

I Am Woman

Southern Baptist Women and Feminism



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In 1992, Pat Robertson demonized feminism as a movement that “encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.”

On its surface, his gross mischaracterization is ludicrous, but the truth of the matter is that many Americans, including many Southern Baptist women, really do not know what feminism is. They have been offered a steady diet of misinformation and stereotypes from the mainstream media and from many churches, religious organizations, and religious leaders like Robertson. But when told that feminism is about women’s social, political, economic, and spiritual equality, their perspective changes. Many Southern Baptist women tend to fear what they perceive as feminism’s extremes (which often have to do with abortion rights, gay rights, and the mistaken notion that feminists do not value mothering or homemaking). Even when they distance themselves from feminism, they recognize, sometimes begrudgingly, that feminism has brought about necessary changes, from the right to vote to equal employment opportunity legislation.

Over the past few years, I interviewed 159 current and former Southern Baptist women. I asked them if they are feminists and what feminism means to them. One participant quoted a bumper sticker that she had

seen: "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people." For the earliest feminists, the definition would have involved women's rights, particularly the right to vote. Yet, they were also concerned with women's access to education and employment opportunities. These early feminists, including Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Victoria Woodhull, and Lucy Stone, recognized that men's political and economic control over women necessitated a movement to change laws that prevented women from achieving equal rights. Following the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, feminism entered a quiet phase, although women like Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman continued to expand women's possibilities for self-determination. In the 1960s, however, feminism reemerged as a visible political force, challenging patriarchal constraints and redefining widely assumed constructions of womanhood and gender.

Given that brief history, what exactly is feminism? Second wave feminists, those feminist thinkers who have emerged starting in the 1960s, have offered a number of definitions that, while they may vary in some respects, carry at their core a commitment to equality and social change:

Feminism is a belief that although women and men are inherently of equal worth, most societies privilege men as a group. As a result, social movements are necessary to achieve political equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies.¹—*Estelle Freedman*

Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels.²—*bell hooks*

Feminism is a social movement whose goal is to eliminate the oppression of women in all its forms.³—*Amy Kesselman, Lily D. McNair, and Nancy Schniedewind*

Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women-as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women.⁴—*Barbara Smith*

Within feminism, beyond its broad goals for social change and equality, much difference of opinion exists about the roots of oppression and the means by which to bring about social change. Wide varieties of feminism exist. Some varieties are more liberal, some more radical, some rooted in sociological explanations, and others in psychological ones. Some emphasize leveling the playing field; some want to play an entirely different game. Some see women's oppression rooted in their biology; some see women's liberation rooted in the female body. Some want men to work alongside women as allies; some want to separate women from men (at least on occasion). Even so, the lines are not very clearly drawn, and feminists' concerns, issues, and analyses overlap.⁵ In recent years, a so-called Third Wave of feminism has arisen to reflect younger women's concerns with activism, intersectionality, and popular culture.⁶

Because feminism in all of its forms offers a challenge to the status quo, Southern Baptists, since the nineteenth century, have reacted strongly to it. Some have supported feminist goals of both the first and second waves. Many more have opposed feminist movements, and, in contemporary Southern Baptist life, fundamentalist Southern Baptists have undertaken an all-out assault on feminism. Nonetheless, because Southern Baptists are still a part of the larger American culture and are inevitably shaped by its cultural forces, feminism has been a salient feature in Southern Baptist life and has changed the experiences and identities of Southern Baptist women, beginning with the movement to win the vote.

Southern Baptists and the First Wave

The South was the most reluctant region of the nation to give women the vote. In fact, only Tennessee and Kentucky ratified the Nineteenth Amendment. In the Southwest, Texas and Arkansas ratified that amendment. But most Southerners opposed suffrage, fearing that it would enfranchise black women and reenfranchise black men. Southern Baptists were divided on the issue of woman suffrage.⁷ While some argued that woman suffrage would pave the way for blacks to dominant Southern politics, more argued that suffrage would destroy Southern women's femininity and domesticity. J. W. Porter, editor of the Kentucky Baptist newspaper, *Western Recorder*, wrote that the National Suffrage Association originated "out of the brain of a semi-masculine Minerva . . . Its ultimate ideal is to de-womanize

the woman and make of her a female man.”⁸ One Texas Baptist man wrote that voting and politics were “out of harmony with sweet, modest, home-loving female nature” and added that women’s involvement in voting might take them away from their domestic duties and tempt them to talk too much.⁹ A Kentucky pastor wrote, “How in striking contrast is the loud unwomanly clamor for recognition by the twentieth-century woman, demanding an evanescent crumb of comfort at the great cost of unsexing herself while apparently oblivious to the Divine benefactor.”¹⁰ Many Southern Baptist men saw suffrage as the antithesis of the meekness and submissiveness of the godly, Christian Southern woman that would bring about dire consequences for both the women and the social order. Porter wrote, “The feminine demons, knowingly or otherwise, are pointing womankind to the path that leads to harlotry and to hell.”¹¹

Despite these grave warnings, many Southern Baptists supported suffrage, primarily because they thought giving women the vote would lead to moral reform. In particular, they believed that enfranchised women would support prohibition, and many women, especially those who had experienced the ill effects of alcohol on their husbands and fathers, believed that temperance would help stop domestic violence and improve the lives of women and children. Southern Baptist support of suffrage was evident in the state newspapers. For example, an article in Georgia’s *Christian Index* called the Nineteenth Amendment a “great event in the world for women to be given full voice in the government of the United States of America.”¹²

The Woman’s Missionary Union (WMU), interestingly enough, did not take a stand on suffrage.¹³ WMU president Fannie Heck was asked repeatedly about suffrage, and she always responded that her only interest was missions. Because Southern Baptists were divided on the issue, the WMU feared that taking a stand on suffrage could end up hurting missions work. When the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, however, the WMU embraced it with enthusiasm, using publications to encourage women to vote. The WMU president at the time of the amendment’s passage stated, “Whether she wanted the vote or not the responsibility has been placed upon [the American woman] and she must use this privilege in such a way that she will influence the life of the nation for good.”¹⁴

The WMU did engage women in social activism, first in the temper-

ance movement and then later in civil rights. When the second wave of feminism came in the 1960s and 70s, the WMU stayed focused on missions, while responding to women's changing status. WMU president Marie Mathis cautioned, "Don't think we're not progressive." To which WMU executive director Alma Hunt added, "We're just not militant."¹⁵

Southern Baptists and the Second Wave

As reflected in the statements by Mathis and Hunt, Southern Baptists' ambivalent relationship with feminism continued into its second wave, which followed closely on the heels of the civil rights movement. Women participated in civil rights marches, bus rides, and voter registration drives, and they soon began questioning their subordinate status in a movement that purported to effect equality. Having learned the tools of social change in working for civil rights, these women turned to their own situations.¹⁶ As writers such as Betty Friedan gave voice to women's sense of isolation and unhappiness, women began to form consciousness-raising groups in which they examined the constraints of gender, asking questions such as: Why did the burden of housework and child-rearing fall primarily on women? Why were women not allowed into certain universities? Why did girls have to take home economics and boys shop? Why were secretaries paid less than garbage men? Why were women segregated into lower paying jobs? Why did law enforcement turn away when a husband battered his wife? Why could bosses demand sexual favors from female employees?

As women asked these questions and explored the material realities of their lives, they realized the extent to which gender shaped every experience. They recognized that their gender systematically placed them in a subordinate position in relation to men in their homes, churches, schools, and workplaces. With this dawning realization, some women demanded equality and social change. Second wave leaders, including Shulamith Firestone, Susan Brownmiller, and Andrea Dworkin, offered theoretical explorations of previously unexamined issues such as sexuality, rape, and sexual harassment, and they examined gendered experiences that created and maintained women's subordination.¹⁷ Feminist activists staged protests and street theater to call attention to women's issues. Others worked within the legal system to demand enforcement of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination based on sex. Other women set

about to draft an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which generated a great deal of controversy but ultimately failed.

Perhaps one of the most far-reaching legislative pieces to arise from Second Wave feminism was Title IX, the Education Amendment of 1972, which stated: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."¹⁸ While the statute provided certain exceptions, on the whole, it meant that most educational institutions could no longer practice discrimination based on sex. Bernice Sandler, one of the key Second Wave feminists who pushed for passage of Title IX, recently stated that when feminists worked on the legislation, they had no idea the impact it would have on sports.¹⁹ Feminists were mostly concerned with discriminatory practices in college admissions and in the classroom. Sandler noted that in relation to sports feminists figured that Title IX would mean that girls would have a few more options on field day. Little did they know that Title IX would revolutionize girls' and women's sports, bringing with it all the benefits that accrue from participation in athletics.²⁰

Women's Liberation is Your Liberation

As they had been with suffrage and the First Wave of American feminism, Southern Baptists were divided over Second Wave feminism.²¹ In the 1970s, many Southern Baptist leaders, especially those at the denomination's seminaries and publishing houses, embraced a number of the stated goals of feminism. Many laypeople and pastors, however, opposed the movement, seeing it as a threat to patriarchal power and God's divinely ordered hierarchy of creation.

Given the rightward turn of the Southern Baptist Convention beginning in 1979, readers might be surprised to learn of rather progressive writings that emerged in the 1970s from the convention. While these publications affirmed the value of traditional roles for women, they also advocated openness to the changing mores fostered by the women's movement.²²

In the halls of academia, feminism was also challenging the canons of theology and biblical studies. Trained in the classic methods of theology, biblical criticism, and church history, feminist academics began to develop new forms of feminist theology, feminist biblical criticism, and feminist

church history²³ Perhaps the most renowned Southern Baptist scholar in this endeavor was Phyllis Trible. A Hebrew Bible scholar, Trible authored *God and The Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978) and *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (1984). In both books, Trible used a feminist hermeneutic to explore the Hebrew scriptures and to challenge traditional male-centered ways of reading the Bible. In 2005, an interviewer asked Trible if she thought the dominance of male language in the Bible meant that there was a bottom line she had to reject. She responded:

The Bible is too full of its own contradictions and diversities for me to want to do that. One uses the small things to confound the large things, or uses the foolish things to confound the wise things. You live by faith in the remnant. You do acts of subversion. The prophets were subversive figures. There are models like that in the Bible that I cling to. I'm not going to let the Bible go, and I'm not going to reduce it to one thing, I'm not going to turn it into a feminist document either. It is through and through androcentric, male-centered and patriarchal. Nevertheless, it does not speak with one voice. Readers interacting with it can do things to the text that bring out countervoices within in.²⁴

Woman was Made for Man

The majority of Southern Baptists were not accepting of the ideas of women's liberation. Billy Graham, in a 1971 article in *Contempo* (the WMU's then-new magazine for young women), wrote "Wife, mother, homemaker—that is the appointed destiny of real womanhood."²⁵ His solution to the "problem that has no name" was a return to satisfaction with women's God-ordained role in the home. The problem lay not in the social construction of gender but in women's refusal to joyfully and obediently accept the role God had given them. While Christ did bring women new freedom, Graham argued, "He did not free them from the home."²⁶ Conservative rhetoric about the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s focused on maintaining gender distinctions. One interview participant noted that she had heard that the ERA meant that unisex bathrooms would be the norm and that women would be drafted. Suffragist Alice Paul penned the first version of the ERA in 1921, just after women got the vote. In its entirety, the amendment stated

Section 1. Equality of Rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex.

Section 2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

Section 3. This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.

The ERA was first introduced in Congress in 1923 and, finally, after being introduced in every session of Congress thereafter, it was passed in 1972. The amendment required ratification by thirty-eight states, but only thirty-five had signed on by the time for passage expired in 1982. Led by Phyllis Schlafly and Christian fundamentalists, the anti-ERA movement used distortion and fear to convince many American voters that the amendment would invalidate child support, prevent wives from receiving their husbands' social security benefits, threaten women's custody of their children, repeal states' abortion restrictions, and take broad powers away from state governments. Despite the fallacy of these concerns, many voters believed that the ERA would undermine women's status, and therefore, fifteen states, primarily in the South, did not ratify the amendment.

Since 1982, the amendment has been reintroduced to each session of Congress. Feminists continue to lobby for the passage of a constitutional amendment that guarantees equality for women, which without this amendment are absent in the constitution. Legislation currently provides American women with some protections of equality, but legislation can be rewritten and is often not enforced.

In the midst of the tremendous changes that occurred in the 1970s, conservative Southern Baptists found many of their beliefs about gender threatened, not only by the broader society, but also within Southern Baptist life itself. Reacting to the women's movement and its influence among Southern Baptists, Jessie Sappington, a pastor's wife from Texas, led the SBC in 1973 to pass this resolution on the place of women in Christian service:

WHEREAS, The Scriptures bear record to the distinctive roles of men and women in the church and in the home, and

WHEREAS, Christian women have made and are making a significant contribution to the cause of Christ, and

WHEREAS, Christian women have been made exhorted (sic) to redig the old wells of mission promotion and education in our churches by Kenneth Chafin, and

WHEREAS, There is a great attack by the members of most women's liberation movements upon scriptural precepts of woman's place in society, and

WHEREAS, The theme of the Convention is "Share the Word Now" and this Word we share is explicitly clear on this subject

Therefore, be it RESOLVED, That we 'redig' or reaffirm God's order of authority for his church and the Christian home (1) Christ the head of every man, (2) man the head of the woman, (3) children in subjection to their parents—in the Lord

Therefore, be it further RESOLVED, That we 'redig' or reaffirm God's explicit Word that (1) man was not made for the woman, but the woman for the man, (2) that the woman is the glory of man, (3) that as woman would not have existed without man, henceforth, neither would man have existed without the woman, they are dependent one upon the other—to the glory of God ²⁷

Sappington intended her resolution to be a direct confrontation of the women's movement. Writing several years later, Sappington said that she was surprised when no one at the 1972 SBC meeting had offered a resolution on the women's movement. "The demands of segments of the Women's Liberation Movement for the lawful recognition of prostitute and lesbians lay heavy on my mind. Their avowed intention to get women out of their homes, under the guise of 'freeing' them from the bondage of husbands and children. Their children to be cared for in public day-care centers, funded by taxpayers, patterned after the structure of China, and several other countries."²⁸ When she mentioned her surprise to her husband, he suggested she write a resolution. Sappington did so and submitted her initial resolution, "On the Christian Woman versus 'Woman's Lib'" to the convention's resolutions committee, which is tasked with processing proposed resolutions and selecting the ones that will be brought to the convention floor. The committee did not select Sappington's resolution but instead sent one that actually recognized women's leadership roles in local churches and in the denomination. Upset by this resolution, which she read as supporting

women's ordination, Sappington successfully offered a substitute resolution that decidedly affirmed women's subordinate position from the floor of the convention.

In the following years, many other people, especially male pastors, expressed great displeasure with the notion of women's ordination. Following a 1974 article by Nell Magee in *The Baptist Program* in which she decried discrimination in the denomination, the magazine received so many letters that it had to run them across two issues.²⁹ While some supported Magee, many others castigated her and even questioned her faith because of her suggestion that women should be given opportunities to fulfill all roles in the church. One evangelist expressed surprise that any woman who believes the Bible could accept the idea that she was experiencing discrimination in Southern Baptist churches.³⁰ Another pastor wrote that while women in the New Testament were not ordained, "They did fill a much higher office, prophets or prophetess, serving the church in various ways, washing the Apostles' feet, etc., but never ordained or placed in a position to dominate their men."³¹ A director of music quoted 1 Peter: "Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands . . . for after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands: even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord."³² Another pastor quipped, "I personally feel that a woman is no more qualified to be a pastor or deacon than she is to be the husband of one wife. She's just not equipped for it."³³

For many fundamentalist Southern Baptists, the convention's affirmation of women's equality, especially the ordination of women, was absolute evidence of the denomination's drift toward liberalism. As fundamentalists wrested control of the convention away from moderates, they continued to address the progress of women in resolutions, policies, and practices. In 1984, the convention adopted a resolution titled "Ordination and the Role of Women in Ministry," which prompted some women ministers to suggest that at the 1985 convention they should wear T-shirts that read, "I was at the Edenic fall." The salient parts of the resolution are below (*italics are mine*):

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 (1 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 (1 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 (1 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* (1 Tim. 2:13ff); and

WHEREAS, These Scriptures are not intended to stifle the creative contribution of men and women as co-workers 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 Christians 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.³⁴

The changes in the convention, while having little direct affect on most laywomen, made a profound difference in the lives of women ministers. Interestingly enough, some of these changes reflect the level of success that the women's movement had, even among Southern Baptists. Certainly the backlash attests to the fear raised among many conservatives that an unchecked women's movement would undermine the patriarchal constructions of the home, the church, and the SBC. More importantly, the more recent emphasis on equality between men and women by conservatives, even as they advocate for gender roles and women's submission, can

certainly be attributed to the influence of the women's movement. Additionally, the women's movement has opened up many career paths in ministry, even for conservative women, that were not available prior to the 1970s. Almost all the women interviewed recognized the benefits that have accrued to them, regardless of their theological convictions, because of the women's movement. None of them suggests that women should not receive equal pay for equal work or that men should be favored in job application processes. Despite conservative Southern Baptists' reactions against feminism, the denomination has been influenced by it, and conservative women have benefited from it.

Contemporary Southern Baptist Women and Feminism

Contemporary Southern Baptist women reflect their forbears' conflicting attitudes about feminism. Many strongly identify as feminist; others adamantly oppose feminism. Almost all acknowledge that the women's movement brought about needed change, and most distance themselves from what they perceive as feminist extremes. They all believe in women's ontological equality, although they disagree vehemently about what that equality looks like in practice. A surprising number still hold onto stereotypes of feminists as bra-burning man-haters (even among progressives), and many see feminists as shrill, angry protestors, despite these women's own embrace of the ongoing gains brought to them by feminism.

In many ways, contemporary Southern Baptist women's acceptance or rejection of feminism is closely related to their own generational proximity to the women's movement. Older women who were raising families by the time the movement began tend not to identify as feminist, and many of them feel the movement denigrated their choices to be homemakers. Nonetheless, they see their daughters as beneficiaries of the movement, and they themselves in many ways have become more open-minded about feminist issues as they have aged. Middle-aged women, those who grew up alongside the women's movement, are most likely to identify as feminist, even among more conservative Southern Baptists. They experienced first-hand the benefits, and they remember the way the world was before the movement. Even middle-aged women who do not identify as feminist support many of the goals of the women's movement, and, when given the definition of feminism as a belief in and willingness to work toward equality

for all people, many of these women admitted that, given that definition, they might well be feminists. Young women, who have always lived in a world with sexual harassment, equal protection, and domestic violence laws, are much more likely to distance themselves from feminism. Of the more theologically progressive young women, many do claim to be feminist, but, even among them, some do answer with the proverbial, "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." Conservative young women are the most adamant in denying feminism. They equate feminism with secularism, sin, and evil. They believe feminism has disrupted God's divinely ordained hierarchy in the home in particular, as well as in church and society, and they profoundly disagree with many of feminism's stated objectives.

Despite many Southern Baptist women's objections or antipathy toward feminism, they have all undoubtedly benefited from it, and Southern Baptists' recent emphasis on ontological equality, especially among those who identify themselves as "complementarians," is a reflection of the influence of the women's movement on Southern Baptists. Feminism has been a factor in Southern Baptist debates about women across its history, and Southern Baptist women remain conflicted about it. While many may reject feminism, they are influenced by it, and, despite fundamentalist opposition to it, feminism remains an active dynamic among Southern Baptist women. **BH&HS**

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