

A “True Baptist” Theology of Women in Ministry



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Those who fought the conservative takeover in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) spent much of the 1980s organizing their opposition. Women pursuing ordained ministerial status were among the first, founding Southern Baptist Women in Ministry (SBWIM) in 1983. And yet much to their dismay, those other, namely moderate, movements left women out of their leadership, strategies, and structures. One example is indicative of many.

When the Alliance of Southern Baptists (the Alliance), widely heralded as the most liberal and progressive of these moderate groups, held its first convocation at Meredith College in Raleigh in 1987, Anne Thomas Neil was excited to attend. A native of South Carolina, Neil had served with her husband and their two daughters as Southern Baptist missionaries to Nigeria. Over the years she had become invested in numerous ecumenical projects and social justice causes. Now retired, she advocated for the acceptance of women in ordained ministry in Southern Baptist life. Many regarded her as one of the primary driving forces behind SBWIM, and she was SBWIM's first president. For her, the Alliance represented the possibility of an exciting partnership.

So imagine her surprise when she walked into the conference room and found it crowded with men. It felt, as she put it, like "business as usual."

Perhaps she should not have been surprised, then, when the men subsequently voted down her request for \$15,000 and resources for SBWIM. Still, she found infuriating their intent to financially support seminary faculty fired by conservatives, especially when they budgeted exactly \$15,000. After she expressed her consternation, one male pastor asked, "Can't you see the blood of these faculty members flowing here on the floor?" to which Neil responded, "Yes, I can; but can you see the avalanche of blood of women that has been flowing for nearly 2,000 years?" With few exceptions, it seemed, even the most progressive of Southern Baptist men had little sense of this alternative history, and certainly not their role in it. As Neil commented of the Alliance early on, "Here was a giant job of consciousness-raising."¹

While copious ink has been spilt analyzing the fragmentation of the SBC, few scholars have heeded the organization of SBWIM. One reason has been the privileging of institutional "empire-building" that we find in the annals of Southern Baptist history. If measured in terms of numbers and finances, SBWIM held little importance, and especially when compared to other denominationally related entities. But another, more complicated reason for the neglect might also have been the view among many progressive historians and scholars that the theology and activism of SBWIM was shaped almost entirely by other movements, particularly feminist theology, evangelical feminism, and liberation theology. Because Southern Baptist women lacked their own Rosemary Radford Reuther or Letha Scanzoni, the prevailing assumption was that their "consciousness-raising" around women in ministry lacked historical significance.

In this article I challenge this latter assumption and argue that although BWIM women did pull heavily from these other movements, they also interpreted them from within their own Southern Baptist context and background. Rather than passively echoing others, they worked actively to create a theology of women in ministry that was uniquely Baptist. In making this argument, I highlight select articles from SBWIM's quarterly newsletter *FOLIO*, holding them as indicative of hundreds of other articles, profiles, sermons, meeting minutes, and letters published by the organization during the 1980s.²

While the women did not develop their theology of women in ministry in a consistently linear fashion, I will still present it logistically and conceptually in three stages of thought:

1. Ideals of equality invoked by women in ministry were biblical (and thus traditionally Baptist) before they were feminist.
2. Women's pursuit of ministry was a response to Southern Baptist piety and programs, which had cultivated within them the language of call.
3. Women in ministry appealed to a "golden age" in Baptist history, an age in which "true Baptists" existed as a primitive movement for those on the fringes of society and culture.³

Background

While officially founded in 1983, SBWIM began more informally at a dinner for women in ministry at the SBC's 1981 convention. Throughout the next decade the organization brought women together in face-to-face dialogues and encounters and also kept them connected in their various locations and ministerial commitments across the South and in other parts of the country. True, its budget was slim and its participants, as critics were apt to point out, a small percentage of Southern Baptists, but they were committed to SBWIM's dual purpose: "to provide support for the woman whose call from God defines her vocation as that of a minister or that of a woman in ministry in the Southern Baptist Convention" and "to encourage and affirm her call as a minister of God."⁴

On paper, men were included. In reality, however, SBWIM's leaders and participants were overwhelmingly female and hailed from four backgrounds or locations in denominational life:

1. Ordained women ministers who served in Southern Baptist congregations: (The congregations that called women as pastors were few and far between, and in these early years, often rural. Thus, these women lived in isolation from one another and were removed from any immediate Southern Baptist network of support outside of their church.)
2. Female seminarians at either Southern Baptist Theological Seminary or Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, each of which eventually had a resource center for women that coordinated a local chapter of SBWIM

3. Lay advocates, those women and men who supported the purposes of SBWIM
4. Women associated with the Woman's Missionary Union (WMU), namely national officers who had put some of the historic women's missions group's resources and money toward SBWIM⁵

While one founder described SBWIM as a group that dreamed big but lacked the monetary funds to bring those dreams to reality, the women reveled in having found one another and so worked diligently to achieve SBWIM's purposes on a shoestring budget. Its steering committee usually held at least one yearly retreat as well as a worship service at the annual denominational convention. But it was SBWIM's newsletter and periodical, *FOLIO*, that kept them connected. Published quarterly, it celebrated women's ministerial accomplishments, announced their ordinations, printed their sermons, highlighted their stories of ministry and call, and provided space for their reflections. Along with their occasional meetings and retreats, the women of SBWIM used *FOLIO* to develop and deepen their understanding of women in ministry.

A quick glance at *FOLIO* shows numerous sources of inspiration and streams of influence. *FOLIO* consistently advertised conferences hosted by the ecumenical Church Women United and the Evangelical Women's Caucus alongside WMU retreats and SBC-related seminary events. *FOLIO*'s resource section recommended readings by noted feminist theologians and evangelical feminists, almost always female, along with books and articles (some from *Baptist History and Heritage*) written by well-respected Southern Baptist professors and pastors, often male, who supported women in ministry. On the surface these worlds (feminist, evangelical, and Baptist) did not easily coalesce, and even underneath, their encounters invoked internal tensions. But as SBWIM attempted to bring these movements and theologies together, it achieved a new understanding of women in ministry that was unique in being decidedly Baptist.

Equality as Biblical, and Thus Baptist

As feminists lobbied for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment during the 1970s, most Protestant Christians began to interpret women's ordination through the lens of feminism and women's rights, seeing the pursuit

of women for clerical status as a bid for gender equality with men. And of course, feminist theologians saw gender parity in the ecclesial realm as a primary goal. As faithful Southern Baptists, the women of SBWIM realized the need to undergird their own movement in scripture if it were to gain any acceptance in Southern Baptist life and culture. And by the 1980s, that necessitated their showing that the egalitarian principles associated with feminism were first and foremost biblical. This need became all the more pressing as conservatives increasingly pitted the Bible over and against feminism, and inerrancy over and against gender equality.

SBWIM began circulating *FOLIO* in 1983. As early as its second issue, Molly Marshall-Green wrote "Women in Ministry: A Biblical Theology." Soon to become the first woman hired as a professor in theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS), Marshall-Green was still, at this point, a doctoral student at SBTS and an ordained Southern Baptist minister serving as pastor of a small rural Kentucky church. Active in SBWIM from the start, she frequently contributed to *FOLIO* and even served as its editor. This piece, with the rhetoric of gender equality everywhere present, was indicative of not only her future articles as they appeared in *FOLIO*, but also of countless others.

Marshall-Green began her article by claiming that amidst the "controversy swirling around differing views of the inspiration of the Bible" and the "cacophony of voices bidding for attention" in the SBC, "perhaps the most productive method for ascertaining the biblical portrait is to delineate the enduring theological principles." She then affirmed that the "longer I study Scriptures, the more convinced I become of the bedrock theological support for women being afforded equal access to all positions of vocational ministry." Marshall-Green highlighted three "enduring principles" that overrode Paul's "purple passages," which she clearly understood as contextual. First she emphasized that "both male and female bear the image of God, and hence, are equally capable of being renewed in the image of Christ" and "equally share the responsibility of making God's nature known . . ." As for scriptural evidence, both Genesis and the Apostle Paul, said Marshall-Green, affirm that God created woman as man's "equal in power and glory and, even more significant, that Adam shared culpability for the fall alongside Eve."⁶

The second enduring principle was that "equality reigns in Christ's body, the church." Here, Marshall-Green highlighted Galatians 3:28 (the passage noting "there is no longer male or female") and pointed to classic

New Testament stories of women as church leaders (Phoebe, Euodia and Syntyche, and Anna). But again, even more significant, were the "culture-transforming attitudes and behavior of Jesus Christ" in "his uninhibited acceptance of women as 'theology students,' his calling women to serve, and his commission of women as primary witnesses to the resurrection."⁷ Within Jesus' time, then, his acceptance and treatment of women rested upon egalitarian principles.

Last, Marshall-Green pointed out that the "Holy Spirit gives gifts for ministry—not according to gender—which each recipient must exercise faithfully." The primary scriptural references to spiritual gifts, she stressed, "do not ascribe certain prominent gifts for leadership to men and 'lesser' gifts to women." Spiritual gifts and abilities were different, but not gendered.⁸ This countered the conservative accusation that women's desire for ordination was motivated by self-interest. Affording women equal access to vocational ministry, as Marshall-Green initially affirmed, was instead the means to holistic church renewal.⁹

Marshall-Green's hermeneutic here was hardly novel, and like the other SBWIM women who wrote for *FOLIO*, she leaned heavily on the work of noted feminist theologians and evangelical feminists who delved deeply into scripture. To be sure, Southern Baptist moderates as well as conservatives saw scripture as preeminent. But having argued that women's equality was biblical, the women were now able to connect their own sense of ordination and ministry more directly and personally to Southern Baptist life and culture.

A Southern Baptist Call to Ministry

More than any bid to equality, women consistently underscored their pursuit of ordination and ministerial status as a response to God's call to ministry. "We are not demanding our rights or asserting our freedom," preached Lynda Weaver-Williams at SBWIM's second annual meeting and worship service and in a sermon reprinted in *FOLIO*, but instead "only want a chance to do what we've been called to do."¹⁰ Moreover, their calls, Weaver-Williams recognized, were the result of their Southern Baptist backgrounds and upbringings.

A doctoral student in ethics at SBTS and one of the first ordained Southern Baptist women ministers, Weaver-Williams had attended an SBC conference on women in the church as early as 1978, and amid resistance

to women's ordination, she spontaneously rose from the floor to insist to the denominational leaders present: "I am where I am because of you. Because you let me learn from you. And because you provided ways to let me respond to God's call."¹¹ The realization that her story, a story of God's calling her to ministry, was deeply rooted in Southern Baptist piety and programs inspired her involvement in the founding of SBWIM and became typical of many women's testimonies in the "Profile" section of *FOLIO*.

Thus, in framing a Baptist theology of women in ministry, SBWIM women simultaneously demonstrated how holiness fervor, evangelical zeal, and old-fashioned piety inculcated within them a sense of call to ministry and, equally significant, located all of these within Southern Baptist life and institutional culture. Time and time again, SBWIM women pointed to Southern Baptist Sunday School, Training Union, summer camp, and most particularly Girls Auxiliary and Girls in Action (GAs). And they reminded Southern Baptists that in their capacity as teachers, missions leaders, missionaries, and ministers and preachers, they had instructed Southern Baptist girls as well as boys to listen for God's call in their lives. It naturally followed, then, that impassioned sermons and rousing hymn singing would stir their souls, and that they would walk the aisle, experience the waters of baptism, and ultimately give testimony to God's call.

Several profiles in *FOLIO* are again indicative. One of the earliest issues, from 1984, opened with the ordination of Cindy Harp Johnson, a recent Southern Seminary graduate who eventually served as SBWIM's president, as told by Bill Leonard. Leonard called Harp's response to her local church ordination council's question about her conversion and call to ministry as "vintage Southern Baptist," which he then recorded as "born in a Christian home . . . grew up in the church . . . father a pastor . . . converted at age five . . . walked the aisle . . . public profession of faith . . . baptized. Nurtured in Baptist organizations: Sunday School . . . youth camps . . . Girls' Auxiliary . . . revivals . . . Constantly urged to make total commitment to Christ . . . follow him wherever He might lead . . ." The list concluded with the traditional language of call: "a growing sense of God's call to vocational Christian ministry . . . a period of struggle . . . finally a surrender to God's call to ministry . . . a call to preach the gospel."¹²

Similarly, Mary Day Miller profiled Jeni Cook, another ordained Southern Baptist woman pastor and graduate of SBTS who was then serving as a hospital chaplain. Miller wrote that Cook "heard the words over and over

again during her childhood . . . Listen to God. Be ready. Be willing to respond and obey. Make the most of the gifts and talents God has given you." Both "at church and at home" and "from her teachers and parents and grandparents," these words formed an inner refrain. And so, said Cook, "I decided they were right and I determined to do that."¹³

In a particularly moving letter, Diane Eubanks Hill not only narrated her own story toward ordained ministry, which started in GAs, but also asked after her own daughter: "What if she sticks with GAs and youth group and summer camp? What if she comes home . . . to tell me that she thinks God is calling her to ministry? What if she believes them when they tell her she can be anything God calls her to be? What's a mama to say?"¹⁴ These profiles followed an archetypal narrative, or testimony, that placed women's ministry squarely within the Southern Baptist tradition of call, cultivated in turn by that blending of denominational programming and local church vitality.

In recalling the significance of GAs, the mission organization for girls, women ministers frequently recollected that they had initially assumed theirs was a call to missions overseas. After all, missions was the avenue most available to women, and it was certainly one highly encouraged, celebrated, and affirmed. Changing times, though, had brought a fresh awareness of women's gifts and talents as well as a new understanding of scripture. Thus, the specifics of their call had indeed changed. Still, while God might now be leading them down new paths, that sense of call remained steadfast, and old-fashioned Southern Baptist piety necessitated their response. Only now, they faced rejection.

Like many women, Diane Hill wrote of this rejection feeling all the more "cold" as it followed a girlhood in which the "church was filled with warmth." As she put it: "The same denomination that nurtured me as a child, interpreted call to me as a young adult, and ordained me as an adult now declares that my gender separates me from God's will."¹⁵

Stories of hate mail, meager salaries, and futile searches for ministerial placements filled the profile section of EOLIO, but always along with what one woman called the "freedom and peace" accompanying the realization that "my place was in the calling itself."¹⁶ Moreover, in being pushed to the fringes of their denomination, women began to understand themselves as being a different, even "truer" sort of Baptist. In the final stage of developing a Baptist theology of women in ministry, SBWIM reached further back in history to narrate and privilege a much earlier "golden age" in Baptist life.

Fragmentation as Liberation to *Being a True Baptist*

In 1986 *FOLIO* launched a series of articles that sought to articulate a theological vision for the women-in-ministry movement and, of course, SBWIM. Those traditional Baptist distinctives of the priesthood of the believer, soul competency, and local church autonomy were certainly present. And several articles focused once again on scripture. But the most innovative aspect of this theological vision was its understanding and interpretation of Baptist history. To that end, Molly Marshall-Green opened the series with "Toward [an] Encompassing Theological Vision for Women in Light of Baptist Tradition."

Addressing but quickly moving beyond the anticipated distinctives, she emphasized that "Baptists have always been characterized by their social concern" largely because in their "beginnings," they drew from the "broken, marginal, and dispossessed." And "yet as Baptists climbed the socio-economic ladder," she lamented, speaking as a Baptist herself, "much of our concern for the disenfranchised of society has ebbed," so much so that "today we resist being besmirched by them."

As for women, Marshall-Green then argued that because "we have been among the oppressed historically . . . the theological vision informing women in ministry is acutely sensitive to the brokenness all around us." So "perhaps," she suggested, "God is using and will use women to call Baptists back to a posture of stooping advocacy as redemptive public servants." Pulling more from the language of liberation theology, with its concern for social justice, than from the feminist rhetoric of equality, she spoke of the leadership of Christ as reversing the hierarchical principle and breaking the authority structures that oppress. But this time, liberation theology seemed to emulate and echo Baptist understandings. In closing, Marshall Green argued that because the Baptist women of SBWIM were "going against the tide of ecclesiastical disapproval," then they were "in step with their courageous forebears." Then again, she added, "being a true Baptist never was for the faint-hearted."¹⁷

Subsequent articles elaborated on this history of "true Baptist[s]." In fact, in a later interview, one SBWIM founder exclaimed that recovering early

Baptist history, a history of which she and most women had been unaware, was one of the most exciting and meaningful endeavors of the organization in its early years. Working with historians such as Leon McBeth, Alan Neely, and later Carolyn Blevins, they held that beginning in England and continuing in colonial and frontier America, Baptists stood prophetically against the status quo. As for Baptists in the South, southern prejudices had crept into early nineteenth-century Baptist life, downplaying dissent and transforming the SBC into an agent of the status quo as it demonstrated in both the slaveholding and Jim Crow South. After World War II, the SBC moved even further from "true Baptist" history, more preoccupied as it was with success in money, numbers, and empire-building than the prophetic impulse that informed the original Baptist movement.

By the late 1980s, the SBC had moved from denominational infighting to fragmentation and structural division, and it became increasingly apparent that in developing a Baptist theology of women in ministry, SBWIM spoke not only to conservatives but also increasingly to moderates. Jann Clanton was a feisty Texan and ordained Southern Baptist woman who served a Methodist church for lack of a Baptist pulpit. Her *FOLIO* article, "The Sin of Tolerance," demonstrated this shift in audience during the final stages of developing a Baptist theology of women in ministry.

First, she said, Southern Baptists had violated their history in racist practices. And then, she argued, they continued to violate it by oppressing women. But moderates, she indicated, were part of the problem, for their "sin of tolerance," which was, among other tolerances, a "tolerance of the institutional status quo" and one that had come to define the SBC under moderates and their leadership. "Eet's face it," she cried, "our status quo is not a just system." Pointing to the injustices that had defined Southern Baptist racism and sexism as well as the concessions moderate leaders seemed willing to make to maintain the status quo, Clanton urged moderates instead to reject "business as usual" by "righting the wrongs in our Baptist institutions" and becoming once again, in the Baptist tradition, a "prophetic statement for human rights in our larger community."¹⁸

Therefore, as SBWIM moved into the 1990s, its women began to argue that fragmentation liberated women to being "true Baptist[s]."

Conclusion

It is fitting to end this article, as part of a Festschrift to Carolyn Blevins, with SBWIM's intent to recover "true Baptist" history. While I am neither probing the accuracy of SBWIM's history nor affirming any "true Baptist" tradition over and against another, I am following the example of Blevins, who for thirty years insisted on and taught the significance of those Baptist women challenging the status quo in Baptist life. While Blevins often reached back to earlier periods, I look more recently, here and elsewhere, to the women of Blevins' own era. Thus, it is hardly coincidental that during my research I discovered numerous SBWIM women who praised Blevins as a mentor whose teaching, writing, and example inspired their own journeys to ministry.

In conclusion, then, SBWIM's uniquely Baptist theology of women in ministry influenced moderate life substantially. It served as a form of "consciousness-raising" that has informed a younger generation, and men as well as women. This younger generation matured as Baptists in the wake of the fragmentation of the SBC and did indeed reject "business as usual." We see this rejection in the eventual attempts of the Alliance and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to include women in local church ministry and institutional leadership. But we can also find it in the pages of *Baptist History and Heritage*, which now regularly features "Baptists on the margins" and "other Baptists."

To come full circle, Blevins was integral to this process as she spurned those male empire-builders as the "proper" subjects of (Southern) Baptist history to advance and eventually write the articles on unsung Baptist women for the journal. As a popular newsletter, *FOLIO* depended on the more academic *Baptist History and Heritage*. Thus, in reimagining Baptist history from the standpoint of those women challenging the status quo, Blevins provided a pristine and stunningly prophetic vision of the past, from which the women of SBWIM crafted a unique and, to their mind, "true Baptist" theology of women in ministry. **BH&HS**



Women I Can't Forget

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Notes

1 Anne Thomas Neil, "Life's Greatest Adventures," Neil Personal Papers, 6, 13-14. Neil also recounted the incident over money in addressing the Alliance's 1996 convocation. See *Minutes*, Southern Baptist Alliance Executive Committee, Office of the Baptist Alliance, Washington, D.C. It seems that the event over money occurred at a meeting of the executive committee (of fourteen men and three women) convened shortly after the first convocation.

2 My focus will be on how their theology of women in ministry was uniquely Baptist rather than on the influence of these other movements. I explore the latter in my previous work, *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). While I hint toward a uniquely Baptist theology of women in ministry in this book, in the current article I explore and develop it more fully through a careful examination and analysis of *Folio* through the 1980s.

3 My intent is not to evaluate the accuracy of this history but to underscore its role in women's theology.

4 See *Minutes*, Conference for Women in Ministry, SBC, Personal Papers of Reba Cobb; Proceedings of the 1983 Women in Ministry Conference, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee (SBHLA); and Betty McGary Pierce, "History of Women in Ministry, SBC, *Folio*, Summer 1985, 9.

5 The history and background of SBWIM come from the aforementioned sources and articles in *Folio* and from my own ethnographic work and formal interviews with ten early founders and leaders that I conducted for writing *Into the Pulpit*.

6 Genesis 1:26-28, Genesis 3, Galatians 2:20, Colossians 2:12.

7 Luke 10:38-42, John 4:23ff, Matthew 28:10, John 20:17.

8 Romans 12:1-8, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, Ephesians 4:7-13.

9 Molly T. Marshall-Green, "Women in Ministry: A Biblical Theology," *Folio*, Fall 1983, 1.

10 Lynda Weaver-Williams, "Exercising Our Gifts," *Folio*, Winter 1985, 1-2.

11 Lynda Weaver-Williams, "My Call," in *Findings of the Consultation on Women*, 24, Consultation on Women Collection, SBHLA.

12 Bill J. Leonard, "Good News at Wolf Creek," *Folio*, Summer 1984, 1.

13 Mary Day-Miller, "Profile: Jeni Cook," *Folio*, Autumn 1988, 4-5.

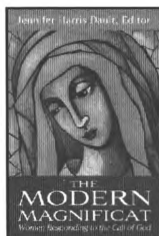
14 Diane Eubanks Hill, "What's a Mama to Say?" *Folio*, Winter 1986, 7.

15 Ibid.

16 Zelma Mullins Pattillo, "You Know Women Can't Be Preachers," *Folio*, Autumn 1984, 5.

17 Molly Marshall-Green, "Toward Encompassing Theological Vision for Women in Light of Baptist Tradition," *Folio*, Autumn 1986, 1-2.

18 Jann Aldredge-Clanton, "The Sin of Tolerance," *Folio*, Spring 1988, 11. While "business as usual" speaks to Clanton's sentiment, it is not part of her actual statement. I insert it here as a reference to Neil's earlier remarks.



The Modern Magnificat

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