

# Remembering Addie:

## *Baptist Ordination Pioneer and the Influence of Femism on Her Ministry Journey*



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*Addie Elizabeth Davis became the first ordained woman minister in Southern Baptist circles when Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina, ordained her to the gospel ministry on August 9, 1964.*

In the years since that historic ordination, thousands of Baptist women called and gifted by God have been ordained, most of whom do not even know Addie's name even though they walk on the trail she blazed. Addie's place in history makes her story an extraordinary one, but often overlooked is her expanding embrace of feminism and the influence feminism had on her ministry and theology. Examination of her seminary experience, her sermon writing, and her pastoral leadership reveal that she read widely and researched the roles of women in the church, that she was aware of the women's movement, and that she fearlessly addressed topics related to women's roles in the church and community.

Addie was born in Covington, Virginia, on June 29, 1917, to a family of committed Baptists. Neither of her parents received much formal education. Her father had to leave school at the age of fourteen to help support his family after his own father's death. He worked hard and finally had enough

money to open a furniture store in Covington. His lack of educational opportunity fostered in him the determination that all three of his children would go to college.<sup>1</sup>

In 1938 Addie finally had her chance. At the age of twenty-one she enrolled at Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina, and majored in psychology and minored in speech. Upon graduation in 1942, she found a ministry position and began service as education director at the 500-member First Baptist Church in Elkin, North Carolina, a town just west of Winston-Salem. Addie served the church for four years, but she soon realized she had not been called to be a religious educator but to be a pastor.<sup>2</sup>

She left Elkin in 1946 to take the position of dean of women at Alderson-Broaddus College, a Baptist school in Phillippi, West Virginia. There Addie recognized her need for theological education as well as the need to strengthen her commitment to pursue her calling. She applied to and was accepted by both Duke Divinity School and Yale Divinity School, but as she prepared to make this transition, a need in her family took precedence. Her father had died in 1944, and following his death, Addie's mother took over management of the furniture store. By the end of the 1940s, her mother needed help with the store, and thus, instead of heading off to divinity school, Addie returned home to Covington. For more than ten years she worked alongside her mother, selling furniture. But Addie never gave up on her call to ministry.

During that decade at home, Lone Star Baptist Church, a rural congregation sixteen miles outside of Covington, called Addie to serve as interim pastor. She served for six months and had opportunities to preach and gain invaluable pastoral experience.<sup>3</sup> In 1960 Addie's mother retired, leaving her forty-three-year-old daughter free to pursue her call to be a pastor. By this time, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, had begun allowing women to study for a bachelor of divinity degree (equivalent to a current Master of Divinity degree), and Addie was among the first women to attend and graduate from the seminary. Her graduation program in 1963 lists the names of six women, including Addie's, among the 144 graduates that May.<sup>4</sup>

In her first semester of seminary Addie took a preaching class. She received favorable feedback from her professor and fellow students. The next summer she took a class titled "Preaching to Human Need," in which she had to prepare six sermon outlines and one full-length sermon.

Although Addie had preached previously, she was still a novice at preparing and writing sermons in the seminary classroom setting, and she received “Bs” on her outlines. But she improved over the course of the brief summer semester, and on her full sermon, “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?” based on Genesis 4:9-16, Addie received an “A-”. Her professor wrote comments such as “excellent outline,” “worthy material,” and “well handled.” In that sermon Addie courageously took on the greatest social justice issues of the day. She addressed racism, unethical business practices, and poverty, asking “Will the color of skin continue to build a wall to divide us? Can we not build bridges of understanding? We do this as individuals occasionally. Most of us know Negroes whom we regard highly and who are dear to us; but as a people, we have not bridged the gap of prejudice and misconception. This we need to begin to do, and we must start with ourselves.”<sup>5</sup>

In the spring of 1963 Addie enrolled in a History of Christianity course, and for her class project she completed a paper titled “Illustrative Attitudes of the Contemporary Church Toward the Ordination of Women.” In her introduction she wrote, “Many people wonder why the question of the ordination of women should arise at all since, obviously, they themselves have not considered it and see no particular reason why it should be considered. It seems unbelievable to ‘traditional’ thinkers that some denominations have admitted women to the ministry for a number of years, and do not feel that this is a man’s prerogative alone.”<sup>6</sup> She then gave attention to the biblical interpretations most often cited by those opposing or defending women’s roles in the church, provided information on the varied polity structures of denominations, and focused on the cultural influence on beliefs about ordination. In researching the paper, Addie read a wide cross-section of books on the subject, including the following:

- Charles E. Raven, *Women in the Ministry* (1929)
- John R. Rice, *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers* (1941)
- F.D. Bacon, *Women in the Church* (1946)
- Cecilia M. Ady, *The Role of Women in the Church* (1948)
- Kathleen Bliss, *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches* (1952)
- Doris M. Rose, *Baptist Deaconesses* (1954)
- Charles C. Ryrie, *The Place of Women in the Church* (1958)
- M.E. Thrall, *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood* (1958)

While a good number of these resources offered negative views on the ordination of women ministers, Addie also found encouragement from some. In Thrall's book she read, "In the matter of ordaining women we have not perhaps reached a clear enough understanding of the truth to make any decisive action necessary or possible. The vital question at the present moment is whether or not we are really and genuinely concerned to discover the truth."<sup>7</sup> Addie also quoted Raven in her paper: "If the Church is what it claims to be, the embodiment of the Spirit of Christ, then since His Spirit is manifestly operative through the ministry of women, that ministry must have its accredited place in the organism: otherwise the Church is not truly or completely the expression and instrument of the will of God."<sup>8</sup>

Addie also included statistical information regarding denominations associated with the World Council of Churches and their official stance with regard to women's ordination. She briefly reviewed the beliefs of Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Swedish Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, American Baptists, and Southern Baptists. Her research of Southern Baptist annuals and records concluded with these words: "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."<sup>9</sup> Her research and her inclusion of this information indicate that Addie clearly had awareness that should she seek ordination from a Southern Baptist church, she would be making history. Her research on women's ordination also indicates that she was educating herself, carefully and intentionally preparing herself for what was to come.

During her seminary years Addie was an active member of Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham. There she met the pastor, Warren Carr. As she neared graduation, Addie knew that she needed to be licensed to preach. In early 1963 she talked with Carr about the possibility of the church's granting her a license. Both Carr and Watts Street "had achieved something of a reputation for their civil rights activism."<sup>10</sup> Likely, the willingness of this church to take radical stands on racial issues made Addie comfortable in asking the congregation to consider another radical stand—to endorse a woman preacher. Indeed, Carr and members of Watts Street, like many progressive Baptists in the 1960s, had begun to see that "it is illogical to take stands on behalf of black liberation and refuse to do so on behalf of the freedom of women to choose the ways to direct their service to the same God whose teachings mandated freedom for oppressed blacks."<sup>11</sup>

Looking back on the process of being licensed by Watts Street, Addie said: "I felt that I had a friend in Warren Carr, and I approached him about whether or not he thought his church might back me in granting a license to preach with the idea of being ordained later. He said it sort of threw him at first, but being the kind of man he is, he said yes. And he laid the groundwork very patiently and quietly in the church among the people, and I am sure in the association among fellow pastors. As a result of that, I was granted a license to preach on March 13, 1963."<sup>12</sup>

Following the vote, the church presented Addie with her ministerial license that same evening. The Certificate of License she received was the standard fill-in-the-blank form sold by Southern Baptists' Broadman Press, and it read "This is to certify Addie Davis who has given evidence that God has called him into THE GOSPEL MINISTRY was Licensed to preach the Gospel as he may have opportunity, and to exercise his gifts in the work of the Ministry by Watts Street Baptist Church of Durham, North Carolina on the thirteenth day of March, 1963."<sup>13</sup> Obviously, Baptists—even progressive Baptists—had no concept that a woman would ever be licensed to preach, and they certainly had no certificates available that would have been appropriate to present to women ministers.

In addition to working toward licensure, Addie spent those months before graduation looking for a pastorate. Wanting to stay in the South, she contacted several state executives about placement. None of the executives knew "of any church that would consider a woman," she recalled, "and the truth is that they weren't willing to recommend a woman to any church. I had the feeling that most of them were a little bit afraid to be the first to make a suggestion like this."<sup>14</sup>

Addie's search for a pastorate continued for more than a year, and finally after realizing she would not find a Southern Baptist church open to her leadership, she contacted her college friend, Elizabeth Miller, who worked for the American Baptists. After college Miller had been pastor of First Baptist Church in Readsboro, Vermont, and in 1964 the church was without a minister. Miller recommended Addie for the position. In June, Addie traveled to Vermont, interviewed with the search committee, preached to the congregation, and was soon called as pastor. She was forty-seven years old.

With this invitation, Addie now needed to be ordained. She first approached her home church, Covington Baptist Church. She had grown up

in that church, served there, and still had family connections in Covington. Addie was hopeful the congregation would bless and affirm her new ministry.<sup>15</sup> She recalled:

The minister who was there at the time I went to the seminary was very much opposed to women ministers. I think the people in my church would have approved because I grew up there and they knew me. . . . My letter [asking for ordination] was addressed to the church, but of course, it apparently went to the minister and he took it to the board of deacons. So I simply withdrew the request. . . . I did feel within me that I should give them the opportunity because there had been four generations of my family in that church. . . . But I simply felt that it was better to withdraw the request, which I did, because I did not want to be the center of any controversy.<sup>16</sup>

Addie then contacted several churches in Raleigh about the possibility of their ordaining her. When those churches declined, she began to believe that she might never be ordained in a Southern Baptist church. She was aware, however, that she could seek and be granted ordination by an American Baptist church, but as a life-long Southern Baptist, she very much wanted to be affirmed by the denomination that had birthed and nurtured her faith and with which she had now been affiliated for forty-seven years.<sup>17</sup> She held on to that hope and contacted the church that had licensed her the year before. The deacons at Watts Street reviewed her request for ordination, and Warren Carr sat with Addie to talk about her calling. In a 1979 interview he recounted his conversation with her, noting that she was certain God had called her "to be a preacher." Not once, according to Carr, did Addie express a desire to be the first woman ordained by a Southern Baptist church, although she clearly was aware that she would most likely hold that honor of "being first."<sup>18</sup>

During that conversation Addie also told Carr, "I have tried to be almost everything having to do with ministry." Yet nothing could still her restlessness, nor could she let go of the knowledge that God had called her to be a pastor.<sup>19</sup> Carr could not "escape the fact that she was called! She belonged in the center pulpit, according to our tradition, to proclaim the gospel on the Lord's Day. She was called to be a preacher."<sup>20</sup>

Carr proceeded to select an ordination council to examine Addie, and all council members promised to evaluate her based on her calling and confession. On the day of the examination, she was one of two candidates for ordination. The council voted to recommend the other candidate, the chaplain to Baptist students at Duke University, despite what they believed to be the young man's unorthodox belief concerning the Virgin Birth. Addie's conservative theology, however, posed no problems for the council, but two members confessed that despite their previous assurances, they could not recommend a woman for ordination. After a heated discussion, one supportive council member asked the two holdouts to explain their apprehension: "Brethren, you leave me confused. In the case of our first candidate, you were quite insistent that he believe that a virgin bore the word. How is it that you are now so adamant that a virgin should not preach the word?"<sup>21</sup> The council ultimately voted unanimously to ordain Addie, with only one member abstaining.<sup>22</sup>

The ordination service at Watts Street Baptist Church was then scheduled for 3 p.m. on August 9, 1964. Addie remembered the service as meaningful and noted that "the whole congregation wholeheartedly backed me."<sup>23</sup> Two of Addie's professors at Southeastern Seminary participated. Luther Copeland, who taught Christian missions and world religions, offered the charge to the candidate, and R.C. Briggs, who taught New Testament, led the ordination prayer. All the ordained ministers in attendance were invited to be part of the laying on of hands. While those in attendance and leading the service were aware of the specialness of the day, very likely they, like Addie, "remained largely unaware of the event's historic significance."<sup>24</sup>

Not everyone, of course, was supportive. Soon after the ordination, Carr received nearly fifty letters criticizing him and the church. Addie also was the target of criticism. A Richmond, Virginia, man demanded, "Renounce your ordination!"<sup>25</sup> Another man told her to learn from her husband, an ironic demand given that Addie was unmarried.<sup>26</sup> Another labeled her "a child of the Devil."<sup>27</sup>

While Addie certainly encountered opposition, historian Elizabeth H. Flowers concluded that the ordination did not "create a storm of controversy across the Southern Baptist Convention."<sup>28</sup> For most Southern Baptists, the event went entirely unnoticed. Only one story about the ordination appeared in Baptist Press, the SBC's official news service, and in that article the writer offered the comment that "women graduates of Southern Baptist seminaries

usually enter church vocations in education or music, become teachers or are appointed as unordained missionaries."<sup>29</sup> At the next gathering of the Southern Baptist Convention in June 1965, Addie's name was not mentioned nor was the topic of women's ordination addressed—at least not from the floor.<sup>30</sup> Two years after the ordination, in 1966, Marie Mathis, president of the Woman's Missionary Union, was asked about women's ordination and replied, "I've never heard of a woman wanting to be a minister, and I've been connected with women's organizations in this faith since 1938. . . . I think it is women's intuitive feeling that ministers should be men."<sup>31</sup>

Some scholars have asserted that Addie's ordination was an anomaly or aberration, which explains the lack of attention it received at the convention level.<sup>32</sup> They also have noted that Addie's move to the North to find ministry placement also lessened the impact of her ordination. Whether their analysis is correct or not, the fact is that for the next seven years, no other Southern Baptist woman was ordained. Another view is presented by Flowers, who concluded,

One is hard-pressed to accept that the major milestone for Southern Baptist women in the twentieth century could be so easily forgotten. It seems more likely that Mathis and the WMU were intentionally avoiding any hint of controversy. Like their male counterparts, WMU officials operated from the center. If Davis' ordination became the symbol of progress for Southern Baptist women, as it was later touted, its downplaying also embodied the spirit of compromise that marked Southern Baptist life during the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>33</sup>

Being rejected, ignored, and dismissed by her Southern Baptist family did not keep Addie from becoming a pastor. She faithfully served at the Vermont church for six years, and in June 1972 was called as pastor of Second Baptist Church of East Providence, Rhode Island, where she remained until 1982. Serving in "Roger Williams' territory," Addie continued to be a pioneer. She was the first woman pastor of this church. She was also Rhode Island's first woman pastor, the first woman elected to the Providence Baptist Theological Circle, and the first woman vice president of the East Providence Clergy Association.<sup>34</sup> Addie later served as president of the association, which consisted mostly of Catholic priests.<sup>35</sup>



During these years in which Addie pastored in New England, the women's movement in the United States was gaining momentum, and women's rights became a hotly debated issue. The same year in which Addie was licensed to preach (1963) Betty Friedan's influential book, *The Feminist Mystique*, was released and soon became a best seller. That same year Congress passed the Equal Pay Act, making it illegal for employers to pay women less than men solely based on gender. The next year, the year in which Addie was ordained and began her pastorate in Vermont, the Civil Rights Act with the addition of Title VII banned discrimination based on race and gender, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was created to investigate violations of the new laws. Two years later, in 1966, a new advocacy group, the National Organization for Women (NOW), was founded, and in 1971, the year that Addie accepted her second pastorate in Rhode Island, *Ms. Magazine* published its first "sample" issue. Gloria Steinem, its editor, soon stepped forward as a vocal advocate for the women's movement. The next year Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and sent it to the states to be ratified, although in 1982, ten years later, the amendment died, failing to receive enough support from the states.<sup>36</sup>

While Addie never spoke out publicly about the women's movement, she was very much aware that it was happening around her, and she saw the connections between what was happening in American society and the gospel she was preaching every Sunday. Among her papers, Addie had numerous pamphlets and mimeographed copies of articles that addressed the topic, including a pamphlet titled, "Feminism and the Church Today," and a long article written by Leonard Swidler in 1971 titled, "Jesus was a Feminist." Addie apparently used these materials to prepare for a retreat she led during her time as pastor of East Providence. Although her typed notes are undated and her name is not listed as the writer, the handwriting on the notes indicates she produced these materials. The retreat was titled "In God's Image: Male and Female," with the first discussion time given to the questions "What does feminism mean to me?" and "What was your first encounter with feminism?"<sup>37</sup> The plenary session of the retreat was devoted to biblical implications of feminism, the descriptive statement of which noted, "The Gospel speaks of liberation of those oppressed, but there are other passages which are oppressive to women. What do we do with this dilemma?"<sup>38</sup> Addie was certainly echoing the hard questions being asked in the 1970s in society, but she was also asking those questions in the context of the church. Addie also

kept a mimeographed copy of a Bible study agenda. It is not clear whether she wrote and taught this study or simply attended it. Titled "Bible Study on Women," the session outline called for a review of ten scripture passages, including several of the more challenging ones: 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15. The outline also included questions about each passage, questions that encouraged the participants to discuss the historical context of the scriptures and to address Jesus' view of women in his own society.

Addie also kept pamphlets in her possession. One, "My Pastor's a Woman," produced by the American Baptist Churches, was based on findings from a task force on women in ministry convened by ABC of Massachusetts. A second pamphlet, titled "Feminism and the Church Today," published by the National Ministries of the American Baptist Church USA, called on American Baptists to "work for full and equal use of women's resources in every area of church life, including pastoral ministry," and to "develop ways of giving support to persons dealing with the changing roles of women and men in church and society."<sup>39</sup>

Addie Davis was indeed a Baptist pioneer. Despite opposition and barriers, she remained committed to her calling and forged a pastoral path for herself. Her ordination has been much celebrated by moderate and progressive Baptists for these past fifty-four years, but there is more to her story than the August day in 1964. A discussion of her journey toward ordination and her service as pastor is not complete without recognition that she was intentional in her research and reading about the feminist movement and the roles of women in the church, that she was very much aware of the national cultural shifts, and that she was willing to speak out within her circles of influence about needed changes in gender roles in society and the church. **BH&HS**

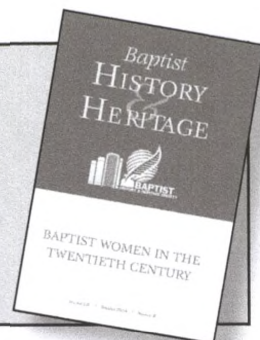
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## Notes

1 Cody Lowe, "Pastor says furor over her ordination didn't bother her," *The Roanoke Times*, August 28, 2004, <http://ww2.roanoke.com/extra/9887.html>, accessed January 20, 2014.

2 Addie Davis, interview by Robin McKenzie (Hardison), October 25, 2001.

3 Ibid. Addie did not remember the exact dates of her interim pastorate, only that it was sometime during the 1950s.

4 Addie Davis, Graduation Program, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina, May 1963. Addie Davis Papers, Special Collections, Jack Tarver Library, Mercer University, Macon, Georgia. The six women graduates were Margaret Bloom, Addie Davis, Dorothy Deering, Laura Kendall, Judy McLamb, and Ida Marie Parker.

5 Addie Davis, "Am I My Brother's Keeper?" Seminary Sermon, 1961, Addie Davis Papers, Jack Tarver Library.

6 Addie Davis, "Illustrative Attitudes of the Contemporary Church Toward the Ordination of Women, 1963," Addie Davis Papers, Jack Tarver Library.

7 M.E. Thrall, *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood*, (London: SCM Press, LTD, 1958), 112, quoted in Davis, "Illustrative Attitudes."

8 Charles E. Raven, *Women in the Ministry* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1929), 88, quoted in Davis, "Illustrative Attitudes."

9 Davis, "Illustrative Attitudes."

10 Elizabeth H. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 28.

11 David Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1990), 120.

12 Addie Davis, interview by Eljee Bentley, June 9, 1985, taped interview located in the Alma Hunt Library of the Woman's Missionary Union, Birmingham, Alabama.

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17 Ibid.

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21 Ibid. See also George Sheridan, "Tremors of Change," *Home Missions*, May 1972, 27, and "And What Ever Happened?" 1.

22 Davis, interview by Bentley.

23 "What Ever Happened?"; Lowe, "Furor over her ordination."

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25 Lowe, "Furor over her ordination."

26 Laura Johnson and John Pierce, "'A Day to Remember': N.C. church marks 40th anniversary of first female Southern Baptist minister's ordination," *Baptists Today*, October 2004, 38.

27 Addie Davis, "A Dream to Cherish," *Folio*, Autumn 1985, 1.

28 Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, 28.

29 "Church Ordains Woman to Pastoral Ministry," *Baptist Press*, August 12, 1964.

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31 "Southern Baptists Tell Why 'Ministry Is for Men Only,'" *Detroit News*, May 24, 1966, quoted in Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, 28.

32 David T. Morgan, *Southern Baptist Sisters: In Search of Status, 1845-2000* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 174.

33 Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, 28-29.

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35 Davis, interview by McKenzie.

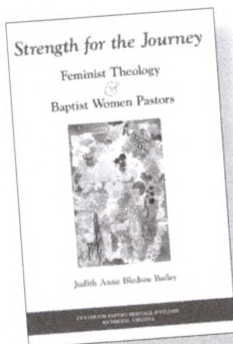
36 For an excellent and comprehensive analysis of Southern Baptists and their response to the women's movement, see Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*.

37 "Bible Study on Women," and "In God's Image: Male and Female," Addie Davis Papers, Jack Tarver Library.

38 Ibid.

39 "My Pastor's a Woman" and "Feminism and the Church Today," Addie Davis Papers, Jack Tarver Library.

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