conservatives took over the SBC in the 1980s-1990s, Richard Land was appointed head of the Christian Life Commission. Land worked with a group of white and black Baptists toward a racial reconciliation resolution that passed the SBC in 1995.\(^{159}\) At the same time, as one reporter observed, the Southern Baptist conservatives who took control of the Convention aligned themselves with the complicated social problems. They were not trained theologically for this. Samuel S Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis Revisited*, 113.


\(^{159}\) Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 253. SBC outreach to black Baptists has resulted in congregations that are dually aligned with the SBC and the National Baptist Convention, resulting in approximately 1,200 predominately black congregations in the SBC with roughly 800,000 African American members in the year 2000.
Republicans who oppose virtually all government policies aimed at ending racial injustice, all affirmative action.\textsuperscript{160}

\textit{The Women's Movement – 1960s and 1970s}

The 1950s ideal of women as contented housewives did not fit the reality of women who had worked during World War II and others who continued to work for their living. Those who were supposedly content to focus on home and family identified with Betty Friedan's "problem that has no name" articulated in \textit{The Feminine Mystique} (1963). In a convergence of advanced education, professional experience and political will women in the 1960s and 1970s created a movement for change that resulted in significant legislation. Not simply content with the pursuit of equal rights, other women worked for the liberation of women from sexism in every aspect of one's personal life as well.

As a result, the decades of the 1960s and 1970s saw major advances in the status of women. Among the legislative victories were the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the Higher Education Act (1965); the Equal Rights Amendment (passed in 1972 but failed ratification by all 50 states); Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 that banned sex discrimination in schools, whether in academics or athletics; and the 1973 Supreme court decision in Roe v Wade, guaranteeing the right to abortion. Though these advances were fiercely contested, the marches, lobbying efforts, boycotts, legal battles, publications and consciousness-raising groups of the women's movement challenged traditional notions of gender and opened up new opportunities.

\textsuperscript{160}ibid.
These changes in the status of women challenged the Southern Baptist ideal of women and domesticity, the hierarchy in which men rule and women lend support. In their minds, feminism that included women's reproductive freedom\textsuperscript{161} and freedom to pursue their own careers independent from men was a threat to the family and thus to society. The freedom and ability of women to be independent leaders of congregations was something the fundamentalist/conservative pastors could not tolerate. Feminism was the new evil to be defeated as the SBC controversy of the 1980s illustrates.

Ironically, the consciousness-raising and organizational strategies of the women's movement empowered not only the liberal women but also the conservative women in the SBC. As I discuss in later chapters, many Baptist women embraced the changes and claimed their right to be ordained ministers, but other Southern Baptist women fought to preserve the traditional family. Conservatives stressed the need for "family values" as a means of broader social order, implying that women are ultimately responsible for both. While this was not the patriarchal slave-holding "family" of the antebellum South, Southern Baptist resistance to the new social order of the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century was reminiscent of 19\textsuperscript{th} century struggles in which "order" based on nostalgic ideas about race and gender was the desired goal.

\textit{Women's Ordination Movement – 1950s – 1970s}

\textsuperscript{161} Southern Baptists passed resolutions nearly every year after Roe v Wade in 1973, at first stating that abortion should not be taken lightly or for simple convenience. Over the years the resolutions have become more restrictive, upholding the "sanctity of human life" and supporting a ban on federal funding for Planned Parenthood in 2008. http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/AMResSearchAction.asp?SearchBy=Keyword&DisplayRows=10&frmData=Abortion&Search=Search (accessed December 3, 2013).
The women’s movement of the 1960s came in a convergence of cultural change that included a relationship between religious women’s push for ordination and the secular women’s movement, proving beneficial to both. Religion played a pivotal role in inspiring nineteenth century women’s challenge to the status quo and their work for social reform that included gender equality, then suffrage for women. Liberal Protestant women articulated feminist ideas and concern for poor women, women of color and lesbians as well as those of white, economically comfortable, heterosexual women in the 1950s and early 1960s, anticipating the secular feminism that emerged later.\(^{162}\) As a result of the synergy of the ordination movement and the women’s movement, by 1970 women were being ordained in record numbers. More denominations began to ordain women during the 1970s than during any other decade in the past 140 years—seven of the largest denominations.\(^{163}\) The push for ordination that met with resistance, particularly in the struggle for ordination within the Episcopal Church, created an awareness of the inequities that existed and drew women into the feminist movement.\(^{164}\)

In the 1950s, women began to move toward ordination and greater leadership roles in American churches, threatening the patriarchal structures of the church and reflecting a broader move toward the recognition of women’s contributions. Although

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a few women achieved ordination in earlier years, in the 1950s congregations began ordaining women in larger numbers.165 Scattered Southern Baptist churches in Texas, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Missouri and Virginia began to ordain women as deacons, perhaps as many as 200 women, often suffering expulsion from their local associations for doing so.166 Northern Methodists and Presbyterians USA began ordaining women for pastoral ministry in 1956, and the Church of the Brethren and United Presbyterian Church, North America followed in 1958.167

One of the earliest proponents of women’s equality was the National Council of Churches (NCC), founded in 1908 by social gospel progressives who believed that social reform was as central to Christianity as personal salvation.168 Although dominated by male leaders, the Council emphasized the needs of oppressed groups, and feminists expanded the agenda and rhetoric to include concern for women of all races, economic status and sexual identity. Aided by the decentralized structure of the NCC, women were able to give high priority to the specific support of African American women through the Division of Education and Ministry as well as the Division of Church and Society. Among the issues these groups addressed were the

165 Pamela R. Durso and Amy Shorner-Johnson, The State of Women in Baptist Life 2010, Commissioned by Baptist Women in Ministry, Presented, June 2011, 6. The first woman ordained was Antoinette L. Brown, in 1853 by the Congregationalists in upstate New York. In 1876, the first known Baptist women ordained was M. A. Brennan who was recognized as a newly ordained minister by the Bellevernon Freewill Baptist Church of Pennsylvania in 1876.


civil rights movement and the ordination of women. In 1974 the Council on Women in Ministry addressed the paucity of ordained women and consequently supported the "illegal" celebration of mass by Episcopal women in 1975.169

In addition to the work of the national ecumenical groups, individual denominations formed task forces to advocate for women’s full participation in the life of the church, including ordination for pastoral ministry. These national groups also promoted the formation of task forces in local churches, an important move. As a result, by 1975 all of the evangelical bodies except Southern Baptists had women’s study and task force groups.170

Although Southern Baptists were behind other denominations in terms of denominational organizations, individual congregations responded to women called to ministry in the 1960s and early 1970s with the inherent authority of their autonomous status. Not until the national controversy that exploded in the 1980s did churches adopt a more ideological stance toward the ordination of women. Even then, many congregations would ordain one who had grown up in their church.171

Conclusion

While many in the South embraced the evangelism of the Great Awakenings, especially women and African Americans, others found the egalitarian message and practice a threat to established racial and gender hierarchies. The need to preserve the

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171 Pamela R. Durso and Amy Shorner-Johnson, The State of Women in Baptist Life – 2010, 7. By 2010 the number of women ordained in Baptist churches (including churches affiliated with the SBC, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Alliance of Baptists) was 2,200.
existing order prevailed in the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845. Southern Baptists developed their own distinctive brand of being Baptist — successful in evangelism, organization and encouraging personal piety — while denying the social justice implications of Christianity. During the remaining years of the 19th century Southern Baptist women resisted their secondary role in the social and religious hierarchy by forming their own mission organization, always having to manipulate the language of “rights” to focus on the right of service, rather than political rights.

The racial and gendered hierarchies of the South continued until the challenges of post World War II America forced the dismantling of Jim Crow laws and societal integration, developments violently opposed by Southern Baptists. Although some African American Baptist churches whose primary affiliation is with the Baptist General Convention, also affiliate with the SBC, Southern Baptist churches are still overwhelmingly “white” congregations.

The women’s movement and the women’s ordination movement freed many women to become pastors and leaders in the church, and yet these changes in the status of women was a “bridge too far” for late twentieth-century conservatives in the SBC. While other denominations were establishing task forces to promote women’s ministry, emerging neo-evangelical leaders in the SBC were strategizing to shut down the expression of women’s liberation in the church.
Chapter 2: Backlash and Feminist Responses

We did not say to each other “Let’s start a justice equality movement for women in the Baptist church.” We simply stood up and said, “I am. I am called. I am a daughter of God and the church.” Thus began our long learning about the use and abuse of power. As you can imagine, we desperately needed each other for mutual support, encouragement, and discernment.172

Nancy Sehested

The Baptist women who advocated for ordination and a place in the church based their conviction on their call to ministry, not just the desire for equality. Nancy Sehested’s sermon at the 30th Anniversary Celebration of Baptist Women in Ministry was taken from the same biblical passage as her first sermon to the group (“We Have This Treasure”). The biblical passage (2 Corinthians 4:7-12)173 is an argument for authority from a transcendent God to be disciples of Christ. More subtly, a woman who represents Jesus and speaks for God challenges the notion that God is male and only men can represent God. When a woman stands in the pulpit and proclaims the Word of God, proclamation becomes a political as well as spiritual event.

In this sermon and in other publications, Southern Baptist women identified with the feminist theologians who challenge assumptions about God and emphasize the experience of women. God’s liberation includes all humanity, women and other

172 Nancy Sehested, “We Still Have This Treasure,” First Baptist Church, Greensboro, North Carolina, June 26, 2013, the 30th anniversary celebration of Baptist Women in Ministry (formerly Southern Baptist Women in Ministry).

173 “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.” (2 Cor. 4:7-12, NRSV)
marginal groups.\textsuperscript{174} It is never just about women or women's equality, but includes broader issues of justice in all areas of life. Women who are called by God, therefore, should be a part of the church with equal responsibility and leadership opportunities. That was not the case in 1983. Like all justice movements, the will to organize among Southern Baptist women was fueled by "a sense of outrage"\textsuperscript{175} at the way they were being treated.

By the late 1970s women who wanted to be ministers in Southern Baptist churches were going to seminary in record numbers, getting degrees in theology, becoming ordained and enjoying the support of significant organizations in the denomination. As I will discuss later, conservative leaders viewed the enhanced roles of women in society and in the church as part of a liberal trend they were determined to reverse. As the controversy intensified over the Bible, Baptist beliefs in soul competency and church autonomy, the role of women ministers became a major point of contention. Unable to resolve their differences, moderate Baptists formed new associations that included churches willing to have a woman as pastor.

The struggle between Baptist women ministers and Baptist conservatives viewed through the lens of feminist theory highlights the ability to organize and create a narrative of one's own as classic expressions of women's power — and this power has been greatly resisted by those who preach a submissive role for women. Determined Baptist women organized into networks of support, creating their own identity as ministers.


\textsuperscript{175} Nancy Sehested, "We Still Have This Treasure," June 26, 2013.
There were many strategies for effecting change, including forming state and regional groups, holding conferences, teaching, preaching, mentoring and helping with employment. I will focus on the publication of *FOLIO, A Newsletter for Southern Baptist Women in Ministry*. Especially during the first ten years, Southern Baptist Women in Ministry (SBWIM) created a counter-narrative to conservative ideology by employing feminist theology to challenge theological constructs that God ordained the subjugation of women by the “order of creation.” In addition, I will argue that *Synergy, Journal of Virginia Baptist Women in Ministry* was also an expression of feminism and feminist theology.

In response to the conservative takeover of the denominational apparatus, women and men resisted by organizing into other networks, the Southern Baptist Alliance in 1987 (now Alliance of Baptists) and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, 1991. These two associations support women as pastors and provide the space for the formerly Southern Baptist women in my study to live out their calling.

"They Don’t Know Change is Coming” – Women Advance in the SBC

In the 1970s Southern Baptist women had reached a critical point in their ability to access theological knowledge and gain agency in the institutional structure of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) through seminary training, ordination, and organized networks of women. In the late 1970s several events that included conferences and publications reflected a growing acceptance of women in ministry at least among some in the denomination.
Advanced Degrees in Seminary

With increased opportunities and expectations for college degrees that attended the women’s movement, more women went to seminary for theological and spiritual growth, to train for ministerial roles other than pastor, and/or with pastoral or teaching goals in mind. In 1970 women comprised 10.6 percent of the student body in Southern Baptist seminaries. By 1981-82 the number of women in Southern Baptist seminaries had increased to 17.9 percent of the student body. In other denominations the number of female seminarians increased during the same period. In 1972 there were 1,077 women enrolled in seminary, or 4.7 percent of total seminary enrollment in three or four year professional degree programs, those that typically led to ordination. In 1980-1981 there were 4,747 women in these programs, or 14.7 percent of the total. Thus the percentage increase for this period was 340.8 percent for women, while male enrollment in the same programs grew by only 25.0 percent.

With more women pursuing theological degrees, debate about the proper role for women intensified. Women attending Southern Baptist seminaries in the early 1970s and other denominational seminaries had an uphill battle to gain acceptance as

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177 Jackson W. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, Adair T. Lummis, Women of the Cloth: A New Opportunity for the Churches (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 5. This study is based on nine denominations: American Baptist, American Lutheran, Christian Church (Disciples), Episcopal Church, Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church, U.S., United Church of Christ, United Methodist, United Presbyterian, USA. It does not include Southern Baptists, or Episcopalians, whose women won official ordination in 1976 after an intense fight that included an “irregular” ordination of eleven women in 1974.
serious students, not only from professors but other students. Erin shared her experience at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS), Louisville, Kentucky. In 1974 she found the perception among administrators that the young women right out of college were there mainly to get married. This was humorous to her - looking at the field of men “who were not the pick of the litter.” But the most disappointing reality was the subtle harassment women experienced from the administration and several professors in not taking them seriously or not being willing to recognize and encourage their academic abilities. As Erin explained, “A lot of the professors had been there a long time and they had been used to teaching white males for a long time . . . and they don’t really know that, hey, in five more years they would be blown out of the water. They don’t know that change is coming.”

The numbers of women in seminary continued to increase, causing Vickie, one of the older students, to express her own doubts about women at SBTS between 1982-85. In her opinion there were three kinds of women in seminary:

There were ones who dressed up every day, put on the make-up, heels, because they were looking for an MRS; second, the women like myself, who, and I don’t mean to paint myself in a good light, but you know what I am trying to say, who were interested in getting a good solid education because they were to serve the Lord; and then there were the angry women that wanted everyone to know we should be there and women have a right and they were always pushing things in a way that sent everybody packing and turned people against women.

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178 Jackson W. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove and Adair T. Lummis, *Women of the Cloth: A new Opportunity for the Churches*, 78. The situation was different at selected non-denominational schools. In 1972 Union Theological Seminary in New York resolved to work toward having women constitute one-half of its student body and faculty. Yale and Princeton were also popular and more receptive schools for women. However, women who intended to be pastors eventually felt the pressure to attend the denominational seminary.


Although questioning the motivations of other women, Vickie believed female students had to take a stand for equality, but that it should be done subtly. As co-leader for Women in Ministry at the seminary she challenged the SBTS president to include women on the ministry teams that routinely went to local churches for the weekend to preach and advocate for the seminary. As a result, she became one of the first women to participate in one of the weekend ministry teams. Not wanting the men to feel threatened, she baked cookies for those in her van and knitted during the trip. Laughing, she explained, “I don’t even knit.”

Even though seminaries were bastions of male power, unaccustomed to having women in theological studies, five of the women in my study attended Southern Baptist theological seminaries (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and SBTS) in the 1970s and early 1980s and reported distinctly positive experiences. In 1973 the students at SBTS passed a resolution that affirmed openness to women in virtually all forms of ministry. Individual professors supported their call to ministry, even encouraging them to preach. Vickie remembers being told, “You really need to think about preaching.” Erin’s homiletics professor returned her first written sermon with the words, “You are a preacher, do you know it?” Susan struggled with her desire to become a pastor when so few women filled that role until a seminary professor encouraged her: “Wouldn’t you rather be a part of something

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181 Ibid.
182 Barry Hankins, Uneasy in Babylon, 203.
new and exciting than a part of something that has always been?”\textsuperscript{185} Susan won the prestigious Clyde T. Francisco Preaching Award at SBTS, the first woman to do so. In the 1980s, Vickie also won the award.

When the conservative/moderate controversy intensified during the 1980s, there were thirty-four women in the EdD and PhD programs at SBTS. A study that included twenty-six of these women reveals an increasingly “chilly environment” – meaning male professors, exclusive male language, exclusion of women from curriculum – accompanied by sexist jokes and generally not being accepted as credible students. Four women reported being physically harassed and one woman endured a male student’s comment, “I don’t think you have a right to study theology, and you shouldn’t be here.”\textsuperscript{186} Another woman who made one of the two highest grades in the class recalled having a professor say to her, “Don’t tell the boys what you made.” She responded, “I will if I want to because I’m proud of the grade.”\textsuperscript{187}

In spite of the difficulty of being among an overwhelming majority of males, most of these women reported a time of learning and personal growth. As one person described her experience, “It was hardly a utopia – but despite all the problems, I got pushed and stretched to grow and become in a way I could never have dreamed of when I got there.”\textsuperscript{188}

\textit{Congregations Ordain Women}

\textsuperscript{185} Susan, interview with author, December 10, 2008.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 400.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 403.
Southern Baptist congregations, affirming their belief in soul competency and congregational autonomy, continued to exercise their right to ordain women even as resistance against women also continued. The numbers of Southern Baptist women ordained increased slowly, though there was a surge in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The first woman ordained by a Southern Baptist church was Addie Davis, who graduated from Southeastern Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, and was ordained by Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina on August 9, 1964.189 The second ordination of a Southern Baptist woman did not occur until 1971. By 1975 there were seventy-five ordained women in SBC. But by 1982 the number had grown to 175,190 fulfilling a prophetic statement by C.R. Daly, editor of the Western Recorder in 1976: “Ordaining women as preachers and teachers is another trend among Southern Baptists. It is only a trickle now, but looks more and more like the beginning of a stream.”191

National SBC Publications Support Women in Ministry

After studying publications of various agencies and institutions of the SBC,192

189 Pamela R. Durso and Keith E. Durso, eds. Courage and Hope: The Stories of Ten Baptist Women Ministers (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005), 25. Addie Davis was unable to find employment in the South, but served as pastor of two churches in the north, one in Vermont, another in Rhode Island.

190 Sarah Frances Anders, “Pilgrimage Toward Equity in Ministry, SBC,” FOLIO 1, no 1 (1983): 3. Anders, professor of sociology at Louisiana College voluntarily kept records on the number of women ordained and were pastors of churches; and regularly wrote articles calling attention to the status of women in the convention. There was no official count of women minister in state or national Southern Baptist statistical records.


The magazine for college students published by the Sunday School Board of the SBC, *The Student*, devoted the entire February 1985 issue in support of women in ministry. Included were articles on “The Bible and Women,” “When God Calls,” “What is Femininity” among others about church leadership and the relationship of church and campus. Because of this show of support for women ministers, the editor of the magazine was fired within two years.

WMU Support and Consultation on Women in Church Related Vocations

197 Frank Stagg was a Baptist theologian and professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1964-1978. Evelyn Stagg is an authority in classical studies and a great supporter of women in ministry.
The WMU supported women in ministry, not only in terms of developing leadership qualities in women, but in specific acts.\textsuperscript{198} The WMU was among prominent SBC agencies and institutions that sponsored the "Consultation on Women in Church Related Vocations" in 1978, attended by three hundred women and men.\textsuperscript{199} In fact, the WMU conceived of the event, steered the planning committees and ran the meeting. The purpose of the gathering was to address the issues of improving the employment patterns for women in the Convention,\textsuperscript{200} and to provide a platform for the discussion of a balanced variety of views on the topic. The unofficial hottest topic of the consultation was the ordination of women. Of the 202 women in attendance, approximately twenty-four ordained women were present along with many female seminarians. Over and over again, they raised the issue of ordination, stressing that local congregations had nurtured their calling. Lynda Weaver Williams, an ordained woman and Southern Seminary doctoral student told her story and challenged the Southern Baptist audience:

I am where I am because of you. Because you let me learn from you, and because you provided ways for me to respond to God's call and because you have supported me and encouraged me in every endeavor. At least you have supported me until now . . . . Those prayers and smiles and pats on the back, and even the more substantial means of support are gone because I

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have not answered God’s call in the way you wanted – in the way that you believe to be valid . . .  

Male leaders in attendance responded with a limited level of understanding, seminary presidents pledging to do more. Jimmy Allen, who was president of the Southern Baptist Convention at the time, gave qualified welcome to “any gifted person anywhere to do anything they’re good enough to do.”

*Formation of Southern Baptist Women in Ministry, 1983*

In a series of meetings, organizers took steps to create an effective association of women. In 1981 the WMU sponsored a luncheon prior to the SBC meeting, followed by a dinner meeting before the 1982 meeting in New Orleans. At that dinner Sarah Frances Anders presented a white paper on the status of women in ministry, calling for a network of support and fellowship. Carolyn Weatherford, Executive Director of the WMU, immediately pledged financial assistance from the WMU. From the October 1983 “Theology is a Verb” conference on “Issues Affecting Women” in Charlotte, North Carolina, Nancy Hastings Sehested gave a report calling for national/regional conferences for women and a regular newsletter. After the March 1983 meeting of thirty-three women, Betty McGary Pearce and Reba Sloan Cobb presented a proposal for a Center for Women in Ministry and a newsletter. The next year, seventy-five women gathered prior to the meeting of the SBC in Pittsburg.
to formally organize Southern Baptist Women in Ministry, (SBWIM)\textsuperscript{204} and "a dream was becoming a reality."\textsuperscript{205}

The purpose for SBWIM was simply stated: "to provide support for the woman whose call from God defines her vocation as that of minister or as that of a woman in ministry within the Southern Baptist Convention" and "to encourage and affirm her call to be a servant of God."\textsuperscript{206} At the meeting the first issue of \textit{FOLIO, A Newsletter for Southern Baptist Women in Ministry}, was distributed. The group decided to open its membership to all Southern Baptist women who felt called to the ministry, and to their supporters, both women and men. A Steering Committee was selected and the group agreed to hold a second meeting preceding the 1984 meeting of the SBC in Kansas City.\textsuperscript{207}

The founders of SBWIM were a diverse group of women, some more conservative than others. There were debates within the organization about the most effective strategy to achieve their goals. One thing was sure: they did not want to replicate the hierarchical structures that excluded them from full participation in the church. In her address to the group in 1983, Nancy Sehested, a graduate of Union Theological Seminary in New York and versed in feminist theology, called upon the members to resist claiming for themselves power and authority that is rooted in domination. "Rather," she said, "we need to transcend all the talk about only

\textsuperscript{204} Flowers, \textit{Into the Pulpit}, 92.
\textsuperscript{206} Flowers, \textit{Into the Pulpit}, 94.
demanding rights and place the emphasis on the responsibility of using our gifts . . .. We must earnestly resist the temptation to reduce the task set before us to merely political terms . . .. We need to understand and embody a completely new image of what it means to lead."208

Members of SBWIM were most visible during the meetings and dinners they held before the annual Convention. Having women lead in worship was the only time most heard a woman preach. SBWIM partnered with The Center for Women in Louisville, Kentucky in publishing a quarterly newsletter, FOLIO.209 SBWIM welcomed supportive men, but the overwhelming majority of participants and leaders were women.

In addition to annual meetings, the organization adopted several strategies for advancing its cause. SBWIM sponsored conferences, established a resume service, and assisted in state and regional associations of women. One of the most ambitious projects was that of integrating women into seminary curricula. The 1991 project involved identifying the courses on women in thirty-five seminaries across the country and then producing bibliographies and syllabi for additional seminary-level courses on women. At the time there was at least one course on the role of women in society and church at all six of the denominational seminaries.210 Two seminaries, Southern and Southeastern had courses on feminist theology. There were Centers for

208 Ibid., 2.
209 Baptist Women in Ministry continues to operate on the national level, now with paid staff, holding meetings at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship annual meeting, publishing an online newsletter, Vocare, a mentoring program and other initiatives in support of women in ministry.
Women at three of the seminaries, offering a place for information and support for women in seminary.


**Controversy and Control in the Southern Baptist Convention, 1979-1991**

By the 1970s the Southern Baptists had constructed a massive empire with services and materials for every aspect of church life. At the same time, from the 1960s Southern Baptists were moving increasingly into the mainstream of American religious culture as well as moving out of the South and establishing churches in other areas. Southern Baptist scholars began to appropriate the methods and ideas of that larger culture, studying the Bible in its historical and literary context. Many accepted the science that the earth is several million years old. SBC scholars joined the conversation about the nature and essence of the biblical stories, especially those found the first chapter of Genesis.²¹¹ A new generation of college students, encouraged by the Baptist Student Union and the Home Mission Board, were trying to make sense of their faith and the church's role in civil rights, poverty, the Vietnam War and the women's movement. Women were entering SBC seminaries in record numbers and through advanced degrees were gaining teaching positions.

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Many people in the southern churches, however, saw the societal changes as a threat. They interpreted the 1970s “as the sort of chaos one might expect when biblical rules are discarded.” It seemed to them that they must remain true to the Bible and to evangelism in order to counter the change around them. They were unwilling to accept biblical interpretations other than the old ones. Unlike the seemingly ineffective liberal denominations, they would fight these changes by retreating and attempting to hold on to their way of life. In their view the most relevant issues were not race, social justice and sexual equality but the truth of the Bible. Unless they remained true to the Bible and to evangelism they would become like other “liberal” denominations and fail. As Nancy Ammerman has argued, “For many Southern Baptists, maintaining the truth of the Bible was a matter of spiritual survival in a sometimes alien land.”

Conservative preachers found a receptive audience when they argued that the Southern Baptists were in danger of decline because of the “liberal” teaching of seminary professors and compromise with cultural changes – specifically, the banning of official prayers in public schools, legal abortion, homosexuality and women in ministry. In their view there was too much capitulation to culture and so much individualization in belief that the communitarian side of Baptist life, expressed

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213 *Ibid.*, W. A. Criswell’s book, *Why I Believe that the Bible is Literally True*, published in 1969, was highly influential in the debate over the nature of the Bible.
in confessions of faith, covenants and catechisms was being undermined. Unable to change society, conservative fundamentalists turned their attention to changing the denomination.

Historically, the SBC was held together by a “Grand Compromise” based on an unspoken agreement that allowed for diversity of beliefs in the interest of cooperative efforts in evangelism and missions, a kind of “theological diversity and functional unity.” This structure held the denomination together and afforded autonomy to local congregations. Conservatives increasingly argued that doctrinal diversity did not lead to unity. In their view, it led to division. SBC president Adrian Rogers agreed that Baptists were not all alike, but “at the same time, Southern Baptists are old-fashioned, Bible-believing Christians that believe that hell is hot, heaven is sweet, sin is black, judgment is sure and Jesus saves. That’s who we are.” He was among other conservatives who insisted there needed to be a united,

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219 Ellen Rosenberg argues this arrangement led to “a reluctance to face issues of power”—respecting the rights of the individual while ignoring responsibility for the vast religious structure they had created. Rosenberg, The Southern Baptists, 53.
identifiable confessional identity. In order to do that, conservatives had to take over the denominational structure and make it work for them. No longer content to be the ultra-conservative wing of the denomination, somewhat on the sidelines like the progressives on the left, the goal was to take over and change the large moderate center.

Strategy for Takeover

Devised by Bill Powell, editor of the fundamentalist The Southern Baptist Journal, (and implemented by Houston Judge Paul Pressler, theologian Paige Patterson of Criswell Bible Institute, Texas, and preacher Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist in Memphis, Tennessee), the strategy was simple though challenging—elect a conservative as president of the SBC for at least ten consecutive years. The president has broad appointive powers, specifically to appoint the Committee on Committees. This Committee appoints the Committee on Boards that in turn nominates the trustees of convention institutions and agencies. Since the trustees served in staggered terms, it would take ten years for a complete turnover. Judge Paul Pressler summed up the goal in a speech at Old Forest Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, 1980: “We are going for the jugular. We are going for having knowledgeable, Bible-centered, Christ-honoring trustees of all our institutions who are not going to sit there like a bunch of dummies and rubber-stamp

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221 Fundamentalist Baptists had established their own alternative seminaries to those of the SBC—Criswell Biblical Studies Center, Dallas, 1971 and Mid America Baptist Seminary, Memphis, 1982.
222 Barry Hankins, Uneasy in Babylon, 274.
everything that’s presented to them.”

Since the number of messengers a church could send to the SBC depended upon the amount of money given to the Cooperative Program, Pressler’s advice to the churches was to “work within the framework of the Cooperative Program. Give at least enough to have the maximum number of messengers.”

The main theological agenda was biblical inerrancy, using the straw man of “liberalism” as the major thrust of sermons delivered during the pre-session Pastors’ Conferences at the SBC, to their congregations in weekly worship and revivals, and through television. Walter Shurden described the preaching as “passionate, incendiary and inflammatory,” rallying Southern Baptist preachers and laity to unite and join the movement for change.

Conservative/fundamentalist preachers presented the “slippery slope” argument – that unless one adheres to the inerrancy of the Bible, other beliefs – the divinity of Christ, the virgin birth or the bodily resurrection of Jesus - will fall as

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225 Ibid., 57.

226 Someone remarked that the number of “liberals” in the Southern Baptist Convention would fit in a phone booth - because all Southern Baptists were conservative.

227 George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4. Marsden describes fundamentalism as “militantly anti-modernist Protestant evangelicalism,” opposed to modernism in theology and cultural changes that modernism endorsed. Still, there is a paradoxical tension in fundamentalism, deeply alienated from the mainstream of American culture while still yearning to engage that culture for the sake of the gospel.

well. Adrian Rogers, three term president of the Convention within a nine year period, said in May 1982 that it was simple: the Bible was either "infallible" or "fallible," "inerrant" or "errant." Morris Chapman, elected president of the SBC in 1990, is quoted as saying, "For us not to believe in inerrancy is not to believe in God." Judge Presser argued "The issue was not an interpretation of Scripture, but the nature of Scripture – the complete, absolute reliability of Scripture: the complete truthfulness of Scripture and – may I dare say – the compete infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture."

While conservatives argued that the controversy was over theology – to save the denomination from liberalism and decline - moderates believed it was about the desire for control and power using inerrancy as a political weapon. In actuality, it was both theological and political and on both counts met stiff opposition by moderates. The series of resolutions that defined the role of women, inveighed against legal abortion, weakened the concept of the priesthood of the believer, appealed to "doctrinal integrity," and advocated an authoritarian role of pastor in the church.

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230 David T. Morgan, New Crusades, New Holy Land: Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention, 44.
231 Ibid. When conservative scholars spoke of inerrancy, they acknowledged inerrancy only in the original biblical documents – which are not available.
passed by rather close votes. Moderates had their own candidates for the office of president, but were outnumbered each time, by margins of two to ten percent.\textsuperscript{234}

Conservative pastors, highly organized and determined, were successful in getting busloads of parishioners to the Convention, which met only once a year, for the presidential vote,\textsuperscript{235} claiming the office of president for over ten consecutive years. Using the political skill of Judge Pressler, leaders of the takeover held pre-convention meetings in various states to ensure votes for their candidates. Conservatives were far ahead of the moderates in organization and strategy. Indeed, for the first two or three years, many in the convention were unconvinced that the conservative efforts would succeed. In addition, many moderates were SBC employees who were reluctant to take sides.

The most identifiable difference between the conservatives and moderates became the role of women in the church. Adrian Rogers argued that the sin of Eve was in not rebuking the devil, in believing “Satan’s fib about women’s lib.” He continued, “Women are superior to men at being a woman. . . . And a man is definitely superior to a woman at being a man. Don’t ever forget that it was God that

\textsuperscript{234} Grady Cothen, \textit{What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention: A Memoir of the Controversy} (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 1993), 253. The closest vote was in 1987 when Jerry Vines beat Richard Jackson by less than 700 votes – 15,804 to 15,112.

\textsuperscript{235} Shurden and Shepley, eds. \textit{Going for the Jugular}, 135 & 178. The number of messengers is astounding. The largest attendance was in Dallas, in 1985 with 45,519 messengers. In 1986 the second largest number appeared in Atlanta – 40,987. Prior to the years of controversy, typical Convention messengers were pastors and their families. Most church members did not attend.
made them in the beginning male and female, and God said, ‘That is good,’ and this unisex movement has been belched out of hell.”

Dorothy Patterson, theologian and wife of Paige Patterson, defended the submissive role of women by arguing for the biblical mandate of a fixed “order of creation.” She advanced a “complementarian” view of the role of women and concluded that the real issue at hand is not ordination itself but the authority of the Bible. In her view, with a fixed submissive role a woman could not be ordained because ordination implies the wielding of authority in carrying out the functions of pastoral ministry. Challenged by Jann Aldredge-Clanton who pointed out that Southern Baptists had also justified slavery on the basis of the Bible, Patterson dismissed that idea, saying there was no lasting injunction against slavery in the Bible as there was on the role of women. As a result of the Civil Rights movement, Southern Baptists in the 1970s and 1980s were no longer willing to defend their historic positions on race, but continued to resist equality for women, especially for ordination.

The new wave of fundamentalism that surfaced in the Southern Baptist Convention as neo-evangelicalism was a reaction against feminism and societal

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236 Shurden and Shepley, eds. Going for the Jugular, 15.
237 Elizabeth Flowers, Into the Pulpit, 134. Dorothy Patterson did not blame Eve for the sin of the world, but advanced a “complementarian” view of the role of women as equal with men spiritually, but with different fixed roles.
changes that challenged the sense of order and morality.\textsuperscript{240} The problem in their view was that women had departed from their God-ordained sphere, resulting in challenges to authority in other areas of life, including the authority of the Bible.\textsuperscript{241}

Conservative leaders linked women's ordination to the political movement for women's equality as if all were part of the same political agenda. By blaming women for societal problems Southern Baptists linked with the neo-evangelicalism\textsuperscript{242} that found expression in the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition.

\textit{Turning Point – the SBC Resolution on Ordination and the Role of Women}

Under the guise of biblical inerrancy the new conservative Southern Baptists argued that the Bible prohibits the leadership of women in church in any capacity that would indicate authority over men. Citing the sin of Eve, conservatives applied the

\textsuperscript{240} Betty DeBerg argues the driving force of 1920s fundamentalism was anxiety over the shift in gender roles. In her view fundamentalists were not so much defending "traditional theology as traditional ideology." \textit{Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 141.

\textsuperscript{241} Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, \textit{Fundamentalism and Gender: 1875 to the Present} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 124. By the mid 1970s the neo-evangelicals, or the "latter-day Calvinists found a pattern of hierarchy and rule embedded in God's original intent for humanity." See also Barry Hankins, \textit{Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture} (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 22. Several who emerged as leaders in the SBC – Richard Land, Al Mohler, Timothy George, Mark Coppenger and Paul Pressler – came under the influence of neo-evangelical leaders like Carl F. H. Henry and Francis Schaeffer when they studied in northern universities.

\textsuperscript{242} Harold J. Ockenga, Foreword to \textit{The Battle for the Bible} by Harold Lindsell (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 12. Ockenga, co-founder of conservative Fuller Theological Seminary, outlined the difference between fundamentalism, which was often separatist and avoiding sociological, political and economic areas of life and neo-evangelicalism, which intended to get involved and influence society. Donald Matthews, "'Christianizing the South' – Sketching a Synthesis" in \textit{New Directions in American Religious History}, eds. Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 103. Linking fundamentalism with evangelicalism is questionable since the two movements are antithetical.
dispensational premillennialism of the late 19th century millennial movement.

According to the premillennialists, sexual inequality is linked to the curse of Eve, and this curse will not be lifted until the millennium, Christ’s reign of one thousand years on earth. Until then, the situation of humans will remain unchanged and women will remain in a subjective state because that is God’s intention.243

In 1983, the year that SBWIM organized, the SBC passed a resolution that paid tribute to the contributions of women in all areas of ministry, including at home. Indicating things to come, Joyce Rogers244 offered an amendment to the resolution: “Be it finally resolved this resolution should not be interpreted as endorsing the ordination of women.” That amendment to the resolution failed.245

Not deterred, the SBC conservatives organized during the year and at the 1984 meeting had the votes to pass a resolution (53% to 41.09%) acknowledging the participation of women in the early church and their continued value as Christians, yet blaming women for the sin in the world and barring them from pastoral ministry.246 The Resolution on Ordination and Role of Women reads as follows:

WHERAS, We the messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Kansas City, June 12-14, 1984, recognize the authority of Scriptures in all matters of faith and practice including the autonomy of the local church; and

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244 Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, 79. Joyce Rogers, wife of Adrian, wrote a book entitled *The Wise Woman . . . How to Be One in a Thousand*, that captured the central message of fixed gendered patterns concerning women as God’s overarching plan for humanity.
245 Shurden and Shepley, eds. *Going for the Jugular*, 79.
246 Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, 102. Carl F. Henry, northern voice of neo-evangelicalism and first editor of *Christianity Today*, introduced the resolution, cementing his influence over the new Southern Baptist leaders. Many were surprised that he belonged to a Southern Baptist church.

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WHEREAS, The New Testament rejoins all Christians to proclaim the gospel;
and WHEREAS, The New Testament churches as a community of faith
recognized God's ordination and anointing of some believers for special
ministries (e.g. I Timothy 2:7; Titus 1:15), and in consequence of their
demonstrated loyalty to the gospel, conferred public blessing and engaged in
public dedicatory prayer setting them apart for service; and
WHEREAS, The New Testament does not mandate that all who are
divinely called to ministry be ordained; and
WHEREAS, in the New Testament, ordination symbolizes spiritual
succession to the world task of proclaiming and extending the gospel of
Christ, and not a sacramental transfer of unique divine grace that perpetuates
apostolic authority; and
WHEREAS, The New Testament emphasizes the equal dignity of men and
women (Gal: 3:28) and that the Holy Spirit was at Pentecost divinely
outpoured on men and women alike (Acts 2:17); and
WHEREAS Women as well as men prayed and prophesied in public
worship services (I Cor. 11:2-16), and Priscilla joined her husband in
teaching Apollos (Acts 18:26), and women fulfilled special church service-
ministries as exemplified by Phoebe whose work Paul tributes as that of a
servant of the church (Rom.16:1); and
WHEREAS, The Scriptures attest to God's delegated order of authority
(God the head of Christ, Christ the head of man, man the head of woman,
man and woman dependent one upon the other to the glory of God)
distinguishing the roles of men and women in public prayer and prophecy (I
Cor. 11:2-5); and
WHEREAS, The Scriptures teach that women are not in public worship to
assume a role of authority over men lest confusion reign in the local
church (I Cor. 14:33-36); and
WHEREAS, While Paul commends women and men alike in other roles of
ministry and service (Titus 2:1-10), he excludes women from pastoral
leadership (I Tim. 2:12) to preserve a submission God requires because the
man was first in creation and the woman was first in the Edenic fall (I
Tim. 2:13ff); and
WHEREAS, These Scriptures are not intended to stifle the creative
contribution of men and women as coworkers in many roles of church
service, both on distant mission fields and in domestic ministries, but
imply that women and men are nonetheless divinely gifted for distinctive
areas of evangelical engagement; and
WHEREAS, Women are held in high honor for their unique and significant
contribution to the advancement of Christ's kingdom, and the building of
godly homes should be esteemed for its vital contribution to developing
personal Christian character and Christlike concern for others.
THEREFORE, be it Resolved, That we not decide concerns of Christian
doctrine and practice by modern cultural, sociological and ecclesiastical
trends or by emotional factors; that we remind ourselves of the dearly
bought Baptist principle of the final authority of Scripture in matters of faith and conduct; and that we encourage the service of women in all aspects of church life and work other than pastoral functions and leadership roles entailing ordination.\textsuperscript{247}

The Kansas City Resolution served to focus the discussion between moderates and conservatives on the meaning of Baptist identity and the future of the church. It laid down the gauntlet of rejection for women seeking the pastorate, and perhaps more shocking, revived old notions that women were responsible for sin in the world. Even though resolutions were considered non-binding, this one was different. As conservatives gained control of the denominational agencies and seminary boards in the 1990s they enforced this prohibition against women through policy. The forced resignation of Molly Marshall, professor of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1994 was just one example of the ramifications of the resolution.\textsuperscript{248}

After the 1984 resolution conservatives increasingly focused on gendered ideas about women, on their ordination and roles in the church – further dividing and serving as a point of difference between persons and congregations. Consistent with the history of Southern Baptist women, the resolution would not have passed without the support of many conservative women. As Elizabeth Flowers has noted, strong conservative women like Joyce Rogers, Dorothy Patterson (who wrote the 1998 resolution on submission that passed and was included in the 2000 Faith and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\textsuperscript{247} Shurden and Shepley, eds. \textit{Going for the Jugular}, 122-123.
\textsuperscript{248} \textit{Battle for the Minds: A Controversial Film About Fundamentalism and Women}, produced and directed by Steven Lipscomb (Ho-Ho Kus, NJ: New Day Films, 1997), documents the changing environment at SBTS and the controversy surrounding Molly Marshall who taught theology, the first woman in the history of the seminary to do so.
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Message),²⁴⁹ Sarah Maddox and Susie Hawkins²⁵⁰ were active in not only in limiting women’s roles, they were forming women’s ministries as an alternative to the WMU.

Moderates Respond to the Resolution

The moderates’ response to the Kansas City Resolution was immediate. Peter James Flamming, pastor of First Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia, called the resolution a “perversion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” in an article titled “Baptist Resolution Stirring Backlash” in The Richmond Times Dispatch, July 28, 1984. In his editorial in The Religious Herald, June 21, 1984, Julian H. Pentecost wrote: “Our position remains that the ordination of women is a matter to be decided by the local church and is not the proper province of the Southern Baptist Convention, or state association/conventions. Our basic perspective is stated with transparent clarity in Galatians 3:28 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

The presidents of the six Southern Baptist seminaries opposed the resolution on hermeneutical grounds as well as being contrary to Baptist polity.²⁵¹ The state meetings that occurred in the fall of 1984 in Virginia, North Carolina, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Washington D.C. and South Carolina passed resolutions either

²⁴⁹ Consisting of four paragraphs the sentence pertaining to submission states: “A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation.” http://www.sbc.org/bfm/brm2000 asp (accessed August 15, 2013).

²⁵⁰ Flowers, Into the Pulpit, 77-84.

²⁵¹ "Seminary Presidents Respond to Kansas City Resolution," FOLIO, A Newsletter for Southern Baptist Women in Ministry 2, no. 2 (Autumn 1984): 1, 6-7.
affirming the ordination of women on the basis of the autonomy of the local
congregation, or deferring the decision of ordination to the local congregation, not the
SBC. Individual congregations publicly opposed the SBC resolution. Peter Rhea
Jones, pastor of First Baptist Church, Decatur, Georgia called for a “Manifesto of
Equality” to be presented at the 1985 meeting of the SBC to counteract the 1984
resolution that “denigrated every woman on the planet.”

It was the editors and contributors to FOLIO, the quarterly newsletter of
Southern Baptist Women in Ministry, who developed the most comprehensive
counter-narrative to the idea that God had ordained the subjugation of women from
the time of creation. Through articles on biblical interpretation, Baptist history and
polity, personal experience (stories of call, experience, role models), sermons, news
about women ordained and church positions, bibliographies and editorials, Baptist
women voiced their protest. Articles highlighted the experience of professional
women – testaments to what they were doing in ministry and how people were
responding. Through the contentious decade of the 1980s writers for FOLIO
chronicled the lives and concerns of women through a publication that became more
than a publication – it was a vehicle for community through which women could
share their lives, questions and answers.

Feminist Theology in FOLIO

Beginning with the first issue, editors of FOLIO turned to feminist theology
for biblical interpretation and support for their experience of call as well as practice of

252 “Fall Conferences Focus on Women,” FOLIO 2, no. 3 (Winter 1985): 6.
ministry through inclusive language. Writers employed feminist theology in three major ways.

First, writers claimed the insights of feminist theologians to counter prevailing biblical interpretations used against women and emphasized the spiritual impact of women’s leadership for renewal in the church. In the first issue of FOLIO (Fall 1983), in the front-page article entitled “Women in Ministry: A Biblical Theology,” Molly Marshall-Green (a PhD student at the time) countered the argument that women were assigned to submission because they were second in creation. Citing Elizabeth Cady Stanton who said in The Woman’s Bible: “Clearly the priestly creation narrative (Genesis 1:26-28) dignifies woman as an important factor in creation, equal in power and glory with man,”253 Marshall referenced Phyllis Trible’s treatment of creation stories in Genesis (God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality)254 to argue that both male and female are created in God’s image. Then she pointed out the evidence in the New Testament (Gal. 3:28) that “equality reigns in Christ’s body, the church.” There were women leaders in the early church (Romans 16:1, Phil. 4:3; Luke 2:36), and the Holy Spirit is giving gifts for ministry to women for holistic church renewal.255

Both Nancy Sehested and Anne Neil reflected the insight of early feminist theologian Valerie Saiving who was first to challenge the male paradigm for sin as

254 According to Trible’s exegesis of Genesis 1:26-28, God created “humankind,” male and female simultaneously without hierarchy, in contrast to the Genesis 2 account in which man is created first. Sin was the result of their shared disobedience, not primarily caused by the woman. Phyllis Trible, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 18.
pride. Nancy Sehested argued for the right of women to “equal responsibility, equal ability to respond to the cries of our world.” Sehested’s vision extended beyond equality to encompass responsibility (justice) in addressing needs of the poor for whom life is a struggle. Though not published in FOLIO, Anne Neil referenced feminist theologians Valerie Saiving and Letty Russell in her address at the SBWIM meeting in Pittsburgh, noting that while men were guilty of pride, women were guilty of passivity, negating the liberation Christ offers. From Letty Russell’s work on leadership as empowerment, Neil urged women to assume leadership through the model of servant in community, not over community.

During the 1980s several book reviews in FOLIO featured books on feminist theology. Linda McKinnish-Bridges reviewed In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins in an 1983 issue of FOLIO, and highlighted Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s use of feminist hermeneutics to reclaim women’s own theology and history from the androcentric text, giving us inspiration and power to accomplish our calling. Mary Zimmer reviewed Letty Russell’s Household of Freedom in an article titled “Authority and Paradigm Shift” in the Summer 1992 issue. Letty Russell’s vision was for power exercised in a community of equals, not a hierarchy.

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256 Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation” A Feminine View,” Journal of Religion 40, no 2 (April 1960): 100-112. Saiving argued that male language and theology do not adequately represent the experience of women. If man’s sin is pride, woman’s sin is characterized as “triviality, distractibility and diffuseness, depending upon others for one’s own self-definition.”
258 Flowers, Into the Pulpit, 98.
In her 1986 article “Women Are Changing the Contour of Biblical Scholarship” Margaret Dee Bratcher gave a brief history of feminist theology books published up to that time. The works of Mary Daly and Letty Russell, Phyllis Trible and Rosemary Radford Ruether she described as foundational books concerned to “describe feminine imagery used for God in the Scriptures (2) depatriarchalize the androcentric biblical traditions and (3) to enunciate a feminist hermeneutic for biblical interpretation.” Bratcher then reviewed Phyllis Trible’s work on Genesis 2 and 3, in which Trible effectively discounts the idea that the biblical texts imply inferiority or subordination of the woman because she was created second and bears greater responsibility for sin. Then she turned to Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s 1983 work In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins, highlighting the early egalitarian tradition in the church against the androcentric tradition of the biblical writers as well as contemporary interpreters.

Bibliographies were included in every issue, listing books by feminist theologians as well as resources for worship. For example, in 1984 FOLIO published a full-page bibliography of sixty-two books on women as ministers that included books by Mary Daly, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Nancy Hardesty, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, Letty Russell and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Also included was a book on worship, Women and Worship. A Guide to Non-Sexist Hymns, Prayers and Liturgies by Sharon Neufer Emswiler and Thomas Neufer Emswiler.

A second expression of feminist theology was found in every issue as FOLIO celebrated the experience of women, giving unequivocal support for their experience

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260 Margaret Dee Bratcher, “Women are Changing the Contours of Biblical Scholarship, FOLIO 4, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 1; 9.
of call. Writers validated women's experience by publishing "Ovations," stories of call and ministry, a strategy to "give account of what is happening. Women are ministering, women are preaching and people are responding."²⁶¹ By publishing powerful autobiographical accounts of a call to ministry, editors also documented and emphasized Baptist piety and the historical belief in soul competency, a move to counter the notion that women were entering ministry for political reasons. The editors of FOLIO featured a different woman and her ministry in each issue - including pastors, chaplains, missionaries, musicians, educators and counselors.

Several articles dealt with biblical examples of women leaders, two by Susan Lockwood Wright and Molly Marshall. Susan Lockwood Wright's 1984 article "Other Pastors Respond" giving biblical examples of women leaders, argued that it is a question of who God is. She explained that when "we mortals begin to say who can and cannot be a minister, we are saying what God can and cannot do. We are in essence making ourselves equal with God and usurping God's power to choose whomever God chooses. The technical term for this is idolatry."²⁶²

Molly Marshall wrote another article on biblical women titled "Spiritual Mothers in Scripture" in which she named Hannah, Samuel's mother (1 Sam. 2:1-10) and Mary the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:46-55). Having been asked by a student to be her spiritual mother, Molly Marshall presented the biblical idea of God as mother - suggesting a fierce tenderness, a compassionate movement, an abiding embrace and a

²⁶¹ "From the Pulpit," FOLIO 1, no 2 (Fall 1983): 7.
travailing mercy. The church’s flourishing depends upon recognizing our spiritual mothers in our history and our present, she concluded.263

The third expression of feminist theology was in advocacy for inclusive language in music and worship. In her article entitled “O Sing to the Lord a New Song,” Deborah C. Loftis focused on the need for a new hymnal that would address gender, race and nationality, and include names for God beyond just removing the masculine.264 M. Mahan Siler wrote of the challenge to “bring our language of faith in line with our understanding of faith . . . So each Sunday we reach for a language that is as inclusive as the gospel we declare.”265

Cindy Johnson chronicled her progress from being resistant to a proponent of inclusive language in “By My Words Shall I Be Judged” (The Reluctant Journey of an Inclusive Language Advocate).266 A feature article on Jann Aldredge-Clanton’s book, In Whose Image: God and Gender, repeated her thesis that male exclusive God language and images of God constitute heresy, and had “profound implications for the Christian church. On the other hand, inclusive God-language frees and empowers women and men to exercise their gifts.”267 Other articles on inclusive language were published in 1987 (“God Talk”); 1989 (“Choosing to be Honest Rather Than Good”)

and 1992 ("Feminine Images of God in the Bible"). In 1992, Leslie Kendrick wrote that in order to connect with God she needs female images for God, and quoted Mary Daly’s words in *Beyond God the Father*: “fixing names upon God” has “deafened us to our own potential for self-naming.”

Sermons were included in *FOLIO*, perhaps the most notable by theologian Phyllis Trible, titled “Take Back the Bible” in which she addressed the challenge of feminism to the Bible and the predicament of those Baptist women who grew up cherishing the Bible as she had. Her solution, citing the story of Jacob wrestling with God (Deuteronomy 30:11-20), is to wrest from the biblical stories the liberating passages while acknowledging the oppressive ones. She concluded: “Do not abandon the Bible to the bashers and the thumpers. Take back the text. Do not let go until it blesses you. Indeed, make it work for blessing, not for curse, so that you and your descendents, indeed all the families of the earth, may live.”

*Feminist Theology in Synergy: Journal of Virginia Baptist Women in Ministry*

On November 5, 1988, approximately 80 women (and men) in Virginia met at the University of Richmond to establish their own state organization for women ministers. Dr. Nancy Richardson, co-founder of the Women’s Theological Center in

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270 Phyllis Trible, “Take Back the Bible” *FOLIO* 17, no 1 (Summer 1999):1-5.

271 *Ibid.*, 5. The sermon was delivered at the meeting of the Alliance of Baptists in Richmond, VA.
Boston spoke on the theme “Empowerment.” Virginia Baptist Women in Ministry (VBWIM) defined itself as “an association of persons, both lay and professional, engaged in Christian ministry.” Its purpose was “to provide a network of support and community; to offer opportunities for growth in self-understanding, competencies and skills; and to create awareness of the personal and institutional influences which shape us.” Following the lead of the national organization, Southern Baptist Women in Ministry, VBWIM held formal and informal networking meetings, annual dinners during the state Baptist General Association meeting and conducted conferences and informal mentoring for young women. In 2001 VBWIM held its first “Ready to Listen” conference for college women who wanted to explore a call to ministry. The conference, now held every two years, is led by women ministers who share their stories of call and ministry, provide practical information on theological education, biblical study and an annotated bibliography of books that include books by feminist theologians. In 2008 VBWIM published a history of its first twenty years.

By 1991, when the first issue of Synergy, A Journal of Virginia Baptist Women was released, the denominational lines were drawn and moderates were forming new associations. In the first issue of Synergy, editor Barbara Jackson (retired, seminary graduate but not ordained) commented on the conservative control of the Southern Baptist Convention and described herself as now an “outsider,” her

calling and identity had been "debased." She was a feminist, not a "male basher" but one who affirms herself and all people, women and men, who want to participate in God's Kingdom.274 Although a Southern Baptist all her life, she no longer felt welcome in the SBC.

Topics in Synergy were multi-faceted — calling, mentoring, systems theory, theology, family responsibilities — and all were meant to support women in ministry, to celebrate their presence and provide resources for their work. The word "synergy" suggests that the effect is more than the sum of the parts. It connotes process of becoming, creating and transforming. During the ten years of publication, Synergy connected women in ministry in their struggles and joys, questions and affirmations, journeys of faith and resolve to continue in uncharted territory. As one reader acknowledged, "I hear my voice in their voices, I read my words in their words. I strengthen my resolve in community with them. In our shared lives I recognize the creative, loving, powerful Spirit of God."275

Synergy followed a format similar to FOLIO, and for ten years (1991-2001) writers celebrated the experiences of women and their ministries. Among the many personal stories featured was that of Addie Davis (then retired and living in Virginia), the first woman ordained by the SBC. In "Picking Up the Pieces, When Home Fails" Davis wrote about her unsuccessful attempt to find placement in the SBC and her

274 Barbara Jackson, "Feminism is Examined," Synergy 1, no. 1 (Fall 1991): 2. Barbara Jackson’s generation led the way for subsequent women to be ordained. She did not seek ordination at the time she left seminary. It was just not considered an option for women at the time.

subsequent move to Vermont to pastor a church. Barbara Sadtler, second career chaplain in a state prison for men, wrote about her efforts to connect with the inmates in “Grandmother God.” She would ask the men, “Who in your life really loved you?” and time and again the answer came – “Grandma.” That was why she was there, she concluded. She was old enough to be a grandmother. Judy Bailey wrote about her experience with college women who had grown up in churches but did not realize women could be pastors in “Campus Minister Sees a Theology of Repression of Women.”

In contrast with FOLIO, the writers of Synergy more openly embraced feminism. The theme of the Fall, 1993 issue was feminism, with a lead article “Feminism Revisited - A Brief Overview” in which B. J. Seymour traced the history of feminist theology, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton as well as Rosemary Radford Reuther, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Phyllis Trible. Seymour concluded, “Mainstream Christian feminists do not wish to substitute a female-oriented religion for a male-centered one, but, rather, the goal is the acknowledgement and achievement of the full humanity of all persons.” In the same issue Betty Pugh, chair of VBWIM, wrote in “The Mission of VBWIM” that feminism is a dirty word to some, but hopefully a word of encouragement and hope to most. She continued, “This issue of Synergy is devoted to a candid look at the issues and concerns of

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276 Addie Davis, “Picking Up the Pieces, When Home Fails,” Synergy 5, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 5.
279 B. J. Seymour “Feminism Revisited:” A Brief Overview” Synergy 2, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 10.
women and how feminist Christianity has brought changes to the church, to women’s experience in the world and to our theological understandings of ourselves.\(^{280}\)

Several issues of *Synergy* contained articles about feminist theologian lectures or books. Anne Rosser summarized a series of lectures by Rosemary Radford Ruether given at Union Theological Seminary (Richmond), describing Ruether’s treatment of gender and redemption during four historic periods with emphasis on the two questions Ruether raises in her book *Women and Redemption: A Theological History*:

How did women become identified with sin? and What forces struggled in Christianity’s deep ambivalence toward women?\(^{281}\) Stephanie Day Powell reviewed *The Chronicles of Noah and Her Sisters: Genesis and Exodus According to Women* by Miriam Therese Winter in which the author “weaves a vision of matriarchal culture.”\(^{282}\) On the 150th anniversary year of the Seneca Falls Convention, also the tenth anniversary of Virginia Baptist Women in Ministry, *Synergy* carried an article on Elizabeth Cady Stanton, including Stanton’s top ten list of biblical women.

The use of inclusive language—in music, worship and language for God—was a frequent topic in *Synergy*. All acknowledged the “shaping power of language.”\(^{283}\) In “The Language of Deity,” Barbara Jackson argued for understanding language as public discourse and for adopting inclusive language that speaks of humankind instead of man or mankind, and that uses plural or non-specific pronouns in referring

to people in general. Also included in this 1996 issue was an article on how to use inclusive language in worship as well as a bibliography dedicated to books on inclusive language.


Writers in *Synergy* fulfilled the admonition of Molly Marshall in her 1986 article in *Review & Expositor*. Beginning with the premise that God is not male, Marshall encouraged the use of “gender inclusive language about God: speaking of God as both motherly and fatherly as well as the ground of being . . .” She recommended specific action: include women regularly in worship, use gender specific language, hymns that are inclusive, and create study groups for those

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interested in “combining a feminist consciousness and serious consideration of the biblical writers with the story of God’s presence in the lives of women and men.”

New Associations: The Southern Baptist Alliance and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

After years of being labeled liberals and unbelievers, of organizing and selecting candidates, writing editorials, attending Conventions, participating in the Peace Committee, and losing the president votes, many moderates gave up the fight, not offering a candidate for Southern Baptist Convention presidency in 1991. According to plan, the conservatives took control of Board and Agency trustees in 1990. In the next ten years they solidified their gains, the SBC mostly intact, forcing compliance with their interpretation of scripture. Conservatives gained control of the largest Protestant denomination, totaling 15,044,413 members, 1990 contributions of $4.6 billion (nearly $365 million being channeled through the Cooperative program), and with ownership of property worth nearly $22.5 billion, a huge religious empire.

In defiance of historic Baptist belief in the separation of church and state, Southern Baptists aligned themselves more and more with the neo-evangelical movement and the political right. Among the featured speakers at the 1991 convention were President George H.W. Bush, Oliver North and Charles Colson.

Jerry Falwell founder of the Moral Majority and not a member of the SBC, made an

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appearance at the Pastor's Conference and was asked to speak, even though he was not on the program.²⁹⁰

The Southern Baptist Alliance

Realizing there would be no compromise on the part of conservatives, many moderates turned their attention to forming an alternative association that would reflect their Baptist belief in freedom and that (because of the insistence and participation of SBWIM leaders) would make a place for women in ministry. In a 1986 article in FOLIO, Libby Bellinger admitted she was tired of the fight, tired of "being careful," of being called a "disobedient daughter." She challenged moderates in the convention to step up, "no more lip service of support; involve women on local and state levels; support the churches that ordain us, recruit more."²⁹¹

A group of progressive Southern Baptists from fifteen states met in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1987 to form the Southern Baptist Alliance (changed to Alliance of Baptists in 1992). Although a new network, the plan was to remain within the convention to be a prophetic voice. It was "an alliance of individuals and churches dedicated to the preservation of historic Baptist principles, freedoms and traditions and the continuance of our ministry and mission within the SBC."²⁹² A reiteration of historic Baptist principles, the seven-point Alliance covenant included soul freedom, local church autonomy, ecumenical cooperation, theological education and reverence

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 177-178.
²⁹² Rob James, Gary Leazer with James Shoopman, The Takeover in the Southern Baptist Convention: A Brief History, 56.
for biblical authority, and the proclamation of the gospel as well as separation of church and state.293

Libby Bellinger described the sense of community and peace during the first meeting. There was a variety of people there, men and women from across the nation, the Southeast most heavily represented, but there was one couple from Okemah, Oklahoma. “We all felt estranged,” she wrote. “We needed a meeting where we could laugh and sing rather than gnash teeth . . . where a business session is conduced in an easy open atmosphere.” Their intent was to benefit the SBC, not to cause division.294

The Alliance attempted to fill a void in missions abandoned by the SBC, namely churches whose pastor was a woman or a divorced person,295 and embarked on mission endeavors that assisted the poor, disenfranchised and powerless. From its inception, the Alliance gave financial support to SBWIM. Working for reconciliation, justice for women in the workplace and church, the Alliance offered a “more tolerant and compassionate approach to homosexual church members.”296

Stan Hasty was elected as the first full-time executive director in January 1989, and the Alliance moved its office from Charlotte to Washington, D.C. In 1988 the Alliance published Being Baptist Means Freedom by Alan Neely followed by The New Has Come in 1989, a study book for local church groups describing the

293 Ibid.
295 The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board would not appoint a divorced person as a missionary.
movement of Southern Baptist women into new areas of ministry. Also in 1989, the Alliance committed itself to helping establish a theological seminary in Richmond, Virginia – a dream realized in 1991 through the additional support of the Baptist General Association of Virginia and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.297 One of the goals of the seminary was to educate and support women.298

By 2013 the Alliance has become the most inclusive group of former Southern Baptists, describing itself as “a faith community comprised of male and female laity and clergy, people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, theological beliefs and ministry practice.”299 Still dedicated to traditional Baptist freedoms, the Alliance conducts a program of missions and routinely takes stands for the underserved and marginal people around the world.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), founded in 1991, has more members, a larger budget and a more traditional approach to missions than the Alliance. Women did not play as prominent a role in its formation, though there were a few who were active from the beginning. The male leaders of the moderate

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298 Betty Pugh, “Woman at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond,” Synergy 1, no. 4 (Fall 1992): 5. In 1992, 44 percent of the students were women, 66 percent in the Master of Divinity track and 90 percent of the women students were Baptists. In 2013 women at BTSR compose 42.4 percent of students in the master of divinity program, 50 percent of doctoral students and 60 percent of students in the master of theology program. Erin Spengeman, Registrar, e-mail message to author, February 21, 2013.

movement who formed the CBF were denominational loyalists who wanted to re-create the SBC as it existed before the conservative takeover. The moderate leaders indicated a welcome for women as ministers in CBF, but there was no effort to prioritize the issue of ordination or women’s other concerns. In fact, the first Moderator, Daniel Vestal, reversed his former position against ordained women ministers after becoming Moderator of the CBF.300

The CBF did not claim to be a separate denomination but an alternative missionary society for those who prefer not to invest themselves or their money in the new SBC. Individuals as well as congregations can be members. Its mission, similar to that of the SBC is “to lead people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and to carry out the Great Commission by an inclusive global mission in which all Baptists can participate.301

This moderate alternative to the SBC grew in numbers and offerings. The CBF adopted a global mission program in 1993 that focuses on people or ethnic-linguistic groups who have had little access to the gospel, rather than on nation-states of geography. Keith Parks, forced out as head of the SBC Foreign Mission Board, became the director of missions. In 1992 three thousand people from 950 churches attended the general assembly in Fort Worth, Texas. In 1991 the CBF received five million dollars for mission endeavors. Currently the CBF budget is $12.4 million

301 David T. Morgan, New Crusades, New Holy Land, 176.
with approximately 1,800 affiliated churches, regional fellowships and ministry partners.\textsuperscript{302}

Though slow to advocate for women in ministry, the CBF has evolved to the extent that in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century one third of the governing body are women, and during the annual assembly women lead worship and preach.\textsuperscript{303} In 2013 the CBF elected Suzii Paynter of Austin, Texas to be executive Coordinator. During the decade of the 1990s CBF became SBWIM's major contributor and SBWIM moved its annual meeting and worship service to the CBF's annual assembly.\textsuperscript{304}

Other innovations and opportunities followed the organization of Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. By 2000, moderates had created a new publishing company (Smyth and Helwys); a new historical society (The Walter H. Whitsett Baptist Heritage Society); a new Baptist press (Baptists Today); and financially adopted the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs that had been defunded by the SBC. Moderates created at least seven new theological institutions, most associated with Baptist colleges. Moderates also support the Baptist program at Duke Divinity School, and Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond.\textsuperscript{305} The CBF partners with fifteen theological schools in helping students, many of them women,

\textsuperscript{303} Elizabeth Flowers, Into the Pulpit, 169.
\textsuperscript{304} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{305} Walter B. Shurden, Not an Easy Journey: Some Transitions in Baptist Life (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005), 143. Conservatives gained control of the SBC and the seminaries, but not the Baptist colleges. Four of the women in my study graduated from new divinity schools or seminaries.
have access to theological education. Still not claiming to be a denomination, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship provides a Baptist identity and resources for those leaders and church members who resist fundamentalism.

Conclusion

In the year 2000 Southern Baptists approved a revised Faith and Message statement, codifying their stands against women pastors, weakening the concept of soul competency, and accentuating the power of the pastor in the congregation. In a move to solidify male privilege the document also included the words of the 1998 SBC resolution on the family: "A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ." By this time the conservatives had complete control of the SBC Boards and Agencies as well as the seminaries, though the control did not extend to the Baptist colleges. Employees were required to sign the new Faith and Message; the ones who refused were fired.

The WMU of Virginia published a rejection of the resolution on the submissive status of women in 2004. The "Declaration of the Dignity of Women," upheld the right of women to follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit and rejected "all blanket discrimination against women in the work of Christian ministry, in particular as elaborated in the 2000 Faith and Message." With this statement the leaders firmly aligned themselves with the proponents of ordaining women as deacons or

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pastors, breaking their century-long effort not to take sides in any of the SBC controversies.

While some interpret the SBC anti-egalitarian stance on woman as a move to establish their identity by being counter-cultural, I would argue the reverse: the resistance to women in leadership roles is consistent with their long established identity in southern cultural history. Though Southern Baptists go along with contemporary culture by condemning racism, the second tier in southern hierarchy – gender – remains intact.

In the next chapter I will discuss the women pastors who have found support in the groups that resisted the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention.


309 Barry Hankins, Uneasy in Babylon, 247. In 1995 on the 150th year of the denomination’s founding, Southern Baptists passed a resolution that apologized to black Americans for the SBC’s support of slavery and its racist legacy. The Resolution on Racial Reconciliation passed with a 95% majority.
Chapter 3: Narratives of Call and Ordination

*I had this theology that if God is calling you to do something you answer it, and how would you know if God is calling me or not? Only I know if God is calling me or not.*

*Lynn*

In the 1980s controversy in which women’s role in the church became the focal point, one of the most basic questions was whether Southern Baptists recognize the validity of a woman’s call to ministry. Who decides? Opponents argued that women who say they are called to be pastors are violating scriptural injunctions about women in authority or they are simply misled. Proponents of women in pastoral roles cited supportive scripture as well as the Baptist belief in soul competency.

Historically Southern Baptists profess belief in the value and importance of personal experience. E. Y. Mullins, early president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1899-1928), claimed that soul competency is “the distinctive Baptist belief.” The idea of soul competency suggests that individual human freedom flows from the nature of God; therefore, the right of individual choice is sacred. The insistence on “soul freedom” or “soul competency” in the Baptist tradition rests on the conviction that the individual responds to God “personally, directly and voluntarily.” This belief affirms the “centrality of the individual over the institutional, the personal over the sacramental and the preeminence of direct access over indirect access to God.”

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310 Lynn, interview with author, October 22, 2008.
312 Ibid.
This primary tenet of Protestant/Baptist faith is contradicted, however, by the underlying gender assumptions about soul competency, that women are free to follow their calling unless the calling leads them into positions where they might exercise authority over men. It is also contradicted by the practice of a hierarchical, familial model of church in which men have the power and authority. Thus it is the male prerogative to decide whether a woman is called to the ministry. In a 1987 interview with Bill Moyers, W. A. Criswell, influential pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas from 1944-1995, concluded that even though a woman may be convinced she is called by God to be a pastor, “She is mistaken. God never called her. Her own personal ambition, or longing for recognition, or a thousand other things led her into that persuasion.”

True to their belief in personal experience, Southern Baptist congregations taught the women in my study to seek a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” and they were guided toward conversion, baptism and church membership. Furthermore, they were taught that if God called them into some kind of special service or vocation they should listen and obey. “Do whatever God calls you to do” was the message the church instilled within them. It was only when they revealed a call to be pastors, requiring ordination, that the validity of their personal experience was challenged.

313 Eileen Campbell-Reed, “Anatomy of a Schism: How Clergywomen’s Narratives Interpret the Fracturing of the Southern Baptist Convention,” 71. Reed argues the concept of soul competency masked the racial and gendered convictions about humanity held by Southern Baptists; and the eight women ministers in her study simply ignored those gendered expectations since they were not openly acknowledged.

Describing the fickleness of Baptist churches, one woman minister wrote: “For years our mother has birthed us into faith, nurtured and suckled us at her breast, and then become our very destroyer by refusing us full entrance into her life and ministry.”

Although Baptist churches are autonomous and associate on a voluntary basis, during the 1950s through the 1970s Southern Baptist churches were highly organized through a national standardization of literature and missions. By the 1970s the Sunday School Board in Nashville, Tennessee, provided an exhaustive array of materials for purchase by local churches. Persons on vacation could visit another Southern Baptist church and find the same Sunday school lesson being taught, the same emphasis in missions or education. Goals for the churches were announced at annual conventions and implemented by local pastors and church leaders.

In each local church there was also a Women’s Missionary Union (WMU) that operated under the direction of the national headquarters in Birmingham, Alabama. The WMU organized mission groups for the children, separating the girls and boys when they were in middle school. Their main emphasis throughout was to become a Christian and to know that being a Christian involves service to other people in the name of Christ.

As Nancy Ammerman describes the organization, Girl’s Auxiliary group leaders emphasized the memorization of scripture and daily prayer for missionaries. Girls learned to name and locate every country in which Southern Baptists had missionaries, as well as the locations and executives of all the denomination’s Boards. As teenagers they participated in service projects and wrote essays on theological

topics. The girls progressed through "steps" and were recognized with church "coronation" ceremonies, complete with long white dresses and crowns. The highest step was to become a Queen Regent in service.\textsuperscript{316} Southern Baptist girls were "shaped by the women's organization that instilled piety, a desire to serve and denominational loyalty - and they kept listening for God's call."\textsuperscript{317}

Most of the women in this study grew up in this Southern Baptist milieu and though each has grown theologically, all express appreciation for the churches of their childhood. Especially for the older women who were ordained in the late 1970s and 1980s, the church and the Woman's Missionary Union, provided the formation that propelled them into professional ministry or "full-time Christian service."

Therefore, there is a disparity between the church's theology of personal experience and call and the Southern Baptist prohibition of women pastors.

**Narratives of Call**

The women in this study experienced a call to ministry in local churches whose Baptist/evangelical theology encouraged their call. The challenges, both internal and external, came when they identified their call to be pastors. The implicit assumption was that the calling would not include a pastoral role that involved ordination or becoming a deacon. When these women followed the logical conclusions of their spiritual formation, they were in uncharted territory. Most did not have women pastors as role models, neither did they hear in those churches


\textsuperscript{317} Ibid.
feminist biblical interpretation that would have suggested they might rightfully claim a calling for ministry. They faced general resistance, even when it was not specific to them, from local and national associations.

The assurance of calling from God to be ministers and pastors is the most important asset to women who are challenged on a daily basis. When asked how they deal with challenges to their positions, all responded with their stories of certainty of calling. In other words, it is essential to them that people understand that there is something spiritual and holy at work in their lives that propels them into situations where their identities are challenged and where it is difficult to find positions to be pastors. When asked if they had considered joining other denominations more receptive to women pastors, all responded that while they might have considered it briefly, they are remain loyal to the churches that nurtured them and taught them to trust their relationship with God. All remain Baptists, though not Southern Baptists.

Anne (ordained in 1977), Erin, Robin and Susan (each ordained in 1981), experienced a vital church and strong women leaders. In discussing her call Anne said that her calling was not originally to the pastorate, but it is a “calling into a relationship with God to be lived out in the roles that the Christian church allows me to serve. So for me, it’s all about relationship. And, I was nurtured in a Southern Baptist church, I was brought to faith in a SBC church in rural South Carolina and the church was extremely mission minded.” Anne describes being a “Sunbeam,” the name of the mission group for young children and as a teenager in 1969 making a public commitment during a worship service to “full time Christian service.” From a

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318 Anne, interview with author, January 26, 2009.
very young age she claimed a relationship with God and willingness to serve wherever the calling might lead her. At that time she, like many other women, did not envision the role of pastor for herself.\footnote{Ibid.}

Erin grew up in a small town, nurtured in a church that taught, “God has a plan for your life.” Erin explained, “You know you are supposed to be committed to God’s will – I bought that – I believe it, I still believe it. You know, I surely do understand it differently now than I did all those years ago, but I believed it. So I have certainly had to wrestle with the Bible, yes, but I believed those things and I moved along through Sunday school stories as a child and youth camp and all those campfire sing-a-longs, and all those things.”\footnote{Erin, interview with author, February 20, 2009.}

In college Erin became involved in the Baptist Student Union, the organization for college students, and in the fellowship and social ministry of the group she found her calling as a campus minister.\footnote{During the 1960s the BSU provided a place for college students to air their doubts and work out a faith that made sense of the intellectual and social world in which they lived. “BSU students in the 1960s challenged all the assumptions under which they had been raised, and materials and leadership from Nashville offered resources for their journeys.” Nancy Tatum Ammerman, \textit{Baptist Battles}, 66.} Yet when she requested ordination, her home church refused. Faced with the decision of whether to reject what she had been taught, she decided to claim her experience in church as valid in her life. She found in the experiences in her home church to be credible and meaningful. Even though the church could not bless her, she said, “I bless you for having given me all that. And so I have to say that because I derived my calling from that in part, and in part from just that experience of having been taught to listen for

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\item[\footnote{Erin, interview with author, February 20, 2009.}]{Erin, interview with author, February 20, 2009.}
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the presence of God, attune myself to God’s story in the world, all those things the
church tries to teach us.”

In Susan’s experience, and in Robin’s, strong women leaders played a major
role in their self-understanding and encouraged them to trust their sense of calling.
Susan was one of four children, the daughter of a Baptist minister who was pastor of
a large church for over twenty years. A year old when her father began that ministry,
Susan’s enculturation was totally Baptist. Her mother taught a Sunday school class of
over one hundred women and was a leader in the national WMU. It was “normal” for
her to see women in positions of leadership.

Robin’s father was also a pastor, and she describes her calling as being
“birthed in the womb” of the church that had strong women leaders. She said, “In the
sanctuary, on the main floor, it was men who were preaching and leading, but just
below was the subversive work of the women. And in the fellowship hall I
experienced as a young girl, women were preaching, teaching and leading.” Her
calling came in this “subterranean” level of life in the church, and from the “feeling
that when you are baptized, everybody then becomes a follower with a mandate to
spread the good news. And I believed that! No one ever preached in my church
against women being preachers, because no one ever imagined someone would.”
But women were doing much of what preachers did, short of giving the sermon in a
Sunday service, though this work was called a devotional or testimonial, and had a
huge impact. As she described it: “I think that out of that experience in that Southern

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325Ibid.
Baptist world, I certainly had a real clear sense that God had a hand on my life and was leading me and all I needed to do was follow that guidance, and I was real clear about that.  

The women ordained later, as recently as 2006, also experienced their call within Baptist churches, but Southern Baptist churches were changing during their childhood and had changed a great deal by the time they were in college and seminary. The youngest women did not experience Baptist life before the conservative/moderate controversy and before the role of women was a defining issue for congregations. By the time they were in college and seminary new Baptist associations like the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists offered alternatives to the SBC in terms of mission support, programs and resources. Local congregations also began to use non-denominational curriculum. The WMU remained independent and supplied mission training and materials for both the SBC and the newer organizations of Baptists, limiting their focus to mission education and support of missionaries.

Despite the changes in Baptist life, young women enjoyed being at church and continued to hear the message of following God’s call in their lives. Jane, ordained in 1990, described the church as a “safe place” for her because her parents were having marital problems. She could count on the women and men in the congregation to love and support her. She loved church and has always felt at home there. Diane (ordained in 2004) grew up in the church and partly because her parents divorced

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326 Ibid.
328 Jane, interview with author, February 17, 2009.
when she was eleven, the church was her “family.” Rachel (ordained in 1995) sensed a call to ministry when she was in the sixth grade, and she was faithful to that call throughout high school and college, planning to attend The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. As she made her plans to go to Louisville, however, Southern was becoming a hostile place for women. After pursuing another career for a couple of years, Rachel went to the Candler School of Theology (Methodist) in Atlanta.

Five of the women in my study did not become Southern Baptists until their teenage years. In Terry’s life the Roman Catholic Church was a “wonderful place.” She memorized the Mass as a child and would come home, put her pink blanket around her shoulders as vestments and recite (at age five) the Mass as if a priest. When her family moved and her parents stopped going to worship, she began attending a Southern Baptist church where she was baptized as a teenager – without her parents’ knowledge. Twenty years later she experienced her call to ministry as a second career in a Baptist church – a very conservative congregation that nevertheless recognized and affirmed her gifts for ministry.

Jessica did not attend church regularly as a child, though she did attend the Baptist Vacation Bible School. She did not join the church until as a teenager she began to attend student-led Bible studies and then became a Christian during a worship service. Sharon grew up in a Catholic home, though her father was Baptist. She joined a Baptist church when she was a freshman in college. Connie, whose

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329 Diane, interview with author, January 9, 2009.  
father was in the military, always attended a Baptist church with her mother, though it was not always a Southern Baptist congregation. In college, she was part of a Southern Baptist church youth group, and it was there that she made a commitment to ministry. Lynn grew up in a conservative church, but did not become Southern Baptist until in college at Baylor University.

In summary, these churches nurtured their children and youth, taught them Christian values and formed them into individuals committed to service. Comfortable in southern culture with defined roles for men and women, church members did not deal with the inherent contradictions of their expectations for women until the logical outcomes of their training were evidenced in the movement to pastoral ministry. And, women who were rejected sometimes by their own churches and officially by the larger denomination remained appreciative of the Southern Baptists who nurtured them.

It is difficult for those not reared in the Southern Baptist tradition to fully understand that loyalty and sense of identity. Susan M. Shaw, born in Georgia in 1960, describes her upbringing in a Southern Baptist church as being "born not so much into a church or a denomination as into an identity." She was "raised right," learning the cultural and religious behaviors befitting a southern girl. Those who lived in the south where Baptists reigned share a "cultural ethnicity" that outsiders will never fully share.

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Called to Be Pastors

Anne's story illustrates the development of her calling as well as the dilemma of local churches that believed in the validity of individual spiritual experience, and yet did not know what to do with women pastors. Anne grew up thinking that she had a very special relationship with God. When she was a senior in high school she made a public commitment to “full time Christian service,” thinking the only option for her was to be a missionary, probably to Africa. Had she been a man, at that point she would have been shepherded through the licensing procedure in order to begin the journey to ordination, but that did not happen for her. She went to a Baptist college and on to Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest when she graduated in 1978 with a Masters of Divinity degree that included courses in with Greek and Hebrew. She began part-time work as a minister of youth and children in a small church. When the pastor became very ill, the church invited Anne to “speak” on Sundays in his absence. This turned out to be her chance to prove her ability as a preacher.

Changes in the worship bulletin documented her progression from youth and children's minister to pastor in the minds of the congregation. The first Sunday the printed order of worship read, “Speaker, Anne Cross.” The second week was the same. The third and fourth week’s bulletin read “Morning Message, Anne Cross. But on the fifth and sixth weeks the words in the bulletin were “Sermon, Anne Cross.”

After her sixth week, the congregation wanted to ordain her. On her last Sunday of filling in for the pastor, Anne went to lunch with church members and
returned to the building to make sure all the lights were turned off and doors were locked. Walking down the hall she saw two men coming toward her, two deacons who wanted to talk with her. Fearing the worst, she thought they might be going to fire her because they didn’t like the unusually dramatic service she had conducted. Instead, they said, “We have voted to ordain you. You have demonstrated great gifts for ministry.” She replied, “I can’t give you an answer until I at least pray about this and I need to talk to my parents.” Anne went home, “euphoric – and afraid” because by then she knew women who had been hurt in this process of ordination.

She had to wait a week before she received a response from her parents. During that time she came to the conclusion that even though she wanted their blessing, she realized she did not need their permission. Rather, at that point she said she had not “one moment’s doubt” about her calling. When the awaited telephone call came, it was a resounding affirmation. Her father told her, “Annie Doll, if you are going to be ordained we want you to do it at home.” During the week she had worked with their local pastor to make the necessary arrangements for an ordination council to meet and evaluate Anne’s call. In all, three churches offered to ordain Anne.

During the meeting of the ordination council one minister held a King James Version of the Bible in his hand and every time he asked Anne a question he would raise it “like a shield.” His first question was whether she believed in the virgin birth of Jesus. Anne answered, “My head says no, but my heart says yes.” He then asked if she supported the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program. She answered in the affirmative. His last question was, “What happens to your call if you get married and

335 Anne, interview with author, January 26, 2009.
336 Ibid.
have children?" Anne answered, “What happened to yours?” No one pursued it further.

Other women shared their times of clarity in understanding and accepting their call to be pastors. Susan, whose role models were strong women, went to seminary thinking she would be an associate pastor or minister of education. However, in the late 1970s, at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, she began to have doubts. She arranged an appointment with one of her professors in his small office and told him that her sense of calling was changing. He said, “Well, what do you think it is?” And she said, “I think that God is calling me to preach.” He responded, “Well, why does that bother you? What are you afraid of?” Susan replied, “Because I’ve never seen anybody do that before.” Then as Susan described it, “He grabbed my hands and got right in my face and said, “Wouldn’t you rather be a part of something new and exciting than a part of something that has always been?” Susan remembers, “And everything inside of me went yes.”

The church was “essential” in Arlene’s life. As part of the children’s missionary organization, early on she knew that she wanted her vocation to be in the church and she thought that meant she would be a missionary. However, when she went to college and studied religion, she began to realize there was this “other world” that greatly expanded her concept of Christianity. One night when having a discussion with her friends about her plans for seminary and possibly chaplaincy, one of her friends looked at her and asked, “Why are you talking about that? God is calling you to be a pastor.” For Arlene it was a “revelatory moment” and she thought,

\[337\] Ibid.


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“Doggone it, she’s right.” Her general sense of calling became specific at that moment. She was ordained in 1988 by her home church that still does not have women deacons, and has never ordained a woman since. She is representative of other women whose churches could not refuse their own – even though theoretically, they do not believe women should be pastors.

Elaine (ordained in 2006) grew up in churches her father served as pastor. She developed leadership and speaking skills in the youth group. She preached her first sermon when a senior in high school, but did not understand it to be a sermon. Hearing a woman preach for the first time, Elaine thought it was “weird,” but at the end of the preaching series she was “totally hooked and thought it was really cool.”

Still unsure of her own future, Elaine entered seminary thinking she would write curriculum or do some kind of educational work. But during the first day of orientation at a worship service, her plans changed. She said, “I felt very clear at that point that I was there to learn how to be a pastor, and that was the thing that surfaced. . . . I started seeing everything through pastoral eyes and it was great.” In the meantime, Elaine’s father was part of the fundamentalist group who opposed women pastors. When she told him of her decision to be a pastor, he said, “Well, you know how this makes me look. I can’t have this happening in my own house.” She remembers, “It was pretty much a terrible moment in my family.”

Lynn (ordained in 1997) was active in her church and thought that she would become a pastor’s wife because that is all she knew a woman could do. In

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341 Ibid.
college she began attending a church that had an associate pastor who was a woman, a new experience for Lynn. The church took her in, and as she described it, "just kept naming gifts and nurturing me and at the same time I’m taking classes and I had this epiphany – I’m called to be a pastor." Excited about her new vocation, she decided to go to the minister alliance meeting at Baylor University. To her surprise, she was asked to leave the all-male meeting. She said, “I didn’t know how naïve I was but this floored me; I mean, I had grown up in a home where I was encouraged to do whatever, hadn’t seen a woman pastor, but if I had this theology that if God is calling you to do something, you answer it and how would you know if God is calling me or not? Only I know if God is calling me." ³⁴²

For Teresa (ordained in 2000) and Sharon (ordained in 1999) calling to ministry came early in their lives. Teresa was twelve years old when she walked into the kitchen one morning and told her parents “God called me into ministry last night.” Her parents would have family devotions the first thing in the morning and always ask, “What is God doing in your life?” Her call came in a dream in which she knew that “God had spoken to me and called me into ministry and from there on my sail was set..." ³⁴³

Sharon reported that her calling started early and she married a minister, thinking this was what she should do. But always a bit unsettled, she realized that “God was calling me to pastor all along, I just didn’t recognize it,” until the

³⁴² Lynn, interview with author, October 22, 2009.
opportunity for a co-pastorate became theirs and she found it to be a perfect fit for her.  

Diane (ordained in 2004) described her significant moment of call as a response to a question “What are you afraid of?” Having grown up in the church, Methodist and then Baptist, she was in seminary planning a career in community or social ministry, having been discouraged from the pastoral ministry by her local pastor. In a somewhat humorous, though discouraging exchange, the minister noted that there were three things against her being a pastor. He said, “You are young; you are a woman and you are inexperienced.” Diane thought to herself, “I can do something about two of those things – I will eventually age and I can get some experience, but I will never be able to do anything about being a woman.”

One summer during seminary Diane traveled to the Taize community in France for a week. During a time of solitude and Bible study that focused on identifying one’s fears, she said she suddenly began to cry. There was no particular reason, no personal crisis, she explained, “There was just this question on the page and the scripture that I read. I just lost it and I was kneeling in that chapel and I remember thinking I am scared to death of doing this and it was like, as soon as I named what I was afraid of, it lost its power over me.”

Sherry (ordained in 1987) and Terry (ordained in 2002) entered the ministry as a second career. Both had dramatic and defining moments of call after years of

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345 Diane, interview with author, January 9, 2009. This Baptist church that licensed her, but refused to ordain her, still supported her financially when she became pastor of a small church.
346 Diane, interview with author, January 9, 2009.
another vocation. Sherry was divorced, two children to support and taught math in high school. She had been married to a minister, however, and realized she had gifts for ministry, gifts that she had employed as a volunteer in the church. In her late 30s she began to sense a strong feeling that she needed to go to seminary and become a professional minister. It seemed like an impossible journey at this point in her life. But through the wise counsel of an older minister she began to work through her confusion. Her moment of decision and clarity came in a worship service during the singing of the hymn “Is God Calling, Yet Shall I Not Hear?” Sherry described the moment: “Well, I opened up the hymn book – I never sang the first word. The tears were streaming. I mean the book was getting wet, so I closed that and I just said quietly, ‘God, if you get me out of this with any dignity at all, I will go.’” Sherry explained, “And I guess the reason being that I knew I had to do that, or I just had to walk away from the church completely. It had gotten to that point. I either had to go do this, or I just had to give it all up. And I couldn’t do that; the church had been a part of my faith from the time I was ten. I was not going to do that.”

Terry had been active in church as a child and teenager, but dropped out as an adult until she married a man whose father was pastor of a Baptist church. Their worship attendance was sporadic until her father-in-law died. In a defining moment while looking down at him in his casket, she heard his voice saying to her, “Now it’s time for you.” She remembers, “It is exactly what it said. I can hear it. I can hear it. And it didn’t bother me, it didn’t upset me. I didn’t turn around and say ‘who said that,’ it was just a voice. And I thought to myself – okay – then kind of in a daze I

walked out of the room and I met my minister's wife and I asked, 'Why is it that
God's voice is so strong at a time like this?' And she answered, 'That's exactly when
God's voice speaks to people, at a time like this.'"348

Cynthia (ordained in 2004), who is also a second-career as well as a bi-
vocational minister (meaning she has another job in addition to that of minister),
describes her calling as a life-long process, beginning when she was a teenager and
feeling that she would one day be in a vocation that implied calling. She said, "I
think I have always just kind of trusted – don't even know how to say it – trusted that
what I knew when I was young was really true, and that I had a certain amount of
faith that if I continued to develop skills and gifts that I had you know, that calling
would eventually mature in the right time and place. And part of that meant that I was
a math teacher for 20 years."349

Her clear sense of calling to be a pastor came to Connie, ordained in 1983,
when she was in seminary. Having grown up in conservative churches, she was at
first convinced that the women in seminary who were planning to be pastors were
misled. True to her convictions, she would set her clock an hour early each morning
to go to the prayer room in the dorm and pray for those "misguided" women by name.
But during her seminary years, she feels that "God began to peel back some sky over
my face and over scripture and the way I looked at myself and the world and the
church and God and began to knock on my door in a brand new way that I had never
experienced before."350 She began to participate in ministry teams that led worship in

local churches. Hearing the male students preach, she would think, "If I were
preaching I would say it this way, or do this or that, and it began to dawn on me that
maybe this is something God is calling me to do."\textsuperscript{351}

Each woman, regardless of age, came to the point of complete confidence in
her sense of calling and experience of God in her life.\textsuperscript{352} There was a significant
moment of call to which she returns with confidence and self-assurance. All seemed
to enjoy remembering and telling those experiences, still confirming and asserting
their chosen vocation.

**Calling and Authority**

All of the components of calling, including a personal experience with God,
support and affirmation by communities of faith, evidence of gifts for ministry
including proclamation and ordination, contribute to the sense of authority these
women possess as they lead their congregations. Challenged constantly, either by the
general attitude of many Baptist churches and pastors, or sometimes by members of
their congregations, these women continue in their work, confident in their
relationship to God.

When asked about the greatest source of authority in their lives, the women
focused on their certainty of call, the presence of the Holy Spirit and the gospel of
Jesus the Christ. Robin responded to the question by declaring that "by what

\textsuperscript{351} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{352} Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair T. Lummis and Patricia Mei Yin Chang,
95. The significance of calling is especially crucial for Southern Baptist women, but
not exclusive to them. Most of the clergy surveyed had both significant moments and
periods of time when they gradually came to believe they were called. In other words,
the motivations were not primarily political.
authority” is the central question. It is a question asked of Jesus and the question she reiterated during her defense at a meeting in which her church was voted out of the local Southern Baptist association because she was pastor. She declared that she is a pastor not because of the authority of the church that baptized her, nor the authority of the seminary that gave her the degree, not the authority of the church that ordained her or called her to be pastor. Rather it is by the “authority of Jesus Christ.”\(^{353}\) The irony of the question of authority, as she continued, is that women had to answer it because, “We were not just into it by entitlement of gender and so that question was huge for us. We had to wrestle on our own insides because we had nothing but resistance from the outside. And see, what I always felt was that men didn’t have to wrestle with that question because they were granted the entitlement by virtue of the fact that they were male.”\(^{354}\)

Even though there may be inherent injustice in the question of authority, these women pastors have ready answers. While a majority of them focused on their calling, others emphasized the community of persons whose lives reflect an inclusive Christian faith. Others simply responded that their authority comes from their own spiritual sense that they are where God wants them to be. Teresa declared, “If you are called, you serve. Period. If you are called, God has a place for you to serve.”\(^{355}\) Connie named the scripture first and the continual “breaking in of the Holy Spirit.”\(^{356}\) Elaine responded that her authority comes from “an internal sense of this is right and

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\(^{353}\) Robin, interview with author, May 12, 2009.


\(^{355}\) Teresa, interview with author, May 6, 2009.

this is God and this is how I exist. That is my contribution to the world so if I don’t make it, I am wasting my life.”

Jane’s answer was a strong statement of personal strength. She said, “My authority has to do with what I do with what I hope is my integrity as a person. So it doesn’t have anything to do with the scripture or Holy Spirit, but sort of my sense that I care about people and that I have some gifts and skills that help me to inspire and give direction to congregational and community life. And that the more authentic and real and trustworthy I am, the better I do that and that is where my authority comes from.”

Cynthia observed that authority has to be conferred by someone else. She began by saying her authority comes from knowing that she has been called. “Calling in itself,” she continued, “doesn’t necessarily give me authority, but what it does is give me feet to stand on and which to speak with my voice. Authority is something that one is given more than can be taken, or even earned. I have no authority unless someone gives it to me and I mean by that another person. And they will give it to me if they have found reason to respect me.”

A clear sense of calling, based on their understanding of the scriptures, along with the support of communities of faith and their strong sense of self contribute to the ability of these women to be pastors of Baptist churches whose counterparts may not recognize their right to fulfill that position.

358 Jane, interview with author, February 17, 2009.
Ordination Stories

The final step in discerning and confirming one’s call is the service of ordination. While Baptists believe that every Christian must participate in some kind of ministry, an ordained clergy has always been a part of Baptist structure.\(^\text{360}\)

Ordination is a formal recognition by the larger faith community that God has called people into service and endowed them with spiritual gifts for that service. It is not understood as a conferral of authority over others, but as a confirmation of blessing.\(^\text{361}\) Ordination assumes that the candidates have taken seriously the divine call by thorough exploration and preparation for ministry. Persons called to ministry typically share their experience with the pastor and the congregation. One can request ordination, or the congregation can offer to ordain the person, at which time a committee within the church may be formed to question the candidate on matters of theology and authenticity of calling. In addition, most churches are part of a local association of churches from which a committee of ministers and laypersons is formed to also question the candidate. In some instances the candidate is asked to write a paper on key theological concepts. When the committees are satisfied with the candidate’s qualifications and certainty of call, they recommend ordination in a service of worship. For several of the congregations in this study, it was their first time to ordain a woman.


\(^{\text{361}}\) Pamela R. Durso and Keith E. Durso, eds., *Courage and Hope: The Stories of Ten Baptist Women Ministers* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005), 11. In contrast to this view, Southern Baptist conservatives argued that ordination conveys authority, not just confirmation and blessing; therefore women cannot be pastors and have authority over men.
Without exception, the ordination services in this study expressed assurance of call and the meaning of church as an egalitarian, inclusive community. All of the women participated to some degree in planning their service. Each selected the persons she wanted to participate in the preaching, praying and musical presentations. All wanted all members of the congregation to participate in the “laying on of hands,” an ancient custom in which participants offer brief words of encouragement or prayer while placing their hands on the head or shoulders of the kneeling candidate. Having all members of the congregation participate was a departure from the custom of just having ordained deacons and ministers bless the candidate. Since women were not ministers or deacons, they traditionally could not participate in the blessing. In all but one of the churches, the request to include everyone was granted, and many women came forward to participate for the very first time. The other exception was that Jane preferred a circle of affirmation rather than the usual custom, partly because she felt it would be too emotionally intense for her.

Having the women participate was particularly important to Teresa (ordained in 2000). She grew up in a church where her extended family opposed women’s leadership as deacons or pastors. Her father was most outspoken. But in an abrupt turn, when Teresa followed her call to ministry, he changed his mind and supported her ordination, publicly admitting that he had been wrong. He identified the fundamental issue when he recalled that when Teresa told them she was called into

\[^{362}\text{Susan, interview by author, December 10, 2008. Susan’s seminary roommate prayed in the service in 1981, but could not participate in the laying on of hands. Though disappointed by this limitation, Susan was encouraged by the blessings of some of the most conservative deacons from her father’s southern church.}\]
ministry at age 12, he could not say to her, "God did not call you." Following the logical implications of his belief in one's direct experience with God, he felt he had to welcome whatever she was called to do.

Teresa insisted that the women participate because they had not had the opportunity to do so before. Very emotional, the women waiting to bless her formed a long line down the aisle of the church and out the front door. Teresa realized that there were women in the congregation who had been advocating for women for years to no avail. She felt that her ordination service was a "holy moment for all of us because it was like the peace had finally fallen and within a year or two, they ordained female deacons."³⁶³

When asked to reflect on an aspect of the service that stands out in her memory, the responses varied from Lauren's "Not much" to Vickie's "It was the most important day of my life." Historic Watts Street Baptist Church of Durham, North Carolina, ordained Carol, whose grandmother and role model was a minister in The Salvation Army. Her pastor preached on "God Our Loving Mother."³⁶⁴ Anne's professor chartered a plane in order to preach at her service and get back home for another commitment. Sherry's ordination took place in a neighboring church because her home church, led by a fundamentalist pastor, refused to ordain her. Her somewhat uncomfortable memory is that the preacher of the day kept saying that she was a "pioneer."³⁶⁵ This designation was true as there were few other ordained women in

³⁶⁴ Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, N.C. ordained Addie Davis in 1964, the first woman ordained in a Southern Baptist Church.
1987, but she did not welcome the responsibility of being a trailblazer for women ministers. She simply wanted to follow her calling.

The services tended to be very emotional for the candidates and participants as well. All of the women were supported by a wide group of people – family, friends, professors, colleagues, and pastors – people who represented all aspects of their lives. Each woman expressed gratitude for the overwhelming support she received from the people who mattered to her. There were exceptions, however. Lynn’s parents did not approve of her chosen vocation and did not attend the service. That hurt was mitigated somewhat by the presence of her in-laws, both very conservative, but they stepped up and became her “biggest cheerleaders” when they realized her parents would not support her. Lynn remembers that her father-in law said to her while crying, “I’m so proud of you.”

Elaine’s father, a fundamentalist pastor from Tennessee, attended the service but did not bless her. Her mother participated fully. Robin and her husband, who had graduated from seminary together, were ordained at the same time. Her parents did not support her ordination at first, but during the service they were overcome by the power of the worship, changed their minds, and blessed her.

The most dramatically painful experience happened during Terry’s ordination service. Most of the service was wonderful, with her Catholic parents in attendance along with many friends and church members. After all had come forward to offer a blessing to her, one last man began to walk toward her. Inwardly she recoiled, because she knew him, the husband of the church secretary. He placed his hands on

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366 Lynn, interview with author, October 22, 2009.
her shoulders and whispered to her, “I’ve got my hands on your shoulders, but what I really want to do is run them all over your naked body.” Absolutely crushed and furious, she managed to get through the service, but the damage was done. As she reflected on that experience and other negative experiences with staff members, she summed it all up: “See, women go through hell. We go through hell.”

Resistance to Ordination

The ordination of women became the flashpoint during the conservative/moderate controversy in the SBC. Churches were divided over whether they would ordain a woman or not. The women in my study did not welcome this attention to what they considered an individual/local congregation matter. They did not want their ordination to be perceived as a political event and they did not want to be misunderstood. For instance, Erin, who was ordained in 1981, initially resisted the efforts of the church where she was co-pastor to ordain her because she wanted to make sure it was not to make a point or to gain publicity. When she finally agreed to be ordained, she felt that the congregation knew her well and knew why they were ordaining her.

Resistance to their identity as pastors continues for women after ordination. Challenges come in many forms, from the inability to secure a position as pastor to the continuous questions from those outside their own congregations. It took Arlene

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367 Terry, interview by author, February 10, 2009. When she had overcome her intense anger Terry threatened to sue this man, demanded and got a letter of apology, and the deacons banned him from the church grounds. Eventually, Terry’s ministry to his wife during a fatal battle with cancer had a positive effect on him and he genuinely apologized to her in person.

twelve years after ordination to secure a pastorate, primarily because of her sexual orientation. Several women served as interim pastors of churches that would not consider them for the permanent position.

A few people challenge their role as pastors on a biblical basis. At first Robin would debate, citing verses of scripture, until she realized it was a useless exercise; she was not going to change any minds. She decided to simply ask them the question, "What are you afraid of?" because she realized that it is not about Bible verses or the authority of the Bible, but it has everything to do with power.369

If persons are sincere in their questions about women pastors and are open to change, the women will have a discussion with them. However, most feel like Diana, that it is not her problem; it is "God's problem."370 This view is echoed by Sherry who will say to direct challenges, "If you can convince God to convince me that what you are saying is true, I will willingly leave the pulpit."371

Sherry succinctly sums up the conviction of calling that all of these women demonstrate. In spite of all the challenges and uncertainties, these deeply pious women are where they want to be, doing what they love to do.

Conclusion

The women in this study are motivated primarily by their conviction of calling, an experience of God's presence and guidance in their lives. Most of the women spent their formative years in Southern Baptist churches being assured that God wanted to have a personal relationship with them, and that they were to follow

370 Diana, interview with author, January 9, 2009.
God’s leading in their lives. This religious conviction shaped their interpretation of
later experience in which they dedicated their lives to professional ministry with the
early support of agencies of the SBC and in context of political and social change that
included the women’s movement, increased education and professional opportunities.

Feminists and feminist theologians know that experience informs our
perceptions and that experience is a credible category. There is no “objective”
theology. Feminist theology did not play a direct role in the early, general sense of
call of these women pastors, at least as they understand it now, but they learned to
trust and value their own experiences in Baptist churches. Baptists uphold the
primacy of an individual’s experience with God and teach that one should follow
where God leads. There is a fundamental contradiction, therefore, for those who
preach individual salvation/calling and yet refuse to recognize the women who claim
the calling for themselves. Leaders in the SBC, like W. A. Criswell, do not admit the
logical and theological inconsistency. Without apology, in his 1987 interview with
Bill Moyers after he declared that God would not call a woman to preach, Dr.
Criswell defined the proper role of women in the church:

There are 10,000 ways that women can serve, and serve effectively and
beautifully. They do here in this church. The women actually run the
church there’s no doubt about that. My wife, these women, gracious alive, if I
don’t get along with the women, I couldn’t pastor the church, I wouldn’t
have a church. They exert an enormous influence in it, but they ought not be
the pastor and the preacher up there in the pulpit.  

372 The 1984 SBC resolution about women pastors ends with the following
sentence: “We encourage the service of women in all aspects of church life and work
other than pastoral function and leadership roles entailing ordination.” (Resolutions
373 Schmidt, A Still Small Voice, 11.
This role definition simply will not work with the women pastors I interviewed. Each day they prove W. A. Criswell to be wrong.
Chapter 4: Feminist Theology and Ministry Narratives

Feminist theology “is essential to the nature and being of God in the world, in humanity’s relationship with God. It is not just a nice idea or a way to make people feel good or fix something.”

Arlene

As we have seen, the women in this study believe God called them into pastoral ministry. In addition, these women have a strong sense of confidence in themselves as pastors who will conduct their ministry in ways that may differ from their male colleagues. The confidence in their experience of call as well as their value as women are undergirded by feminist theologies that uphold the experience of women, however diverse, as essential to theological discourse.

Women pastors deal with biblical texts with a hermeneutic375 based in understanding as much as possible the context of the biblical writings as well as the canonization of scripture in the history of the church. All are graduates of seminary where they enrolled in biblical, theological and language studies. When they engage the biblical passages they do so from their educational background, their own experience and the context of their congregation.

All of the women expressed appreciation for feminist theologians and their work, acknowledging that they have had a positive impact on their lives. Their appreciation, however, is complicated by use of the word “feminist.” Because many

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374 Arlene, interview with author, June 30, 2008.
375 Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 69. From the Greek word *hermeneuein*, which means to interpret, exegete, explain or translate, the discipline of hermeneutics explores how the meaning of a text is produced and how it can be understood.
in their congregations hold negative views of feminism, most of these pastors are not spokespersons for feminist theology, preferring to speak of “theology” while at the same time broadening the term to include contributions of feminism. Jane, who has read widely in feminist theology, said she tries to talk about “concepts without using the trigger language that communicates baggage that stops people from hearing.” At the same time, she acknowledges the significance of the “feminist” label: “It is important for women to know how pissed off a woman can be and what makes her mad and not be afraid of that, all the way to what is your job as a pastor helping somebody resolve those issues in their lives.”

In their evaluations of feminist theology, these women identified five major contributions: a body of knowledge that provides “strength” for their lives, a beneficial tradition, a new frame for understanding theology, the inclusion of women in the biblical story, and providing a “theological and educational ground to stand on.”

**Strength for the Journey**

Two of the women, Jessica and Cynthia, identified the supportive nature of feminist theology as they face resistance to their role as pastors. Jessica turned to feminist theology while in high school. She did not grow up in the church, but after becoming active as a teenager, she soon sensed a call to ministry, a thought that she shared with her youth group. When one of her male friends said, “You can’t do that, you are a girl. Girls can’t be ministers.” Jessica looked at him and replied, “Well, you

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376 Jane, interview with author, February 17, 2009.
can take it up with God.” But his comment prompted her to begin researching the role of women the Bible. Without any adult help, save for a Sunday school teacher who taught her class to consider the Bible in historical context, Jessica came to the conclusion that her friend was wrong. She majored in religion in college, studying Greek and Hebrew, and with the help of several books on feminist theology, wrote her senior thesis on feminine images of God. She said that feminist theology “gives us strength for the journey.”

In her experiences as youth minister and as pastor, Jessica has had challenges not only because of her youth, but because she is a woman. As a youth minister she was not allowed to preach when the pastor was away, and as a pastor she has had people walk out of the congregation because a woman pastor was going to preach. She sighs, “It just wears on you.” She sees young men who are not especially capable as ministers, but get offered large churches right out of seminary, an opportunity to be a senior pastor that women rarely have. She concludes, “And so it is very frustrating and what feminist theology does is that it reminds you that no matter what, you are doing it. You are doing the right thing; you are doing what God calls you to do. And it helps give you strength to walk a sometimes irritating and lonely, sad path.”

Cynthia, a second-career minister who has only recently completed her seminary degree, says that feminist theology is an “outside voice that says yeah, what you are being called to do makes sense. It is an outside affirmation, and probably the

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first place that we can see that voice strongly . . . and recognize that our voices matter.\textsuperscript{379}

\textit{Feminist Theology as Tradition}

Both Diane, one of the youngest ministers, and Susan, one of the oldest, spoke of feminist theology as "tradition," displaying a certain distance from feminist theological scholarship. Diane, who in seminary read widely in feminist theology and in the sociology of religion, expressed gratitude for the "feminist theology tradition," and the women who have gone before and "unlocked these doors for me." She expressed awareness that she is "standing on their shoulders" . . . and I feel that they unlocked the ability to appropriate scripture critically with the lens of gender . . . and called into question the assumptions that God behaves in gendered ways.\textsuperscript{380}

Susan, who is more experienced in ministry, has not read much feminist theology, but expresses the hope that her legacy will be other female pastors. Hopefully the next generations will internalize the reality in that, “Number one, they have at least seen it and number two they’ve heard it, and number three, maybe they will believe it so that, you know, change can happen.”\textsuperscript{381} She told of a family with three little girls who recently came to her church from a church in Georgia where the pastor was also a woman. When they left the service at her church, the girls were

\textsuperscript{379} Cynthia, interview with author, May 19, 2009.
\textsuperscript{380} Diane, interview with author, January 9, 2009. In \textit{The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). Gerta Lerner documents over 700 years of feminist Bible criticism and the redefinition of biblical texts. Included in her list are 19\textsuperscript{th} century American women: Julia Foote, Rebecca Jackson, Sarah Grimke, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Jocelyn Gage. See also Mary D. Pellauer, \textit{Toward a Tradition of Feminist Theology: The Religious Social Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Anna Howard Shaw} (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1991).
\textsuperscript{381} Susan, interview with author, December 10, 2008.
debating who could be pastors and finally asked their father, "Well, Dad, men can't be pastors can they?" These little girls did not know a male pastor. Susan laughed, "There's my hope."\(^{382}\)

Teresa acknowledges the contributions of feminist theologians that have made it possible for her to be a pastor. However, she believes that feminist theology should not be taught as a separate theology, interprets the word "feminist" negatively and thinks some women pastors have not brought it "into the pulpit in a positive way." What she hopes is that because she is a pastor and "women and girls are seeing me, they are not going to need feminist theology because they already have it - they saw it."\(^ {383}\)

**Feminist Theology as a New Frame for Understanding**

Several women acknowledged the transformational promise of feminist theology, seeing it as a new "frame"\(^ {384}\) for looking at the Bible, religious institutions and gender. In Robin's opinion, feminist theology is "great." It is the voice of inspiration, gives new images and metaphors, it is non-hierarchical, and gives the possibility of experimenting with different forms that are empowering to the people, not just to ministers.\(^ {385}\) Lauren noted that feminist theologians are changing the way people think, even if they have not read it, because more women who have been influenced by feminist theologians are in leadership positions.\(^ {386}\)

\(^{382}\) *Ibid.*  
\(^{383}\) Teresa, interview with author, May 6, 2009.  
\(^{385}\) Robin, interview with author, May 12, 2009.  
\(^{386}\) Lauren, interview with author, February 19, 2009.
Both Connie and Carol reflected on the importance of feminist theology in women’s self-understanding. Connie described how feminist theology “opened up some sky over” women’s perceptions about God and consequently their place in the world.\(^{387}\) Carol said, “Feminist theology reminds women that we can be anything God wants us to be, that we are not limited by roles that used to be purely the role of males.”\(^{388}\) Rachel, who read more liberation theology than feminist theology, agrees that feminist theology gives us new “language about God and the way we frame issues and our understanding the history. I guess for me it was more opening my eyes to the ways that our experience shapes how we view God and how we make our way in the world.”\(^{389}\) Sharon said that feminist theology provides “validation as the way I look at the world is different, not less than. There is no need for a hierarchy of voice; it’s a reminder that all voices are part of the picture.”\(^{390}\)

Arlene and her co-pastor, also a woman, are perhaps the two most intentional about involving their congregation in the transformational aspects of feminist theology. One retreat focused on a feminist interpretation of the doctrine of atonement, the meaning of Jesus’ death. Arlene believes that feminist theology “is essential to the nature and being of God in the world, in humanity’s relationship with God.” It is not just a “nice idea or a way to make people feel good or fix something.”\(^{391}\)

*Feminist Theology and Inclusion of Women in the Biblical Story*

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\(^{388}\) Carol, interview with author, October 1, 2008.
\(^{389}\) Rachel, interview with author, January 30, 2009.
\(^{391}\) Arlene, interview with author, June 30, 2008.
A critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of full humanity for women, exposing the oppressive as well as the liberating texts of the Bible. All of the women in my study have benefitted from their enhanced self-awareness, both from understanding the Bible as liberating in general, and from their study of feminist theology. Robin offered this view in her own words: “Feminist theology offers us a way of finding our life in the story. And in some profound ways that empower us. And we can find our voice, we can find our life; we don’t have to pretend we are somebody else.”

Women pastors employ feminist theology to educate and elevate the role of women through sermons and Bible studies, including Vacation Bible School. Two ministers have written and performed dramatic monologues that portray individual women in the Bible who have displayed strength of faith and leadership.

Feminist theologians provide a re-thinking of women’s oppression, especially in violent form. “For instance,” Susan explained, “when I use Phyllis Trible’s stuff, it was to preach on that scripture (Judges 19: 1-22) where the concubine is thrown out and raped, etc. I did a whole sermon on that.” She continued, “On Wednesday nights, I did a whole series on issues that have to do with women and how their concerns

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392 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 23. Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether makes use of different sources to uncover the prophetic-liberating traditions that can be appropriated by feminism as normative principles of biblical faith, which, in turn, criticize and reject patriarchal ideology.

have not been raised, and issues of power and control and the abuse that women have
endured."394

Two of the women discussed their preaching as being different from men as
well as bringing a distinct moral authority as women to challenge only male
leadership or values. Sherry and Cynthia, both mothers, celebrated the feminine
contributions that women bring to the pulpit, attributes that have been blessed by God
and that can be attributed to the God of the Bible. Sherry said God “wants the
mothering, if you will. . . . Women bring to ministry a compassion that men, in my
view, don’t get - the majority of them - there are no absolutes.”395 Now in her first
pastorate, Cynthia, believes that women have something unique to bring to the table
because of understanding power or strength to be something other than just physical
strength. She feels that women bring a “side of nurturing that is different from what
it is to be a dad. So I think it compliments the male presence in the congregation to
have these different types of images present.” In addition, the inclusion of women and
their voices “added to the ones that we have had before will either complement,
challenge or in some cases replace what was not necessarily a good message because
there is a different message that we can add to the story.”396

Feminist Theology as Theological and Intellectual Ground to Stand on

The youngest pastor I interviewed offered a concise statement on the
importance of feminist theology to her and other women pastors. Elaine said,

394 Susan, interview with author, December 10, 2008. Phyllis Trible’s Texts of
Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives (Philadelphia: Fortress
Press, 1984), explicates difficult biblical passages “in memoriam” to those who
suffered and help prevent these kinds of abuses from happening in the future.
“Feminist theology gives us theological and intellectual ground to stand on.”

She explained that while her main focus now is on the church, not feminist theology, she learned through her education and personal experience that women's voices have been lacking. In her spiritual formation in seminary she discovered women in history and their contributions through the work of feminist theologians “bringing them to the surface.” For Elaine, the acceptance of a call to be pastor meant she had to overcome her childhood training that women could not assume that leadership role in the church. She had to go through her ordination without the support of her father, a Southern Baptist pastor. For her an alternative theological and intellectual paradigm is especially significant.

**Biblical Hermeneutics**

Feminist theologians have provided careful scholarship on the Bible, language about God as well as the meaning of Jesus and the church, always dealing with the paradoxical situation at the heart of feminist biblical scholarship: the “paradox of struggle against God as enemy assisted by God as helper, or defeat the Bible as patriarchal authority by using the Bible as liberator.”

Biblical interpretation is central to the controversy over whether women should be pastors of churches. Fundamentalists believe that the Bible is the direct, inspired word of God, complete in itself for all ages, “truth without any mixture of

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error,”\textsuperscript{399} (in all areas, including science and history) a book of instruction and insight into how people should order their lives to be true to the will of God. In contrast, while the Bible is central in the lives of the women I interviewed, not one holds to a literal interpretation. That does not mean that the Bible has no authority in their lives, or that they do not believe the Bible is true. The women who spend much of their lives immersed in biblical passages in order to preach profess a great love for the Bible. In their view it is possible to hold a very high view of the Scripture without taking it literally. Rachel spoke for everyone when she said, “I think you can revere scripture and have very strong feelings about that being God’s word and not be strapped into a literal interpretation.”\textsuperscript{400}

One understanding of the Bible is in terms of narrative, or “story.” Robin describes the Bible as “our story” that “gives life to me, a story that makes sense and shapes how to live through my days.”\textsuperscript{401} Susan is among those who find the biblical stories a great resource for preaching, especially in inviting the hearers to compare their own stories and see how God’s revelation is ongoing.\textsuperscript{402} Both Diane and Rachel discussed the ways in which story and “testimony,” a favorite Baptist word, intersect


\textsuperscript{400} Rachel, interview with author, January 30, 2009.

\textsuperscript{401} Robin, interview with author, May 12, 2009.

\textsuperscript{402} Susan, interview with author, December 10, 2008.

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and connect contemporaries with the ancient texts. Diane said, “Our stories are as much a part of revelation as scripture is in my opinion.”

Several women echoed the belief that the Bible is not the end of revelation, but a part of the ongoing revelation that occurs in the lives of people today through the power of the Holy Spirit. Sharon describes the biblical story as having a “sacred otherness,” that is never the same as one reads it at different times. Sherry agreed that the Bible “provides whatever we need. The same scripture if we need comforting, it can do that, but if we are too comfortable and it needs to challenge us, it can do that.”

While the Bible has authority in their lives, the ultimate authority is the God whom they worship and the God who called them into ministry, a position that echoes Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s insistence that belief in God comes first; the Bible is a prototype of Christian faith and practice, rather than the unchangeable archetype. Because of their belief that biblical interpretation is made in the context of their experience of God, these pastors have found the message of the Bible to be liberating, even though there are oppressive passages for women. Most of the women focus their preaching on the New Testament Gospels, even though all but three follow the Revised Common Lectionary, a division of the Bible into a three year cycle that includes nearly all of the biblical passages, organized around the seasons of the liturgical church year. For each week the lectionary provides three or more different

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403 Diane, interview with author, January 9, 2009.
passages from which to choose. While these pastors will preach on Old Testament passages or use them along with the Psalms in the worship service, they gravitate toward the New Testament, primarily the Gospels. The message of the "radical inclusivity of God" is to be found in the Gospels, as well as the most challenging passages of Scripture.

The women I interviewed expressed the belief that the central message of the Bible for Christians is God's revelation in Jesus the Christ, whose message of love and redemption is for all persons, regardless of their age, sex, economic status or ethnicity. Lynn, who is pastor of a diverse community, underlined the importance of understanding that "gospel living is liberating for everybody . . . far beyond the women's context for me." Because of immigrants in her congregation, liberation theology informs her preaching as well as feminist theology. She contends that all theological constructs must be examined in the light of the radical and revolutionary nature of the Gospels. Carol believes that Jesus' positive treatment of women, and especially of Mary Magdalene who was the first to proclaim the resurrection, is basis enough for women to be pastors.

This understanding of the central liberating message of the Bible echoes the work of feminist theologians, particularly Letty Russell who argued that God's redemptive and liberating activity in Jesus Christ is the essence of biblical

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408 Lynn, interview with author, October 22, 2008.
409 Lynn, interview with author, October 22, 2008.
410 Carol, interview with author, October 1, 2009.
It was also the message these women heard in the churches of their childhood and youth. Church leaders did not teach children what Phyllis Trible calls “texts of terror,” nor was the issue of women pastors considered at the time. For these women, the message of the Bible was always “God is good and God is great;” as well as “this book says that God loves me.”

Oppressive biblical texts for women and other people exist, however, and are used against women pastors. The women I interviewed did not combat this by simply refuting the oppressive texts with more liberating ones or by encouraging people to look at the whole of scripture. As Robin explained, “You realize what it is about is not Bible verses and the authority of the Bible, it has everything to do with power. And that is where feminist theology comes in.” Especially when challenged about her role as a lesbian minister, Arlene responds: “I read the whole Bible . . . (and understand it) “not as a proof test for life but as story of humanity in relationship to God and God in relationship to humanity and I don’t get bogged down in individual scriptures that are about the context that is not mine. I get bogged down in how I take the scriptures as a whole into my context and understanding.”

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413 Erin, interview with author, February 20, 2009.
414 Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women’s Liberation* (Waco: Word Books, 1974), was an early work by biblical feminists to counter the oppressive passages in the Bible with the more positive ones for women. While important in highlighting positive texts, the limitation is that it can result in endless proof-texting.
Several women indicated the benefit of feminist theology in locating women in the biblical story, and use Schussler Fiorenza’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” as they question the text to see which voices are heard and which voices are absent, to look beneath the surface to discern the broader context, even Schussler Fiorenza’s woman-church. Schussler Fiorenza argued because the God of the Bible is often portrayed as one of oppression, the interpretative key for biblical passages must be found outside the text, in the biblical people and their contexts, especially poor women who believe in the biblical God of creation and salvation despite all experiences to the contrary.417

Anne described her attempt to “read between the lines, to imagine the stories of the women” who are often portrayed in a negative way or whose perspective is left out. Referring to Sarah, wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac, Anne recalled reading a book in which Sarah is given a voice to question Abraham’s intention to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:2). Sarah said: “I stood at the tent and wept. I cried to Abraham and said, why, why, why can’t your God tell me he wants you to sacrifice Isaac?” 418 These words had such an impact that Anne threw the book across the room when she read it, not because she disagreed, but because it was so powerful in showing a mother’s perspective and feelings that are left out of the biblical account.

Sherry concluded that careful study of the Bible shows God speaking in many voices, and “leadership throughout the Scriptures, it was never really and truly restricted to men.” When teaching she lifts up female leaders throughout biblical

417 Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation, 141.

One pastor described her hermeneutic as one not only of “suspicion” but also of “adventure,” letting the biblical account go where it will, not trying to have it all make sense or agree.\(^{420}\)

When addressing the difficult biblical texts, like the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter, the pastors turn to Phyllis Trible’s book, *Texts of Terror*.\(^{421}\) This story of a father sacrificing his daughter because of a foolish promise to God should not be ignored, Trible argued, but read and preached “in memoriam to offer sympathetic readings of abused women,” and “to remember a past that the present embodies and to pray that these terrors shall not come to pass again.”\(^{422}\)

Faced with New Testament admonitions against women preachers (I Timothy 2:11-15; I Corinthians 11:2-5) the pastors bring to bear their knowledge of Greek and historical context to refute those admonitions.\(^{423}\) Elaine deals with the difficult texts from the Old Testament about the “trashing of people and killing and all the grossness,” with her hermeneutic of progressive revelation, God’s continuing story, a story that “had high moments with Christ, but it is a story that is not completed and we are continuing as we live into that story.” She sees the Bible as a narrative written

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\(^{419}\) Sherry, interview with author, February 4, 2009.  
\(^{420}\) Jane, interview with author, February 17, 2009.  
\(^{423}\) Terry, interview by author, February 10, 2009. The word translated “pastor” occurs only once in the New Testament, Ephesians 4:11. The Greek word “gune” means woman or wife, the meaning determined by the use of a pronoun – “his wife,” for example. Thus the context is important in discussing qualifications for deacons and leaders in the church.
by human beings about how they viewed God and it may not be who God is, but we can learn something from it because it speaks to our human condition.424

The women pastors I interviewed cherish the Bible and its truth, they begin their sermons with biblical passages, they find within it validation for their calling to be pastors. The Bible for them is liberating. At the same time, theirs is not a literal interpretation but one informed by an understanding that the gospel message is the standard for all interpretations, that the Bible tells of God’s relationship with humanity from a variety of viewpoints, and that the biblical revelation is not the final word. Informed by their seminary education and their readings in feminist theology, they search the scriptures for new insights about God and individuals, particularly about women.

Theology

Views of God

A central aspect of the feminist movement as well as the work of feminist theologians has been the role of language in not only describing reality but also in shaping reality. The generic “man” intended to include all persons is challenged as effectively ignoring women in discourse and as participants in all aspects of society. Simultaneously, feminist theologians challenge the biblical language about God as being androcentric, patriarchal, even militaristic. The Trinitarian description of God as Father, Son and Holy Ghost leaves out women entirely. Translations of Old Testament passages describing creation and birth do so with male language, ignoring

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women as the child-bearers. Since the "symbol of God functions," language about God, which is ultimately inadequate to describe God, must reflect the experience of women as well as men. Elizabeth Johnson justifies the use of inclusive language "so long as the words signify something that does characterize the living God mediated through Scripture, tradition and present faith experience, for example, divine liberating action or self-involving love for the world, then new language can be used with confidence." Sallie McFague argues that language about God for the present nuclear and evolutionary age must "support ways of understanding the God-world and Human-world relationships as open, caring, inclusive, interdependent, changing, mutual and creative."

From Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Sexism and God Talk*, to Elizabeth Johnson's *She Who Is*, feminist theologians have struggled to re-name and re-imagine God in language and function that resonate in the lives of all people. Interested to know how women pastors think about God and name God in their private thoughts, I asked, "When you think about God, what comes to mind?" The responses were significant in that most of the images of God are not traditionally male, and the responses represent an immense variety of metaphors for God. In addition the responses indicate a sense of God's intimate presence in their lives.

Visions of God shared in an interview indicate not only the spirituality and creativity of women pastors, but also the freedom to name God in ways that make

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426 Ibid., 7.
sense in their reality and experience. While theirs is also a God of transcendence, the pastors expressed more confidence in the immanence of God, a central theme of feminist theology. Their views of God speak not only of inclusion but expansion—an openness to ways to think about and name God that speak of freedom, but also of faith.

As children, most of the women had an anthropomorphic view of God. They thought of God as an "old man," a "grandfather" in heaven, a person. Elaine confessed that she thought of God as male until the year before she entered seminary and read Sue Monk Kidd’s book, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. Now she thinks of God as a "heavenly parent," one who brings order and purpose to the world, one who loves even though people do unloving things.428

*The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* is Sue Monk Kidd’s spiritual autobiography, her journey from patriarchy within culture, church, faith tradition, marriage and even herself to discovering her "feminine soul" and also the "Feminine Divine." Standing before Leonardo daVinci’s *Cartoon of St. Anne*, she became aware "for the first time that the symbol of woman can be a vessel of the sacred, that it too can be an image of the Divine . . ."429 Elaine described Kidd’s work as "a great book, especially for people who grew up in Baptist churches because you know what she is talking about."430 Sue Monk Kidd was originally Southern Baptist.

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Though they know that God is Spirit, three women think of God as “Father,” partly because that is the way Jesus addressed God, and partly because each has or had a good relationship with her father. They tend to use inclusive language when leading worship, however, believing that any physical description would be limiting. In worship Teresa uses the Trinitarian formula, but instead of “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” she says “Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer,” describing the functionality without masculine terminology.431

One of Connie’s favorite images of God comes from the Psalms, the image of God as mother. “I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me” (Psalm 131:2). “Often,” Connie said, “when I am anxious and afraid, I repeat that as a mantra over and over and it is very comforting to me: my soul is a weaned child in the arms of its mother.”432

Three pastors, Vickie, Jane and Cynthia, think of God in impersonal terms completely. Vickie thinks of God as a “being, sort of like a big ball of light, a being that radiates, the controlling force of everything, and that is love – total and complete love.”433 Jane’s idea of God has nothing to do with gender, neither masculine nor feminine. She has never gravitated toward an anthropomorphic idea of God. She thinks of God in terms of movement, energy, and power – or light – “the multiplicity of all the metaphors and images of scripture have been helpful to me.”434 Cynthia, because of her love for Genesis 1:1, (accurately translated “in a beginning God

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434 Jane, interview with author, February 17, 2009.
created” or “when God beginning”) describes God in one sentence: “God is the creative force of the universe.” It is her belief that God continues to create, that revelation does not end with the biblical narratives of revelation.435

Arlene, Terry and Sharon think of God in terms of presence. Arlene described God as “sacred and holy presence, that is tangible enough that it influences how I live and who I am and how I am, and it is beyond enough that it is mystery.”436 Arlene reflected on a book she read a few years ago, a book written by a woman who imagined God as a woman with a long flowing skirt and pockets full of surprises that at times wraps around and holds her. She called God “Gracie.” It is a real tangible image,” Arlene said, “and in the moment you settle into God’s skirt and say I’ve got to tell you about this or is there something in the pockets that can give me what I need at this moment.”437

Terry talked about God as “being, essence, presence, spirit, Jesus – creator, redeemer, sustainer.” She expanded on her idea of God as creator, but not an “object” for people to blame for illness or war or other negative things. Noting that people often blame God and get angry, she will not do that. And, while she does not think of God in anthropomorphic terms, she will sometimes preach in that way because of the anthropomorphism of the Bible – God as a potter, for instance. She maintains that God is above our descriptions, not captured by our perspectives, however they change over time.438

436 Arlene, interview with author, June 30, 2008.
437 Ibid.
Sharon described God as “essence, wholeness, being, completeness, life source and love.” She is careful about pronouns for God, partially because of her children. Her four-year-old daughter and younger son had a discussion in the back seat of the car about whether God is a boy or a girl. Her son asked, “Mommy, is God a boy or is God a girl?” When Sharon replied, “Michael, God is not a boy and God is not a girl,” her daughter began laughing and said, “Mommy, you are so silly. God is not a girl.” Sharon persisted, “Angela, that is not what I said. I said, God is not a girl and God is not a boy. God is God. And there is a special language we use for God. And as you get older I will help you to understand that more and more.”

Anne’s concept of God included several images – the ocean and the sky, warmth, presence and “my mother’s smile.” She referred to Shug’s comment to Celie in *The Color Purple* that “the God you see at church is the God we all bring.” Thus when she thinks of God she thinks of her Jewish friends, her Muslim and Christian friends and that we all have a slice of truth about God. She continued, “We best know God when we let all of the light in. So that’s my image of God. I probably will die thinking about my mother’s smile.”

Sherry views God in terms of love. She shared an incident involving an inmate at the psychiatric hospital when she worked for a time as chaplain. As she entered the locked ward one morning, the man came running up to her, frightening her. Very close to her face he asked, “Rev., what’s the word for today?” Even though she could hardly speak, somehow the words came to her and she replied, “God is love.” His whole countenance changed and he looked at her and said, “You’re right.

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440 Anne, interview with author, January 26, 2009.
That’s a good word for the day. God is love.” Several months later she was on the
campus and again he spotted her and came over. He got right in her face again and
said to her, “You were the one that told me God is love. That was a good word.” She
continued, “So I’ve often thought about it – that really does sum it up.”

Rachel discussed God in terms of love, and light and healing. Connie
thinks of God as spirit, and goodness. In Connie’s mind, the images for God vary;
both male and female images are helpful. But God is always benevolent, always
loving, always fair. Jessica described God as “love, the most surrounding,
encompassing, filling kind of love.”

Diane said that a whole montage of things come to mind when she thinks of
God, but it is mainly because of her strong Christology that she thinks of God in the
image of Christ. She also thinks of God as dwelling in people. When preparing
sermons or thinking about God, Diane envisions an icon of the Trinity - Father, Son,
Holy Spirit. In addition, her Christology tends to be very congregational, so she
thinks of the church and the people in it when she thinks of God. She reflected, “So
I’m thinking of my church, I’m thinking of people that I know that I count part of my
personal church, my interior church that I carry around with me. I just tend to be very
Trinitarian, very congregationally Christological when I think about God. The Holy
Spirit is harder for me to conceptualize . . . . I have a very, very, inclusive, broad
conceptualization of God.

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Erin and Robin, both well-read in feminist theology, have used different metaphors for God in their lives. Erin has been reflecting on the metaphor, “source of life,” and from there she thinks of water and its role in the lives of women. In Genesis, for instance, there are many times when women (like Hagar in Genesis 21:19) turn up at sources of water - wells, springs - and God speaks to them. And so, there is water, and source of life and women and God, wrapped up together.\textsuperscript{446} Robin thinks of God as a midwife, not able to take away our pain, but whose presence makes all the difference. She continued, “I think of God as the possibility for good change and goodness and mercy to happen. I think of God as the discovery of hope, the one who offers us this path to discovery of hope, immanent, within us and around us in this life, but never able to finally name. Mystery.”\textsuperscript{447}

Susan, who has been in the ministry for several years, laughed when I asked what she thinks about God, because she says as she grows older there is less and less definition about who God is. There is more broadness and expansiveness. More specifically, she added, “You know what it feels like when somebody without a doubt loves you, they pull you into their arms and hold you close. I think that’s what comes to mind when I think about God. Held in the light.”\textsuperscript{448}

Lauren’s response about God was that she thinks of God as “something like smoke in the sense that it permeates everything and it emits from one place and then it spreads out.” She continued, “I guess another vision would be sort of like at

\textsuperscript{446} Erin, interview with author, February 20, 2009.
\textsuperscript{447} Robin, interview with author, May 12, 2009.
\textsuperscript{448} Susan, interview with author, December 10, 2008.
Pentecost with the flames of the spirit passing through and alighting on everyone. So it is not mortal.  

Understanding Jesus – His Life and Death

Even though the women pastors do not imagine God as male, they accept the maleness of Jesus as part of his identity. Most responded to the question about who Jesus was with some formulation of the Chalcedonian statement that Jesus was “truly God and truly human” (Council of Chalcedon, 451 C.E.). The pastors focus on Jesus as the incarnation of God, the one who shows us how to live, “shows us what God is like in the flesh,” or “Jesus was God with skin on.” Susan said, “I believe that Jesus was the Son of God, I believe he was both wholly human and divine.” Cynthia emphasizes the divinity of Jesus. In her words, “Jesus the Christ means that healing is stronger than illness, that hope is stronger than despair, that resurrection trumps crucifixion, that out of death there is life and to believe in Christ is to believe that all things are possible.” Robin sees Jesus “as the one who incarnated this life in God in a way that we could see it more clearly. And I think that the Jesus story is far more radical that I could ever possibly live long enough to live into.” Even so, she can still claim Jesus and be a follower because of his radical witness to the “God-mystery and the God-surprise of resurrection.”

450 Carol, interview with author, October 1, 2009.
A few pastors focused more on the humanity of Jesus, his ministry and teaching. Jesus shows what it means to be human, a different way of living and being in the world. For Erin, Jesus is how she “filters” the important things in the Bible. “If Jesus talks about it a lot then it is important. If he doesn’t talk about it, then it is not important.” Lauren sees Jesus as “world changing – he took hold of the ways of this world and just turned them completely upside down.”

Rosemary Radford Ruether’s question, “Can a male Savior save women,” conveys the important issue of whether the maleness of Jesus, which belongs to his historical identity, is “essential to his redeeming christic function and identity.” If so, while women are recipients of divine grace, they are marginalized and blocked from representing him in ecclesiastical leadership, specifically in the Eucharist and in proclamation. Obviously, the women who serve as pastors of churches do not accept the interpretation that Jesus’ maleness is as important as his message and work on behalf of all people. Even though several responded in orthodox terms regarding his identity, the maleness of Jesus is not the essence of who God is and does not mean one has to be male to represent God. The women pastors focus on the liberating and egalitarian message of Jesus. They interpret their experience of call to ministry to be from the God who has given them spiritual gifts for the task. As Rachel said, “For

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"propitiation." Rather, three women expressed support for the idea of "expiation," that Jesus' self-sacrifice was done out of love and has redeeming effects. Vickie said, "I do believe that the death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection were necessary for our salvation, but not because God was angry and had to take out his anger on somebody and Jesus was it. I believe, rather that it is like the sacrifices that you give for your children . . . because you love them, and I think that's the way Christ showed us his ultimate love. . . . It was giving his life for us that we would never doubt his love." \(^{462}\)

Terry distinguishes Jesus’ death in terms of Hebrew sacrifice, but not because of God’s anger. She believes he “laid down his life willingly, he did that for me. So I live my life for him.” \(^{463}\) Sharon acknowledges that she believes there was “some sort of need for the cross,” but is not completely comfortable with the idea that Jesus was the propitiation for our sin. Still, as she wrestles with the meaning she is cautious, not one to just “throw out something” that is part of the church tradition. \(^{464}\) Teresa believes that the idea of sacrifice is problematic, and she wishes God has chosen another way, but it doesn’t keep her from right relationship with him that he chose that. She continued, “I accept it more as, it was the human condition in which Jesus came and that was what the people would understand.” \(^{465}\)

Rachel, who wrote a paper in seminary on the atonement theory, came to the conclusion that his death is somehow “salvific,” but she does not know why. “I tend to shy away from the blood language and the sacrifice – that is not helpful language to me. But there is something mysterious and powerful and reconciling in a real way

\(^{462}\) Vickie, interview with author, December 18, 2008.
\(^{463}\) Terry, interview with author, February 10 2009.
in Jesus death. But I think it is kind of mystery to me.” Diane thinks that Jesus suffering was a way for God to identify completely with the experience of humankind. She adds, “Unless we have dealt with betrayal we cannot deeply love. And to me that is incarnation and until God experienced the worst of what it is to be human, to be betrayed, to suffer, to die, God couldn’t possibly be in solidarity with us and what we experience and could not therefore deeply love us.” Lauren believes that God forgives us and “I think God would have forgiven us even if Jesus had not been crucified . . . So the idea of atoning sacrifice doesn’t ring true with me.”

Jessica shared a personal story to indicate her thoughts about Jesus death. It has been in the times of personal difficulty that Jesus’ death has meant the most to her – when her sister ran away, and when she had a miscarriage. She said, “When you make it to the cross and have your moment, and then you get to come to Easter and remember that in the darkness of every death and every shadow there is also the light of resurrection, and that is what God does for us. That in the light of every brokenness, there is resurrection.”

Erin, Cynthia, and Robin do not use the language of sacrifice to describe Jesus’ death. They believe that Jesus was killed because he confronted the authorities of his day, the “principalities and powers” and human beings who were “blind to his goodness and gave him the worst that our human institutions can give in terms of

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466 Rachel, interview with author, January 30, 2009.
467 Diane, interview with author, January 9, 2009.
468 Lauren, interview with author, February 19, 2009. Lauren admitted that as she is coming to these conclusions, she has not yet had the courage to present them to the congregation.
the cruelty of the death penalty." Robin continued, "His death points to the worst of humanity. His resurrection points to the best of divinity." Thus the resurrection does not depend upon the cross, but is a victory over the evil attempt to suppress the vision that Jesus represented.

Jane credits womanist theologian Delores Williams for helping her understand the atonement in "other than bloody ways. Jesus essentially came to show us how to live, not how to die." In her book, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Williams addresses the surrogacy role of black women, past and present, and uses the biblical story of Hagar as an example of God's help to "make a way out of no way." Williams concludes the "spirit of God in Jesus came to show humans life – to show redemption through a perfect ministerial vision of righting relations between body (individual and community), mind (of humans and of tradition) and spirit."

**Views of Mary-Mother of Jesus**

The women pastors think of Mary as the mother of Jesus with respect, a feminine paradigm of faithfulness and obedience, who suffered a great deal, who could be termed the first Christian, someone "open to the surprise of God." Several women admit thinking of her as being too submissive and therefore not a good role model for women. However, since at some point most preach on the Magnificat,
Mary’s prophetic utterance in Luke 1:46-55, they recognize her empowering and prophetic role.

There are four women whose experience with Mary is more personally profound. Two of the women pastors spent early years in the Catholic Church, and therefore see Mary in a prominent role, as well as the other women in the church, especially the nuns. Terry admits that she does not currently pray to Mary, but she is open to the idea. Sharon has a lot of respect for Mary because of her Catholic roots and feels that Mary provided Jesus what he needed to be complete and to fulfill who he was destined to be. She noted that Mary was elevated, a feminine aspect of the faith, giving more than just the patriarchal images that God made man in his own image. She concluded, “You know, this constant redundant use of the masculine—that lay translation is that two guys did it all.”

Elaine, who grew up in a fundamentalist Baptist church, shared an experience that illustrates the symbolic power of Mary as feminine divinity. She was being interviewed for a position as pastor in the church where she was already employed as an associate. Even though there were women deacons in the church, those chosen for the transition team were all men. Elaine was young, under thirty years old, and she had heard talk of needing an older, more mature person for the job. But she saw it as an opportunity for her to grow and felt competent to lead the congregation. Before the interview she tried to keep calm, at the same time realizing what she was up against. Not only was she a woman, she was a young woman. She knew she must not cry in front of those men, but she was already upset and sad. She found herself

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praying to Mary. She remembers, "It was like the only person that I felt like I could have connected with at that moment, because I needed a woman to help me go be in that room with men who were going to lower me, make me feel like I was insignificant, and you know, unworthy of doing what I was already doing."\(^{479}\)

Vickie shared a deep sense of identification with Mary as one who was chosen, in spite of her lowliness. Vickie feels that there is nothing stellar about herself; she is just an average person, but God chose her and her path has been made smooth. She said, "So I resonate with Mary in her lowliness of being with all that is going on and seeing God at work, taking it in, but maybe not having anyone else to share it with."\(^{480}\) During times of retreat at a favorite monastery, Vickie recalls occasions during Vespers when she sees the image of Mary as the sunlight comes through the stained glass windows and forms shapes on the back wall. "Just glimpses," she says, but she sees her where the light is formed.

Although they did not reference recent feminist scholarship on Mary (\textit{Mary - the Feminine Face of the Church} by Rosemary Radford Ruether) or Elizabeth Johnson’s \textit{Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints}, there is definitely a willingness on the part of the women pastors to think of Mary in new and appreciative ways.

\textbf{Worship Leadership}

One of the goals of feminist theologians is that women are included in all aspects of worship - preaching, using inclusive language in Scripture, hymns,

\(^{479}\) Elaine, interview with author, May 13, 2009.  
\(^{480}\) Vickie, interview with author, December 18, 2008.
readings and prayers. The women pastors in my study represent the fulfillment of that goal as well as the goal of involving members of the congregation in worship.

*Preaching – Women Pastors Find Their Voice*

When asked about what they liked the most about being a pastor, five women responded that they “loved preaching” the most. Teresa talked about the difficulty of “finding her voice” because she had heard only men preach “and that just wasn’t how I preached.” Now in her second co-pastorate, she “hates” writing sermons, but she enjoys preaching. She says, “Preaching is number one. I think if I couldn’t preach I would die.”

Lynn “loves preaching” as well as the preparation of her sermons. She says, preaching is like opening a present every Sunday morning.

Connie “loves” preaching, the preparation and “the preaching moment, how God inhabits that, and even on the days when I really don’t get why people even listen to the sermon that day, is when they come and say that changed my life.”

Anne enjoys preaching, “the growth that I see in peoples’ lives,” and she enjoys her embodiment of spirituality, “just knowing that when I walk into a room I represent something bigger than any of us and that it is helpful.”

Anne recognized at the beginning that she would not preach like a man, so she gave herself permission to innovate and create dramatic monologues; one of the most convincing was her enactment of how one goes from a position of privilege to being homeless. Sherry finds that it takes all of Sunday afternoon to “come down” from the high of preaching and leading in worship.

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482 Lynn, interview with author, October 22, 2008.
484 Anne, interview with author, January 26, 2009.
Effective preaching, the main event in most Baptist worship services, is essential to being a Baptist pastor. Protestant theologies placed the Word at the center of their reflection, understanding theology's purpose to relate God's Word to the world.\textsuperscript{486} Whether sermons live up to this standard, the sermon as interpretation of the biblical text is central in worship. Historically, only men have been allowed the representative activity of speaking for God,\textsuperscript{487} and women have been kept in the background - while providing all the support services that make the church function. But when a woman stands in the pulpit and proclaims the Word of God, she definitely moves from the margin to the center in that worship service. Proclamation becomes a political as well as spiritual event.

The sermon is a form of verbal and non-verbal communication with the congregation. Both verbally and non-verbally, a human being "stands in" for God, for the \textit{Logos}, for Christ. A woman who speaks for God with a female voice challenges theology that understands God as male. Furthermore, the interpretation and communication from a female preacher will reflect the experience of women as well as others on the margins. Several of the women interviewed are intentional about telling the biblical stories of women who have been overlooked as well as interpreting the text from a woman's perspective. With different language and with perspectives from a broader spectrum of people, women who preach contribute to the transformation of theology and begin to create a new vision of God.\textsuperscript{488} A woman who

\textsuperscript{487} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{488} In her October 18, 2009 inaugural address at Union Theological Seminary in New York, published in the Spring 2010 issue of \textit{Union Now}, The Rev. Dr.
gives voice to her interpretations from her experience, proclaiming God's word to the world and for the world embodies change – change that is threatening to many people.

**Main Focus of Preaching**

Most of the women pastors use the lectionary (Revised Common Lectionary) as a guide for preaching, though they give themselves permission to deviate if they choose. Three of the women are “series” preachers, choosing different topics for a series of sermons. All of the women expressed appreciation for different biblical passages, books or characters. They mentioned Old Testament prophets and characters like Jonah and Samuel, stories of women leaders (Hulda, Miriam, Deborah, Shiprah and Puah) and women oppressed (Tamar, Hagar), humorous stories about human nature, like Naaman’s healing (2 Kings 5:1-19). Psalms and Genesis are mentioned as sources of sermons. Generally, however, the pastors focus on the four Gospels that give accounts of Jesus life, death and resurrection, as well as his teaching. Even when preaching about other texts, the preachers will connect them in some way, positively or negatively, with the gospel message. Jane, for instance, wants people to hear something about Jesus every Sunday.489

Lynn hopes that when hearing her sermons one would see excellent exegesis in preparation and delivery; hear about Jesus a lot; be challenged by the radical nature of the gospel and understand the importance of radical investment in Christian

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Barbara Lundblad preached on the embodiment of the Word or *Logos* in Jesus and the need to expand the meaning of embodiment to include women, slaves, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender bodies, disabled and homeless bodies.  

489 Jane, interview with author, February 17, 2009.
community.\textsuperscript{490} Arlene tends to emphasize justice and peacemaking.\textsuperscript{491} Carol often preaches on passages that lift women up, about the women who proclaimed and preached the resurrection, in contrast with those who choose negative passages about women without including what Jesus taught.\textsuperscript{492}

Sherry often focuses on the Holy Spirit because she thinks many Baptists shy away from belief in the Spirit because of the Pentecostal practice of glossolalia (speaking in tongues) a practice frowned upon by Baptists. She wants her congregation to know "the Holy Spirit directs us to do things." By focusing on the Holy Spirit, Sherry emphasizes not only traditional Baptist belief in soul competency but also continuing revelation. In a sermon on the baptism of Jesus she asked the congregation, "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?" They answered, "Yes." Then she asked, "Do you have evidence in your life that you could give that you know the Holy Spirit has directed you to do things?" and they said, "Yes." Then Sherry said, "See, we know God. We know this power. Don't let people convince you that you are second-class citizens."\textsuperscript{493} Sherry’s upholds the immanence of God, her belief that "God has a plan and a purpose for all of us, and that is part of our calling as a Christian, to find where we fit in, and what God wants us to do on this day, February 4, and what is it that God wants us to do today. And then we hear that voice and that we do it."\textsuperscript{494}

\textit{Inclusive Language in Worship}

\textsuperscript{490}Lynn, interview with author, October 22, 2008.
\textsuperscript{491}Arlene, interview with author, June 30, 2008.
\textsuperscript{492}Carol, interview with author, October 1, 2008
\textsuperscript{493}Sherry, interview with author, February 4, 2009.
\textsuperscript{494}Sherry, interview with author, February 4, 2009.
One of the most important achievements of feminist theology is in changing language about God. For instance, Sallie McFague suggests using language of relating to God with the help of relationships we know and understand, those of parent to child (Mother), lover to beloved (Lover) and friend to friend (God as Friend). These three metaphors form a trinity representing God as creative, salvific and sustaining, metaphors that draw attention to the interrelatedness and interdependence of all life.\(^{495}\)

Carol often addresses God as "Dear and loving Lord, gracious and merciful Father."\(^{496}\) Other pastors use inclusive language in their worship services, though as Elaine pointed out, she prefers the term "expansive language" because "when we are referring to the Holy One, I do not think that we could ever be inclusive enough."\(^{497}\) Women pastors' personal views of God include multiple metaphors, and they share those with the congregation. When talking about God, they sometimes use anthropomorphic language, referring to God as Father, occasionally to God as Mother.

In their public prayers, several women use pronouns to address God – Holy One, Merciful, Loving, Knowledgeable, Gracious God, Eternal God, or Wholly Other. Other women tend to stay away from pronouns and use gender-free words like God, Beloved, or "God, I invite your presence."\(^{498}\) Another pastor will sometimes say, "God who loves us as a father, who tends us as a mother." \(^{499}\)

\(^{496}\) Carol, interview with author, October 1, 2008.
\(^{497}\) Elaine, interview with author, May 13, 2009.
While they are careful to use inclusive and gender-free language for God, some pastors acknowledged that they do not use feminine images for God (without also using male images) in public prayer because their congregations would not receive it well. Anne spoke for several women when she said, “I learned that there were some folks who had not moved there yet, and as I say, my role is to lead them in worship, not beat them up.” At the same time she takes every opportunity to teach about language and scripture and the full nature of God, “to enlarge their vision.500

Aware that the pastors are often more receptive to feminine imagery than their congregations, I asked how they address God in their private prayers. The pastors reflected a very intimate sense of God’s presence. Most private prayers begin informally – maybe with just “God.” One person says, “God I’m sorry, I’m finally listening to you.” Others discuss their private prayers as a kind of stream-of-consciousness – an eternal presence, sometimes without a definite beginning and end. One person uses feminine images and pronouns a lot. Another pastor communes with God during her daily runs of approximately five miles, does not worry about names, listening and sometimes speaking.

Regarding inclusive language in music, most of the congregations use some version of the Baptist hymnal, which does not contain inclusive language. Several of

500 Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair T. Lummis, and Patricia Mei Yin Chang, Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling, 18. See also Miriam Therese Winter, Adair T. Lummis, and Allison Stokes, Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives (New York: Crossroad, 1994). Anne, interview with author, January 26, 2009. Baptist women pastors are not alone in their reluctance to use feminine images of God in worship. Two studies of women in other denominations found that in the 1990s women were unlikely to use female images for God in the church service they conducted. However they do free themselves spiritually by using female God-language in their private prayers.

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the pastors use the *Chalice Hymnal* in worship, an expansive collection of hymns, traditional and new, of varied ethnic origins, all of which employ inclusive language and non-militaristic language for God. From the largest congregation (3,000 members) to the smallest (30 members), there is a wide variety of music — traditional, contemporary — even hymns written by the resident choir directors. Most pastors vary the worship style and include very formal services with less formal ones. In short, the pastors thrive on creating meaningful services that are not the same each week.

*Lay Participation in Worship*

Consistent with their egalitarian values, as exhibited in their ordination services, when they insisted that all those present should participate in the “laying on of hands,” all of the women pastors value lay participation in the worship services in as many ways as possible. They invite the congregation to participate in responsive readings, in reading scripture, singing and playing musical instruments, speaking, serving communion, sometimes in planning the service. One pastor invites conversation with the congregation in response to her sermon each Sunday as part of the worship service. Several congregations have a time in the service when the children are invited to come forward for a “children’s sermon,” a simplified version of the main point of the sermon or scripture for the day. Sharon described the children’s time as her favorite part of the service; and on children’s day, the children lead in all aspects of worship.

*Memorable Worship Services*

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501 Lynn, interview with author, October 22, 2009.
I asked the pastors to recall one of the most meaningful worship services they have led. Three of the pastors, who planned their ordination services, remembered their ordination services as highlights of their lives. One pastor could not recall any service in particular because she finds all of them meaningful. Another pastor recalled a service of healing she led for a group of women, a very small group in a large sanctuary, yet a very powerful experience.

Several others shared in detail services that illustrate their theology, the value they place the church as community, their willingness to be creative and transformative, and their obvious joy in what they do. Their services represent what Gerda Lerner calls “self-authorization”503 the freedom to create and innovate worship experiences that incorporate the element of surprise, in contrast to the predictable (male) model of hymns, prayer, offering and sermon.

Arlene and her co-pastor led a worship service at the end of a retreat for women. Having studied different theories of the atonement of Jesus and preached on the subject for several weeks during Lent, they asked the question, “What really is the role of the death of Jesus in our faith and our theology?” During the closing worship of the retreat, they led a service of communion, where the juice was poured from a seashell into a common cup, bread was a common loaf, and they used the words of “coming to the table as celebration of the living body of Christ,” not the death of Christ. As they encircled the table, they remembered all those who have gathered around the table before. The words accompanying the sharing of bread were, “This

bread is a symbol of Christ’s body given even to the point of breaking. The blood is a symbol of life, the essence of life, of what’s important and essential to living.” The point was to use some of the traditional language but give it a new context, trying to stay true to the table as the gathering place of the living body of Christ without settling into “sacrifice as essential for salvation.”

The retreat was held near the ocean, and as Arlene described it, provided a unique experience of the wind “blowing the sea oats, the sun and the sounds and smells of the ocean and (a very) connectedness with the earth among a group of women who had spent the night before in a drumming circle. The energy that they create, when you come together to worship brings something outside of what most of us experience on Sunday morning.”

Lynn described a recommitment service, held at the end of January each year, a time for the 700 members to make a renewal of membership to the 145-year-old church. The questions are “What does it mean to live in gospel community? Am I going to follow Jesus this year?” During this particular service Lynn preached on the story of Jacob’s dream of encountering God as angels ascended and descended on a ladder to heaven, an experience he commemorated by building an altar (Genesis 28:10-19). Lynn then linked the Jacob story to that of pilgrims who climb Monte Picchu and leave rocks there to mark their presence.

She had given a rock to everyone at the beginning of the service; and at the end of her sermon she invited people to come forward to make their commitment known to the pastor and place their rock on the altar. The response of the

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504 Arlene, interview with author, June 30, 2008.
505 Ibid.
congregation was immediate and very emotional, Lynn said, "People were sobbing. It was just a moving, moving, moving, moving service and you know I was sort of taking a risk, you shouldn’t give people rocks to throw at you, but it was very moving and affirming of these qualities of gospel community that I preach and preach and preach and wonder if people are really listening, and they are. That was one neat service."  

Susan remembered a particularly painful time in the congregation when they were about to be excluded from the local Baptist Association because of their support for the Alliance of Baptists, churches inclusive of people of all sexual orientations. She had attended a meeting of a committee of the local Baptist association, hoping to forestall the move to "disfellowship" the church. The congregation had promised to support her, no matter what the outcome. On this Sunday she was prepared to tell them of the outcome, and it was not good. She preached on the story of Jacob and Esau (Genesis 27: 1-40), on the theme of blessing, linking it to the present congregation and how they were not going to receive a blessing this time.

It was very difficult for Susan, and though she does not usually cry in the pulpit, she found herself very emotional. She issued the usual invitation at the end of the service for those who would join the church or make some faith decision. To her surprise, as she was standing in front of the church the people got up one by one and gave her a blessing. They laid their hands on her head, hugged her and told her to be brave. They thanked her for standing up for them. Susan reflected, "I was totally

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506 Lynn, interview with author, October 22, 2008.
507 If a local Baptist association or a state convention votes to "disfellowship" a church, it means that they will refuse to seat a particular church's messengers at the meetings and refuse to receive mission money from the church.
befuddled. I had no idea they would respond like that. But it was incredibly powerful. That we were in this together and that while they as a congregation weren’t going to receive a blessing, they could still give one.”

Jane talked about a service held the day after Christmas. She invited everyone to bring bells. As part of the service she read the story “Why the Chimes Rang” by Raymond Alden. At the appropriate time when the chimes of the cathedral rang in the book, the chimes in the church belfry rang out. During the rest of the service Jane invited the congregation to ring their bells every time they heard or sang the word “bell.” She beamed as she described it: “It turned out to be a very joyous service . . . and there was very little theological content. People were amazed that you could do that in worship and it also felt reverent - that joy could be reverent and joy could be celebrative, and there could be all this stuff going on and there could be all ages participating and so I mean, it was just a ball!”

Terry is serving her first church as pastor, and her most memorable service was when she baptized people for the first time. There was a lot to do in preparation, because she wanted it to be a great experience. That meant persuading the congregation to purchase new baptismal robes and even cleaning the baptistry herself, a task that involved using acid to clean the copper lining. During the service she had the candidates wear the new robes and carry a candle to the front of the church. She placed note cards with their full names on them so she would not forget when baptizing them. She preached on the biblical symbolism of salt and light, and to help them remember, put a bit of salt on their lips. She said, “I wanted them to taste the

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509 Jane, interview with author, February 17, 2009.
salt,” to remember that Jesus said that salt without flavor had to be thrown out. She used the candles to talk about Jesus’ message that light should not be put under a bushel but where everyone can see it. After they were baptized, the candidates took their candles as they walked out, symbolizing their role as light. The service went really well, a significant threshold for Terry, aware that as a woman, she was under additional scrutiny. She reflected, “It was very symbolic and everything went well, and I was really happy that I was able to do it and not mess it up. I feel an added pressure because looking at the girl - you know, can the girl do it?”

As pastor of her first church years ago, Robin was both creative and courageous in expressing her theology. One Sunday she invited all the young people to come and sit at the front of the church. Then she took the Bible and went through many of the parts that people do not believe in - like slaughtering all the Midianites, or incorrigible teenagers being stoned to death. As she identified an offensive passage, she would announce that this was not of God, just cruel and violent, and she would rip the page out and throw it in the air and let it float down. Then she said, “The Bible is considered holy; what makes it holy? Is where and how it was printed?” “No,” she answered, “it is only holy when we take the words and make them part of our flesh. And when we know that God is love and everything and the words that we find must go into us and make of us love.”

Then, knowing the congregation well, Robin visited various senior adults in the afternoon to make sure they were okay with her tearing up the Bible. One of the stops was to an elderly widower with whom she had become close during the illness.

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and death of his wife. She loved him and knew that he loved her. But even though
he trusted her, at age eighty he would find her treatment of the Bible difficult to
accept. She went to his house and sat down with him in his den where he was
shelling peas from his garden. After a few minutes of conversation, she asked, “So
what did you think about what I did this morning in the service?” “Oh,” he replied,” I
knew it wasn’t a real Bible.”

The willingness of these pastors to be creative and courageous in their
worship leadership is matched by the trust of the congregation in their authority, and
in the strength of their relationships that allow for unpredictable services in terms of
subject, format and participation by all present.

Vision of the Church

Feminist theologians describe the church as an egalitarian community where
authority is exercised as partnership, not domination. In this community the full
humanity (or self-identification as women) of everyone is recognized, it is a
“household of freedom” that breaks down the barriers that separate all people and
brings them together in the experience of God’s love that welcomes everyone. This
view of church comes from the teachings of Jesus on the Kingdom of God and is
glimpsed in the writings of Paul: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer
slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ
Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28-29, NRSV). Women pastors share this view of the church, and
add perspective in traditional theological language as well.

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Arlene began her discussion of the meaning of church with appreciation for the congregation of her youth, the people who taught her to worship and to be a part of the church. The mission groups, Girls in Action and Acteens, taught her how to live in the world. She wants contemporary congregations to claim their heritage but also be open to new paradigms that they may have a “clear glimpse of the realm of God.”

In short, her vision of the church is that of “beloved community” – where “people come to the table together, even in the presence of our enemies, we put our feet under the same table and call ourselves family.” She credits Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s concept of women-church for taking her to a new place in her thinking.

Two of the pastors view the church as the Body of Christ, that believers are the “hands and feet” of Christ. As the embodiment of Christ, followers are not just a gathered community, though that is essential, but they are to be witnesses outside worship, to let people know by the way they live that God loves them. In addition, believers must engage in acts of mercy as well as fight for justice.

Being the body of Christ is not easy. Vickie described a conversation with a seminary intern who found the work to be tedious and mundane. Vickie agreed with her that it is often that way, but there are times when she is sitting at her desk and there will be a knock on the door, and someone says, “This is going on in my life and

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514 Arlene, interview with author, June 30, 2008.
515 Ibid.
516 Carol, interview by author, October 1, 2008.
517 Ibid.
518 Anne, interview with author, January 26, 2009.
I can’t stand it; help me find God.” Vickie mused, “And you sit there and you think why would anyone come to me to find God. Yet somehow you do help them find God . . . If you can just do the mundane, you’ll get these moments, they are few and far between, but if you will live through the mundane, there is a moment when the angels’ song will come.”

Four pastors envision the church as an expression of the kingdom of God on earth, as “our world’s best hope,” if people can be redemptive and accepting rather than judgmental. Being the kingdom of God means that followers must know how to be who they are meant to be – “beacons of hope, conduits of love, icons of grace . . . loving God and loving neighbor . . . the church is a family – offering to all the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Sharon admitted that the vision is not always achieved, and as a human institution the church sometimes takes five steps forwards and three steps back. In Cynthia’s vision, the church as the kingdom of God on earth should be the Lord’s Prayer personified. The church is more than just any one place, or combination of places, “but the church at its best are the ones who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the ones in prison . . . . And for me,” Cynthia continued, “in terms of cultural politics and so on, for me that means I don’t care if something is legal or illegal or from the moon. If they are hungry, I’m going to give them food. I’m not called to go through their documents . . . . We are called to love, so

522 The Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen”
love one another. That's it. Some place it is all very simple, just love each other . . .
Do that. Do love."523

If the church is supposed to be the kingdom of God on earth, Connie asks, what does the rule of God look like? That question leads her to investigate the different ways of being church – of bringing people into right relationship with God, of making sure people have enough in the world, whether it is food or justice –or peace. She said, “Food, fairness, justice, and that’s what the church is about. The church for me is an absolutely God centered body and not institution centered; it is about who God is and what God wants. It is about people discovering themselves as God dreamed they would be and leaning into that with all their hearts, with all their gifts, with all their passions.”524

Rachel believes that the church must be inclusive above all else.525 Sherry, Jessica and Sherry focus upon the church as community that nurtures each person, and at the same time reaches out to other people. From her positive experience in the church as a diverse community committed to working together, Elaine believes the “church must model a different way of being in the world that shows that God exists, that God is love, and that cares about issues that radiate God . . .”526 Jessica’s view of church is people who bind together in fellowship, who love and support one another without question, who hold one another up in difficult times and help one another out in all times, and who give back to the community.”527

Sherry reiterated the belief that the church is a “very inclusive community that nurtures and cares for one another, but is not restricted to the four walls of any one place . . . the building is not what the church is.” Lauren’s immediate image for the church is a recycling sign, indicating that the church must always be a community of inward and outward growth. In the same vein, Teresa envisions the church as an organic community, not an institution bound by committees and by-laws.

There are challenges to the church as inclusive community in Sherry and Terry’s experience, particularly in terms of racism. Both pastors had to deal with racist attitudes among white church members that surfaced when children of color were invited to participate in after school programs and in Vacation Bible School. Both have refused to back down from including those children who wanted to participate. Susan and her congregation were cut off from the local Baptist association of churches because they affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists, congregations that support the inclusion of persons of all sexual orientations, in contrast to the Southern Baptist condemnation of homosexuality.

Acknowledging the limitations of human beings in being faithful to the kingdom of God, both Diane and Robin understand the church as a group of people who recognize and confess their brokenness, their failures. To be honest about our failures, to be able to say we are the broken body of Christ is our gift to the world, Robin believes, not our imagined wholeness. When Christians acknowledge their

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530 Teresa, interview with author, May 6, 2009.
531 Though Baptists condemn racism, congregations continue to have members who want to remain segregated, especially when class and race coincide—in other words, poor black children.
failures they can walk beside others who are broken or who have failed, who have been shamed and humiliated, who have not gotten it right, and they can say to broken people, “Let me tell you how I have found healing and hope and let’s walk on this path together.” She continued, “I think the triumphal days of being the church are long gone.” Diane also believes ministers and churches do their work out of brokenness. She said, “There is something holy that happens in our brokenness. And as nice as I wish the church would be, as great and obedient, faithful and open-minded, loving and caring and non-selfish . . . I just trust that somewhere someone is getting watered by the brokenness.”

Jane admits that she has minimal expectations of the church so she ends up being surprised when it is better than basically paying the bills, having good worship and providing a place for people to serve and learn. She wants the church to do some things individuals could not do alone and figure out how to get organized. She believes the church as the body of Christ is organic, very process oriented, and she invests a lot of time in understanding the dynamics of interpersonal relations and working with people. She, however, does not feel responsible for the spiritual lives of her members. She will say, “I am not responsible to make you happy,” directly addressing an unspoken expectation that many pastors accept as their job. However, there were tears in her eyes when she described a broken relationship within the congregation that was not healed.

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533 Diane, interview with author, January 9, 2009. Diane told a story about how even the water that escapes from cracked pots allows the flowers to bloom, and compared ministers and the church to those cracked pots.
534 Jane, interview by author, February 17, 2009.
Appropriate Pastoral Leadership

However lofty and theologically sound one's vision of the church, the task of leadership is complicated and often difficult for several reasons. First, legitimacy of women pastors is rejected by the majority of Baptists, either by policy as in the SBC, or by failure to hire women pastors by Baptist congregations and agencies that voice support. Secondly, while the women advance their belief in an egalitarian fellowship, the structure of the institution is hierarchical, especially in large congregations. As Robin pointed out it is about power and how the church experiences it. She continued, "How the leadership still is, you are the pastor and it is going to stop with you . . . and if the church is paying your salary full time, there is a lot riding on your doing what they want you to do."\(^{535}\)

A third difficulty is in finding workable pastoral models. Based on their belief in the priesthood of believers and on their feminist understanding of community, all of the women pastors reject the authoritarian style of leadership modeled by new conservative SBC pastors. In 1988 the SBC passed a resolution on the priesthood of the believer that promoted the pastor as head of the church, minimizing the ability of congregations to think theologically and make decisions.\(^{536}\) The resolution elevated

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\(^{536}\) The resolution in part: "Be it further RESOLVED, That the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer in no way contradicts the biblical understanding of the role, responsibility, and authority of the pastor which is seen in the command to the local church in Hebrews 13:17, "Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account;" and Be finally RESOLVED, That we affirm the truth that elders, or pastors, are called of God to lead the local church (Acts 20:28). “Resolution on the Priesthood of the Believer” http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=872 (accessed April 2, 2013).
the role of pastor as authority, negating a more collaborative relationship between
pastor and congregation, and in a sense reversing the institutional hierarchy to the
advantage of the pastor. Still, it is not a model the women support.

The struggle of the women I interviewed is to engage and involve the
congregation in ministry and decision-making while at the same time learning to
exercise appropriate pastoral authority when challenged. While their vision of church
is egalitarian, the institutional model in large congregations means the pastor’s
responsibility includes leading the congregation as well as other ministers employed
by the church. One of the issues here is the extent to which the pastors become
administrators in addition to their worship leadership and pastoral duties. The five
women who work with multiple staff aim for collaboration but also recognize their
ultimate responsibility. In other words, “The buck stops with me,” Susan said.537
Connie, whose congregation employs six full time ministers plus support staff,
associates and residents, also knows that she is the “buck stopper” but sees her role as
being to “set a pace, to cast some big picture vision in which all of us can operate
together.”538

Lauren serves in a church that looks to its ministerial staff to do everything.
Her challenge is to involve the congregation more in the actual ministry, to train
leaders among the church members. Lynn considers herself a “team-building,
collaborative kind of leader” but after five years at the church has moved more
toward being more authoritative and visionary now. She realizes there are times when

the congregation needs her to differentiate herself and lead. Jane tends to be direct, honest and clear with staff and members of the congregation. She recognizes the different abilities and experience of staff and tries to give them both what they need in terms of support and space to avoid conflict. She works to have clarity in communication and boundaries; she will work with others in how things are shaped, but she is not afraid to make a decision even if people get angry with her. She enjoys being a leader, but at the same time she can be a follower. She said, "I enjoy somebody else taking the lead on stuff. So I don't think being a leader is a part of my identity as much as it is a part of what I do." 

The pastors of smaller congregations depend upon the involvement of members in goal setting and carrying out ministry projects, a situation more fitted for collaborative leadership. Two women, Sherry and Anne, express little interest in the administrative aspects of church life and focus upon worship and teaching. Anne's congregation is highly organized into different teams that have the authority to make decisions for the rest of the congregation, decisions about buildings as well as outreach into the community. Anne is bi-vocational, meaning she has another job, a reality that dictates more congregational ownership. Cynthia, also bi-vocational, describes her role as being able to engage the congregation in discussion and friendly dissent that results in her being able to lead and they to follow.

In contrast, as pastor of a small rural congregation, Diane would like to be a more effective leader in every aspect, but finds the congregation limits her role to

539 Lynn, interview with author, October 22, 2008.
540 Jane, interview with author, February 17, 2009.
being “chaplain,” unwilling to let her present very many new ideas. While the congregation enjoys Diane’s preaching, pastoral visits and teaching ability, they do not want any significant change to the way the church is structured, nor do they welcome new ideas about programs or worship. Rachel, also in a small congregation, has a more positive experience of interaction with a very active group of socially minded people.

The four women who serve as co-pastors enjoy the complementary nature of their leadership with another person. Teresa, whose husband is co-pastor, is more direct and aggressive in her leadership than her partner. She describes her style as “come on, let’s go,” while her husband is more process-oriented, bringing people along slowly. Arlene describes her leadership situation as a “web of leadership” model, non-hierarchical, where power is not a commodity and it is best used when it is not hoarded and limited, but shared. Sharon, who came into the ministry years later than her co-pastor husband, struggles with feeling inadequate, but operates as a “player coach,” involving a lot of people. Robin shares the pastorate with two other ministers, all part-time, taking turns preaching, all paid the same as the other staff members. The goal is to achieve an egalitarian congregation, “to create companions, not dependents.”

Three pastors serve congregations of 200 to 300 members, with no support staff except for an occasional part-time youth minister or minister of music. A great

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542 Diane, interview with author, January 9, 2009.
545 Arlene, interview with author, June 30, 2008.
deal of administrative work falls on them, in addition to their pastoral duties. Two women describe their style of leadership as “servant leadership” meaning their goal is to serve Christ and the congregation, not dictate or make demands on them. (Carol and Jessica). Terry considers herself an “encourager” but has tackled organizational issues with her vision of what the church should be. Elaine described her leadership as “conciliatory,” but asserts that she can make decisions when she needs to.

With clear visions of what the church should be, the women pastors work with the ideal of involving the members of the congregation in all aspects of church life. They spend a lot of time and energy in working with the church members toward shared results, but they are also growing in their ability to be decisive leaders.

**Ongoing Challenges**

Jane recalled a conversation that took place before she officiated at a funeral. One of the relatives of the deceased, who did not know her or other women ministers asked, “Are you a normal minister?” Jane continued, “I don’t think she knew what she meant by it; but you know – no, I’m not a normal minister I guess, because I enjoy what I do, or I don’t look like the other ones you’ve seen or whatever. But that’s one of the things that if my experience is anything like anybody else, is wearing on you, because it is hard enough doing what you do.”

The women in my study have succeeded in overcoming many difficulties to become pastors of churches, and the challenges continue after securing their positions. For some being pastor has come only after years of waiting, of being

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548 Terry, interview by author, February 10, 2009.
550 Jane, interview by author, February 17, 2009.
associates, or being interim pastors. Most are pastors for the first time, regardless of age, and even though two of the pastors are now in their third church, it is difficult to move because churches are reluctant to employ a woman as pastor.

All pastors have to deal with controversy and power struggles at some point in their ministry, but the women in my study experience a variety of challenges because they are women. In Lynn’s experience the choir director launched a year long campaign to make her resign, causing a great deal of grief on her part, before he finally gave up and left the church.\textsuperscript{551} Arlene and her co-pastor were targets of the wrath of another staff member who rebelled against their leadership until the staff member gave up and resigned from the position.\textsuperscript{552} Terry has not had direct challenges, but she was simply left out of a major decision regarding the construction of a pavilion on church property.\textsuperscript{553} The choir director initially refused to follow Sherry’s plans for Easter Sunday music, until Sherry confronted her with the message that unless she followed her plans, there would be no music at all.

Because they are women and traditionally excluded from sacred rituals of the church, women’s bodies and their sexuality are threatening to some of the congregation. Women are expected to cover their bodies; and their style of clothing becomes a subject of conversation. Lynn endured an entire church council meeting discussion of whether her skirt was too short on Sunday – even though she wears a clerical robe in worship. In one instance a worshiper said he was having difficulty in worship because so many women in leadership (wearing robes) caused lustful

\textsuperscript{551} Lynn, interview with author, October 22, 2008.
\textsuperscript{552} Arlene, interview with author, June 30, 2008.
\textsuperscript{553} Terry, interview with author, February 10, 2009.
thoughts in his mind.\textsuperscript{554} During Terry's ordination service the last person to come forward to offer a private blessing undermined her purpose for being there with his crude comment about "rubbing" his hands over her body.\textsuperscript{555}

Since women pastors are a minority they receive more scrutiny than most pastors. Successful women pastors become "poster-child" examples, with accompanying pressure. One pastor complained that since she is successful in her ministry, the very leaders who did nothing to help her secure her position want to somehow claim credit for her success. Another woman, who attended a Presbyterian seminary because the Baptist seminary was not interested in her, resents that neglect as well as the lack of support by denominational leaders in helping her secure a church. Too often, according to another pastor, the male leaders voice support, but in fact operate in a patronizing way and do not really advocate for women ministers, citing lack of interest on the part of congregations. "The issue ends up being female, rather than being anything else that is about who I am or who any other women in ministry is," Jane added, "and I don't see that changing anytime soon."\textsuperscript{556}

Though expected to be advocates for women in ministry, the women in my study are more interested in focusing upon their profession than their identity as women. An experienced pastor admitted that she does not particularly enjoy leading retreats on women in ministry and never has preached a sermon on why women should be pastors. Acknowledging that being female is part of who she is, she just

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{554} Lynn, interview with author, October 22, 2008.
\textsuperscript{555} Terry, interview with author, February 10, 2009.
\textsuperscript{556} Jane, interview with author, February 17, 2009.
\end{flushright}
wants to be the best pastor she can be.\textsuperscript{557} Another long-time pastor does not make her identity as a woman pastor an issue. She said, “I was very clear in saying to all congregations I’ve served, I’m not here to lead a parade. I have no flags to wave, no banners that I want to put up. I’m here to be faithful to my calling . . .”\textsuperscript{558}

Women ministers expressed the difficulty of managing their time and setting appropriate boundaries as they struggle with multiple roles. Teresa focused on the challenge of parenthood while being a pastor. She is certain she was called to be a pastor and feels quite confident that she is a good pastor, but she struggles with the question of whether she is also a good mother. She will write her first book, she said, on pastors who are breast-feeding, something a male pastor has never had to balance with work. “There is no handbook for that,” she said, “and to this day, for all of the feminist theology I did or did not get, there is still this deep-seated (question), am I really being a good mom?”\textsuperscript{559}

One of the biggest challenges for Baptist women pastors is that of limited opportunity to move to other congregations. In a 2005 online survey, Eileen R. Campbell-Reed and Pamela R. Durso found that the attitudes of moderate and progressive Baptists continue to outpace the reality of women’s ordination, leadership and service among Baptists. A vast majority of respondents reported that they support ordination for women and nearly two-thirds noted that their church has ordained

\textsuperscript{557} Connie, interview with author, May 26, 2009.  
\textsuperscript{558} Susan, interview with author, December 10, 2008.  
\textsuperscript{559} Teresa, interview with author, May 6, 2009.
women, but the role of pastor continues to remain nearly out of reach for Baptist women.⁵⁶⁰

According to the most recent survey (2010),⁵⁶¹ more churches are choosing women as pastors, but the number is increasing slowly, and the percentage is very small. Among the groups that submitted information, churches affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Alliance of Baptists, Baptist General Association of Virginia and the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the number of female pastors increased to 135, a net gain of 33 more women since 2005. Only 7.5 percent of the 1,800 churches that affiliate with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship have women pastors. The percentage of women pastors with the Alliance of Baptists (120 congregations) increased more dramatically, from 24 percent to 28 percent since 2005. The states that had the most women pastors and co-pastors were Georgia (14), North Carolina (17), Texas (11) and Virginia (23).⁵⁶²

Both pastors and congregations suffer from the unresolved tensions within Baptist life that include the proper role of women in the church as well as the autonomy of the local congregation and soul competency/freedom. Women pastors inhabit the margins of Baptist life,⁵⁶³ and are unable to easily move to

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⁵⁶¹ Pam Durso, Executive Director, Baptist Women in Ministry, e-mail message to author, April 5, 2013. By an informal count, in 2013 there are 150 women pastors - 107 pastors and 43 co-pastors.
⁵⁶³ In his 1967 study William Bock concluded that women in the profession of ministry make up a small percentage, were not increasing substantially and
another church. They also face limited opportunities for leadership positions in local associations and state conventions. Even though their congregations support them, others in the same association and state may not. In one instance one of the pastors was not allowed to perform a funeral in a church that is against women pastors. On another occasion, the woman pastor was to present a report on a mission trip to an association meeting, only to have the host church decline to have the meeting because she would be speaking. Three of the women pastors in this study have had their congregations excluded from their local associations. The national controversy in the SBC has moved to the state and local levels.

Conclusion

Along with the challenges and difficulties of being a woman pastor, the women expressed joy in their profession. Of course, they would prefer acceptance from all Baptists, but they are not naïve. Instead they embrace support where it can be found and each has a strong network of support outside the churches where they are pastors. By their own accounts, feminist theology is an influential source of strength, a new frame for seeing themselves in the biblical story, supporting their sense of call as well as providing resources for biblical interpretation, theology and the implementation of ministry - “theological and intellectual ground to stand on.”

Feminist theology reinforces their belief in the “radical inclusivity” of the gospel

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message and the Lordship of Christ over all interpretations of scripture. Their views of God include creative metaphors that bring God's presence close to them and allow creativity in worship services. They are empowered to preach. Their visions of the church reflect their belief that the church is not a building or an institution, but believers who make up the body of Christ. Thus the gathered community is egalitarian, not hierarchical, and all are invited to participate. Consequently, as leaders they work to engage and involve the congregation in ministry and decision-making, exercising appropriate authority within that context.
Conclusion

When I tell people about my research, especially those unfamiliar with the church, I often see an expression of surprise and hear the words: “I didn’t know Baptists had women pastors.” Despite public perception, the SBC takeover was not the end of the story so far as women clergy are concerned.

This dissertation examines gender in the SBC, and is distinctive in its focus on the women pastors who continue to preach, serve as pastors, and remain Baptists in the South, but no longer tied to the Southern Baptists Convention. Other books on women and the SBC controversy, including Elizabeth Flowers’ comprehensive analysis, end with the SBC takeover and do not discuss the women ministers who continue to work in congregations that, because of the SBC’s mandate against female pastors, broke away from the Convention. This study makes a significant contribution by recognizing that not all Southern Baptist churches simply accepted the SBC ban. These congregations affiliate with other associations, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists, but may also retain some of the cultural and theological characteristics of Southern Baptists. The women in my study, several who lived through the takeover in the 1980s, have created a unique identity by choosing to remain Baptist while also advancing their theological education through the study and implementation of feminist theology.

The 1980s controversy and subsequent developments in Baptist life remind students in American studies of the fluctuations of history – the contestation that renders all movements subject to change. While many of us who lived through the dramatic social changes of the 1960s and 1970s celebrated a new era of human rights,
others (women and men) were determined to resist those advances in favor of a more familiar southern culture and a fundamentalist interpretation of Christianity.

Especially for women, American Evangelical history tells a story of continual contestation, with female leadership at times embraced and at other times contested, with the South remaining a place in which backlashes against women’s overt religious power have been usually successful. In the evangelicalism of the First and Second Great Awakenings, congregations in the Northeast opened then closed their doors to the preaching and leadership of women. In the South those revivals with their liberating messages encountered and eventually yielded to the hierarchical social order of southern culture in which white men ruled over men of lesser status, women, children and enslaved persons. The Christianity expressed in the Southern Baptist Convention (formed in 1845) followed the gendered, racial and class lines of southern society.

The political and cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s signaled a new era of progress for women and heightened opportunity for women in the American churches. Southern Baptist seminaries, publications and agencies, including the Woman’s Missionary Union were adapting to the changes and become more aware and supportive of the gifts of women for ministry. Women were being ordained and becoming pastors of churches. One pastor described being called a “pioneer” during her ordination service in those early years. The designation initiated mixed feelings because of the possibility as well as the responsibility the word evoked; but she realized it was “absolutely true.”\textsuperscript{565} She was the first woman ordained in her

\textsuperscript{565} Sherry, interview with author, February 4, 2009.
association, one of the first in her state and in the SBC. Things were changing and she was on the forefront of that change.

The women in my study would not be pastors today without the benefits of those who worked for ordination, led the women’s movement and produced new theological knowledge. One example is Addie Davis, the first woman ordained by a Southern Baptist church (1964). The year before her ordination Davis wrote a paper in which she reviewed the theology concerning ordination in several denominations, including Southern Baptists. She concluded, “It is, therefore, evident that a local church could call for the ordination of women. According to the records available, no woman has yet been ordained in the Southern Baptist Convention.”

On the basis of her analysis of Davis’ writings, in her forthcoming book Pamela R. Durso argues that Addie Davis knew she would be making history by being ordained and she “carefully and intentionally” prepared herself and planned for it to happen.

Women and the moderates who supported them fought the takeover in the 1980s through their organizational strategies, speech, and publications that employed feminist theology to support their calling. And yet, some contemporary Baptist women pastors who embody feminist theology are reluctant to claim the title of feminist. While the politics of this strategy in conservative churches is understandable, recent developments in American political life call attention to the fragile state of women’s power, not only in Baptist churches but in terms of personal

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566 Addie Davis, “Paper: ‘Illustrative Attitudes of the Contemporary Church toward the Ordination of Women, 1963.’” Addie Davis Papers, Special Collections, Jack Tarver Library, Mercer University, Macon, Georgia.

reproductive freedom, as the coalition of right wing activists and conservative
religion work to roll back the advances for women achieved in the last thirty years.
Informed women need to build on the knowledge and advances of the past so that the
power of tradition will not be lost and each generation is not forced to start all over
again to understand and confront the institutions that negate women’s power. What is
needed is the realization that women, though different “subjects,” still have a
vested interest in mutual support and means of political action.

Women in my study persist at the margins, focused on being the best pastors they can be, sometimes conscious of feminist activism and theology, sometimes unconscious of it, and sometimes simply afraid to claim it. These women who grew up in Southern Baptist churches are grateful to the churches of their youth for their spiritual and cultural formation. At the same time, through their education and experience in different settings, they have added to their primary culture a new spiritual and ethical understanding of Christianity informed by feminism and feminist theology. They do not believe in a God who would condemn women, regardless of abilities and situation in life, to secondary status.

Historian Walter Shurden recalls the words of a Lutheran friend who warned him early on in the SBC controversy, “You moderates are going to be in trouble if you do not take fundamentalists on regarding the core issue. The core issue is neither politics nor the Bible; the core issue is the nature of God and the fundamentalists’

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568 Acknowledging that an essentialist understanding of women is inadequate, it is necessary to “change the subject” to respect the multiple identities of women and emphasize the limitations of the liberal emphasis on the individual. Still, the “Subjects” remain. See Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 4-11.
usurpation of God with the Bible, theology and culture."569 Shurden agreed that fundamentalists are mired in a concept of God that is exclusive, intolerant and legalistic while moderates stress God’s inclusiveness, forgiveness and acceptance.570

For centuries religious women have shared their visions of God in their writing and in their lives, but their views have been overshadowed by theology written by men from the experience of men. Twentieth century cultural shifts in consciousness about the nature of truth and knowledge allowed feminist theologians to correct this one-sided view of God and include the experience of women in theological discourse. As Arlene pointed out, “Feminist theologians have taken what the women have been doing in the church all along and held it up to the light and said, “Did you see this? This is of God. It is theology; it’s not just a nice idea or a way to make people feel good or fix something – it is essential to the nature and being of God in the world, in humanity’s relationship with God.”571

569 Walter B. Shurden and Randy Shepley, eds., Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War, xviii.
570 Ibid.
571 Arlene, interview with author, June 30, 2008.
Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Calling
Tell me about your calling to be a pastor. When did you first experience this call? Who encouraged you and/or served as a role model? What challenges did you experience? How did you respond? Where did you attend seminary? Courses in feminist theology? When did you graduate?

When and where were you ordained? How did the experience come about – did the church approach you? What was the service like? What stands out in your memory? What churches have you served as pastor? Size of the congregation? Are there any books or texts that you remember as having a big influence on your decision/calling?

2. Authority
What is the greatest source of authority for you as a Christian pastor (the Bible, the Holy Spirit, the church, a combination of the above, your own experience)? In other words, where do you find the greatest support for being who you are and doing what you do?

How do you respond to challenges to your being a pastor, particularly when people quote certain scriptures that require women to be silent in the church? Do people ever bring up I Corinthians 14:34-35 and I Timothy 2:11-12? Do you have it brought up to you directly? If you have that situation how do you respond?

3. Theology
When you think of God, what comes to mind? When you pray, are there any feminine images of God? How do you understand Jesus and his significance? What do you think about Mary the mother of Jesus? How would you describe your vision of the church at its best (meaning and purpose)?

4. Worship Leadership
How do you most often address God in your public prayers? In private prayer and devotions? How would you describe the main focus of your preaching? Is there a main focus to your sermons? Do you use the Lectionary as a guide? Do you find yourself most interested in select books of the Bible? Explain your biblical hermeneutic.

Is there a particular service of worship that went exceptionally well or that you remember as being very powerful? Would you describe it? Who participated? Use of inclusive language? What type of music? Which hymnal?
5. Pastoral Leadership

How would you describe your style of leadership as a pastor? Describe the challenges you have faced in the role of pastor. What do you enjoy most about being a pastor?

6. Support Groups

Where do you do when you need support? Are there groups to which you belong (Baptist women's groups, Conservative Women of America, Women Aglow)?

7. Books

Are there books that you find helpful? Which ones? Have you read any books on feminist theology? How have the ideas in any of the books been influential? Have you read any of the following books?

Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation*

Virginia Ramey Mollenhoff, *The Divine Feminine: Biblical Imagery of God as Female*

Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretations*

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*

Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*

Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*

Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*

Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*

Letty M. Russell, *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology*

Christine Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective*

Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*

Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*


8. Other Questions

Are there programs in your congregation for young girls like "True Love Waits" and the "Purity Ball?" What are the most serious conflicts you have had with your congregation? Is there anything else about this subject that we
haven't covered that you think is important? How do you see feminist theology as influential in the lives of women pastors?

**Information About Women Interviewed**

The twenty women represent five different southern states in churches that vary in size from thirty members to three thousand members. The diversity of affiliations represented by these autonomous congregations includes their state conventions, local associations, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Alliance of Baptists and American Baptists. Four of the women I interviewed are co-pastors, two with their husbands, one with another unrelated woman; one woman shares the pastorate with two other people - one male, one female. They range in age from twenty-seven to fifty-nine years. The youngest woman graduated from seminary in 2000, the eldest in 1977. Nine women graduated from Southern Baptist seminaries. The remaining women graduated from divinity schools associated with Baptist colleges, divinity schools associated with other denominations or in one case a non-denominational seminary. Fourteen of the women are in their first pastorate; five have been pastors of one or two other congregations; one is no longer a pastor. I spoke to each of them for at least two hours, in person or by phone.
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