

# Women and the Baptist Experience\*



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*"Freedom!" was the cry of Baptists who emerged in the restricted religious climate of seventeenth-century England. Baptists in England and later in the American colonies fought tenaciously for freedom of religious expression for people of all religious faiths. The individual's religious freedom did not stop at the Baptist church door.*

Freedom within Baptist churches is a hallmark of Baptist theology. Ecclesiastical hierarchy is foreign to Baptist teachings. The doctrine of the priesthood of the believer, which asserts the individual's right to interpret scripture for herself, and the doctrine of the autonomy of the local church are cornerstones of Baptist doctrine. Congregational government, giving responsibilities and rights to every church member, is the polity of local Baptist churches. Great emphasis is placed on the individual's responsibility for her relationship with God. Historically, freedom has been treasured by Baptists—in their doctrine if not always in their practice.

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Women took their religious responsibility seriously and were involved in significant ways as Baptists organized in England and America. Two of Baptists' most well-known churches were founded by women. Dorothy Hazard led Baptists in Bristol, England, to form the Broadmead Baptist Church in the 1640s. Lucinda Williams led a small band of Baptists in 1868 to form the church that is now the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas. Women also served as deaconesses according to early Baptist documents. Some Baptist women preached: Hazard in England and Martha Marshall in America. But as Baptists became more structured, women's names as leaders began to disappear from church records and histories. Women were rarely noted except in accounts of membership or as the "wife of . . ." Freedom within Baptist churches gradually became limited for its female members.

Freed slaves in the late nineteenth century found the Baptist emphasis on freedom and the individual very appealing. Many black Baptist churches arose as a result. Theologically, the same doctrines of individual freedom should have attracted large numbers of white women into Baptist churches as well. Pragmatically, however, by this time Baptist churches rarely deviated from dominant cultural patterns in matters pertaining to women. Between the seventeenth century and the nineteenth century, men increasingly dominated church leadership positions. Like many of their Protestant sisters, Baptist women found effective but limited ways of ministering within the spoken and unspoken restrictions.

The nineteenth century was not the best of times for Baptists in America. Curious clashes were occurring in their culture: a religious awakening, the swelling cry for abolition, regional tensions erupting into the Civil War, the difficulties of Reconstruction, and the growing frustration of women who discovered that because they had no vote, they lacked the power to bring about social and moral change. Turmoil also swirled among Baptists themselves soon after they established a national convention.

Early in the century (1814), Baptists formed a national organization, commonly known as the Triennial Convention. By mid-century (1845), Southern Baptists split off primarily over the issue of slavery and formed a separate convention, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). In the last half of the century, during the period of Reconstruction, black Baptist churches emerged and eventually formed the National Baptist Convention in 1895. By the end of the century, Baptists in the United States were divided into Northern, Southern, and Black Baptist groups. A national convention was a

grouping of Baptists into national organizations to support programs too large for a local church or region, such as education, missions, and publishing. Adding to the turmoil was the tension regarding women: their voting power, their roles, and their proper place. Uncertain about the growing influence of women, Baptist pulpits and presses warned of the dangers of any change in the traditional role of women. Baptist churches, schools, boards, and conventions allowed women to participate only in restricted and supporting roles. Baptist newspapers from this era clearly indicate that many Baptists would have agreed with the philosopher Pliny the Elder, who in his book *Natural History* insisted that women were to be quiet and inconspicuous so that when they died no one would even know they had lived.<sup>1</sup>

How does a woman who claims the doctrine of Baptists as her own respond authentically to her faith when the institutions of that faith erect barriers to her? How does she personally interpret her faith in a meaningful way? What avenues of ministry are open to her? What impact does her ministry have on the work and theology of her denomination? What is the experience of Baptist women who are called to minister professionally? What has been the response of Baptists to their ministry?

Before these questions are addressed, a crucial word of explanation is in order: No writer in her right mind would dare to speak for all Baptists. Because Baptists are a collection of autonomous churches, there are always Baptist churches or Baptist members who will disagree, in part if not altogether, with a position taken by another Baptist. Therefore, this writer claims only to speak for Baptists as they are on record historically or as they may be generally characterized. Be assured that some Baptists somewhere may take exception with any statement made here. That is a part of the freedom of Baptists!

### **Women Claim Baptist Doctrine**

Whenever Baptist men have difficulty controlling Baptist women, Baptist theology is often the culprit. Baptist doctrine places great confidence in the believer. Women find affirmation and support in these doctrines. Rejecting the overriding authority of bishops and priests, Baptists from their beginning laid spiritual responsibility at the feet of believers. This emphasis on the individual's responsibility before God is a cornerstone of Baptist theology. Three doctrines in particular are reassuring to women who are called to

minister: priesthood of the believer, authority of scripture, and autonomy of the local church.

### **Priesthood of the Believer**

The excesses of the Anglican Church (and the Roman Catholic Church before it) greatly influenced the direction of the young group called Baptists. One of the Anglican practices that Baptists strongly resisted was the control the clergy exercised over the people. Baptists agreed with the apostle Peter and Martin Luther that individuals were directly responsible to God.<sup>2</sup> No mediator was needed. Each believer had the right and the responsibility to be her own priest—going directly to God in prayer, being accountable to him, and responding to him.

On the basis of this teaching, a woman is responsible for how she responds to God. She does not need permission from any other source. A minister, a church, or a family member cannot determine the call of a woman. Only she is accountable.

Traditional Baptist doctrine does not address leadership in Baptist churches, institutions, or conventions. Because men were usually the church leaders, many Baptists assume that only men can occupy the highest positions. Many Baptist ministers are taken by surprise when the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer is taken seriously by women in their congregations. Frequently a woman hears messages from the pulpit which insist that people should listen to and heed God's call. The message from the pulpit does not stipulate that only men can answer this call. Yet, when a woman responds to the call of God to minister, she sometimes is told by the same minister that God does not call women to preach. These women insist that they are merely taking the message of the minister seriously. They also point out that ministers are not being fair in their preaching if they make no gender differentiation in their message but only accept male respondents. The theology is being preached, but parts of it are intended only for men—an unspoken limitation.

Theological confusion is created in other arenas of church life as well. Baptist organizations nurture a woman's faith and train her to express it, but these groups want her to express her faith only in ways approved by her immediate culture. In the nineteenth century Baptist women were encouraged to give their testimony and lead in public prayer. Mission groups

educated women in mission needs, trained them how to meet those needs in various ways, gave them leadership training and experience, and eventually trained even young girls to learn the same skills. Today women continue to be trained in these methods. Churches devote much time to training their young women and teaching the stewardship of using one's gifts with an unspoken understanding that women will know which ones they cannot use in the church. When Baptist women choose to claim the full message of the church and use the church's fine training in ways that violate the unspoken message, the women's motives are usually questioned. This problem is not new; it has been with Baptists for over a century and still confuses women.

In Baptist doctrine stressing the priesthood of the believer, the term *believer* is not gender specific. In theory, a believer should respond positively to the call of God, whatever that task may be. Obviously this doctrine is a potent ally of Baptist women. Baptist practices, however, have usually assumed that a call to ministry leadership was the domain of men only. Doctrine as it is stated and doctrine as it is practiced therefore clash.

### **Authority of Scripture**

Baptists, like other Christians, observed the abuses and fallibilities of the human religious authorities before them. Rather quickly Baptists made it clear that their authority would be scripture. For guidance on matters in question, Baptists ask: "What does the scripture teach?"

Since biblical translation and interpretation have been done predominantly by men, biblical materials could only reflect language and meaning as men saw it. Most men were sure that the scripture clearly taught that men should lead and women should follow. As women became more literate and more biblically informed, they discovered that some scripture clearly affirmed women's call to ministry. In their study of scripture, women found affirmation for their call to ministry. Scripture was *their* authority.

Using scripture as their authority, women claimed the call to ministry. Using scripture as their authority, opponents claimed that women could not be called to minister. Since the early 1970s the Southern Baptist Convention has made several attempts to use scripture to limit the roles of women in church life. The most blatant action was passage of a curiously reasoned resolution at the annual meeting in 1984 which states that those Baptists

present recognized the authority of scripture in all matters of faith and practice:

. . . [that] The New Testament enjoins all Christians to proclaim the gospel . . . ; [that] 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) . . . ; [that] The Scriptures attest to God's delegated order of authority . . . [that] 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 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); . . . 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.<sup>3</sup>

No wonder Baptist women are sometimes confused!

### **Autonomy of the Local Church**

As a lifelong Baptist, this author is convinced that the invisible inscription above the pulpit of every Baptist church is, "No one can tell us what to do!" That attitude can be quite frustrating at times, yet it expresses a crucial Baptist doctrine. As the believer is responsible directly to God, so each

church is accountable only to God. There is no Baptist hierarchy to make Baptist churches conform to any practice. Of course, Baptist organizations have ways of bringing pressure on local churches, but ultimately a Baptist congregation can do as it pleases and still call itself Baptist. The autonomy of the local church means that some Baptist churches ordain and employ women as ministers, while other Baptist churches adamantly denounce the practice as heresy. Baptist doctrine assures each church of that authority. Autonomy is a unique freedom that Baptists treasure.

For a woman called to ministry, Baptist autonomy can be both a liability and an asset. Local autonomy means that no one is capable of making a church place a woman in a leadership position. On the other hand, it means that the only people who will make that decision, her church, are the people who know her well. Some churches that have reservations about women doing ministry have no qualms about Ms. X whom they know. So they ordain her. Although they may never hire her or any other woman, they will proudly ordain her. The woman needs only the approval of her congregation to become an ordained minister. No hierarchical approval beyond her church is necessary.

Local autonomy does not protect a woman and her supporters from opposition within the national convention or from area churches. Male leaders opposed to women in ministry argue that in spite of Baptist doctrines, only men can lead since Jesus had only men among the twelve disciples. Some Baptists insist that public ministry is not womanly. Two nineteenth-century Baptist leaders, A. T. Robertson and John A. Broadus, were outspoken in their opposition to women speaking in mixed assemblies.<sup>4</sup> In that era women were expected to lead only with their influence, their purity, and their piety. They could never be the figures that represented God. This idea has deep roots in Christianity. Augustine taught that man by himself was the image of God; but woman alone could not be in God's image.<sup>5</sup> Medieval churchmen were afraid that women's biological cycles would contaminate the altar. That fear in its many forms has not yet been obliterated.

In this century the old fears are topped with new layers of fear. The fear that Christianity will become more feminine and less masculine haunts some Baptists. Women's sexuality continues to be a major obstacle. And ministry is still viewed as a man's domain, although nurturing, which is the essence of ministry, is perceived in our culture as a feminine characteristic.

Since Baptists began four hundred years ago, the men-only viewpoint of leadership has dominated Baptist life, inhibiting many women from even considering aspiring to the more powerful positions in their churches and denomination. At the same time a few women have claimed the doctrines Baptists taught as valid for women as well. These women prepared for ministry and sought, many times without success, to be professional ministers. The impediment to ministry for Baptist women has been Baptist culture, not Baptist theology.

Baptist doctrine is quite liberating for women. As Edna Snows said in 1978 in a letter to the editor of the Georgia Baptist paper, *The Christian Index*, "If the gospel, the good news, does not free women from bondage . . . , it is not good news for women."<sup>6</sup>

### **Ministry for Baptist Women**

Because of Baptist doctrine and in spite of persistent opposition, Baptist women find effective ways to minister within Baptist circles. Their contributions have been prevalent in the areas of missions, education, and denominational activities and through their local church ministries.

#### **Missions**

The greatest contribution Baptist women have made to ministry in the Baptist denomination is in the area of missions. From prayer groups to the mission fields, Baptist women have been keenly interested in evangelizing the heathen. Mary Webb of Boston formed the Boston Female Society in 1800, gathering Congregational and Baptist women together to pray for and give financial support to missions. Webb's society was the first mission society in America. During the next few years she was instrumental in encouraging the formation of similar societies in other states.<sup>7</sup> In the meantime Ann Judson sailed to India in 1812 with her husband, Adoniram. Their pleas to Baptists in the United States prompted Mary Webb's society to send money immediately. The Judsons' companion, Luther Rice, returned to America to secure more funds. As a result of Rice's work and the Judsons' repeated requests from the mission field, Baptists in America formed their first national convention, commonly known as the Triennial Convention, primarily for the purpose of supporting missionaries like the Judsons. Their commitment to missions has shaped Baptists. Women have shaped missions.



As Baptist churches were forming in greater numbers during the nineteenth century, men assumed the responsibility of hiring pastors and conducting the business of the church; women assumed the responsibility of missions education and support. Offerings were usually once- or twice-a-year events, often targeted to a time when money was plentiful, such as harvest time. One large contribution was made once a year. However, women had no income except perhaps the money kept in the sugar bowl from the sale of butter and eggs. Women could make no large contributions, so they decided to bring regular offerings of nickels and dimes from their sugar bowls to each meeting. To the astonishment of many, the regular small offerings of the women often exceeded the single large offering of the men. Gradually the women's method of giving became the accepted method for Baptists.

The nickels and dimes of the women from several states combined to provide steady financial support for missionaries serving in remote lands. Meanwhile the men appointed missionaries and controlled the mission boards. But Baptist women, black and white, were the backbone of financial support and missions education.<sup>8</sup>

Missions support improved as people were more informed. Therefore missions education grew in its importance. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, women were busy providing and improving missions education. Women wrote and published materials about mission work around the world. Groups of women, girls, and young children were organized to learn about, pray for, and give to missions.

Women led these groups and trained new leaders. Mission organizations in Baptist churches have been predominantly, if not solely, led by women. As they gathered and taught mission information and encouraged members to pray and give money to missions, women in large numbers ministered within Baptist circles. Their ministry in missions support and education is valued but is often taken for granted.

For women, the missions were far away and also in their own backyards. Missionaries working in the United States also needed support. Native-American work often received strong support from Baptist mission societies. Local needs were also recognized. Histories of churches and mission organizations document repeatedly the community needs being met by various women's groups. Aid societies for uneducated girls, poor mothers, immigrant families, older citizens, or homeless men were common, especially in cities. Social ministries became a crucial part of missions for Baptist women. Many

of these ministries were close enough for women to become personally involved in the work. Baptist women have been and continue to be involved in missions at several levels. The Baptist story of missions is a powerful story of the commitment of women.

Although the pastor's wife is held in high esteem, the woman in Baptist life who occupies the highest rung of the women's spiritual ladder is the missionary, especially a foreign missionary. For most Baptists there is no more noble goal for a Baptist woman than to be a foreign missionary, and Baptist women are proud of their sisters who have served or presently serve on mission fields. A married female missionary is often expected to serve as homemaker and active church member, cultivating the national women through women's groups. Single female missionaries are appointed to a specific task in fields such as medicine or education. However, it is not unusual for women to find they are needed for many other missionary tasks. Retiring female missionaries are known to complain that tasks they routinely perform on the mission field are frowned upon or prohibited in Baptist churches in the United States. For some women, being a missionary is more liberating professionally than working in a Baptist church in the United States.

Initially, Baptists did show discomfort with the role of women on the mission field. In the nineteenth century the Black Foreign Mission Convention paid both husband and wife salaries but sent the money to the husband. White Baptists were reluctant to appoint single women whom the boards viewed as defenseless.

In spite of obstacles, women repeatedly applied for mission work abroad and in the United States. Ann Judson and Henrietta Shuck blazed the trail for Baptists in foreign missions in the first half of the nineteenth century. Joanna P. Moore, a white Baptist, was highly regarded by black Baptists for her work among freed men and women, helping them in various practical ways to meet the new challenges of freedom. A letter from Lottie Moon in China inspired Southern Baptist women to increase their giving to foreign missions. Emma B. DeLaney of the National Baptist Convention led mission work in Liberia. Isabel Crawford was a spunky, talented American Baptist missionary who worked in Oklahoma among the Kiowa Indians in 1893.

The issue of women's roles on the mission field became a matter of concern that was addressed in some Baptist state newspapers. Some writers

suggested that since woman was largely responsible for bringing sin into the world, she should do all she could to remove it. Working from a more positive viewpoint, many women's mission societies decided to use their financial clout. When one mission board showed reluctance to appoint single women as missionaries, some societies began to specify that their monies be used for the support of female missionaries. The mission board got the message. Women were then appointed with greater frequency and were assured of financial support by the board. The acceptance of women as career missionaries was given strong support by the women's mission societies.

The role of a missionary is the most familiar and most accepted professional role for Baptist women in ministry. For Baptist women in general, ministry has been and still is largely centered in missions: missions support, missions education, and career mission work.

### *Education*

Teaching is perhaps the most common ministry of Baptist women. Sunday school teachers in Baptist churches are predominantly women. The faculty of Vacation Bible Schools (short-term summer programs) is staffed overwhelmingly by women. Most Baptists agree that Baptist churches could not function if the women withdrew their services. Women are the backbone of the educational programs of Baptist churches. In many cases men are in decision-making positions and women are carrying out the work. With few exceptions these women are happy and content to do the work. Many women have a strong sense of call and ministry regarding their work in the church and receive much satisfaction from it. There is no question that they make valuable contributions to the work of the church.

Outside the church Baptist women find professional teaching opportunities in denominational institutions. With the explosion of church-funded schools in the nineteenth century many women, especially single women, found respectability, income, and a sense of ministry in teaching. The proliferation of girls' schools at all levels gave women many teaching opportunities and a few administrative ones. Since women were so adept at molding the "plastic minds of the young," as one Virginia writer put it, women were allowed to teach girls at all levels as well as young boys.<sup>9</sup>

Eventually Baptist women became involved in several levels of education: the girls' schools, coeducational schools, schools in the mountains of

Appalachia, schools in the villages of South America, women's colleges, coeducational colleges, and eventually seminaries.<sup>10</sup> A few women served as educational administrators. A notable leader in education was Nannie H. Burroughs, a National Baptist, who in 1901 stunned an assembly of black Baptist leaders when she proposed a school for black women. When black Baptists did not provide the funds, she raised the money to purchase land in Washington, D.C. In 1907 she announced to the National Baptist Convention that she had the land and needed fifty thousand dollars to build and launch the school. National Baptists did not have that kind of money and discouraged her efforts. Booker T. Washington told her that the nation's capital was not a good location. Burroughs believed that the border state location was indeed the best location. Although men gave no support, women believed in Burroughs' proposal, providing funds and encouragement—as was their pattern in educational matters.<sup>11</sup> She raised the money, and the school that opened in 1909 was known as the National Trade and Professional School for Women and Girls.<sup>12</sup>

For some women, teaching was simply a good career. For many others, the career was accompanied by a sense of ministry. Considering the low wages and long hours common in the field, ministry it was.

### *Denominational Activities*

As early as 1886, Baptist women were providing literature for Sunday schools; the women in Baltimore formed a literature department.<sup>13</sup> Teaching people in the local churches about the programs and needs on the mission fields and being involved in the work on various mission fields prompted women to design, write, and publish their own materials. Mission leaders needed literature giving missions information. Women teaching inner city or migrant girls to read wanted to use Bible study materials.<sup>14</sup> Publishing missions materials became the responsibility of the women. Women such as Helen Barrett Montgomery traveled to foreign countries where Baptists were involved in evangelistic work and wrote inspiring books about the work and needs there. Women such as Annie Armstrong produced materials on missions organizations. Missions education was a field ripe for women's talents and interests.

Denominational ministry outside women's groups has been more difficult for women. A common path taken by the denominational professional woman is movement from local church staff to state work to the staff of a

denominational agency. As early as 1882 the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) authorized its boards to appoint a “competent woman” to coordinate and strengthen the work of the women’s committees in various states.<sup>15</sup> At the time there was tension in the convention over the woman-suffrage movement, and some feared a woman leader would face opposition. The “competent woman” was never employed. At that time the Foreign Mission Board and Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention were paying the heads of their agencies while Annie Armstrong worked without pay as the head of Woman’s Missionary Union. After eighteen years she was pressed to accept a salary, although some in the convention were appalled that Miss Armstrong might commercialize her services by accepting pay and thereby “dim her glory.”<sup>16</sup> However, Una R. Lawrence, mission study editor at the Home Mission Board of the SBC in 1926-1947, made it clear that “the pay you can afford to make will have much to do with the time I can give to the work.”<sup>17</sup>

Women in the American Baptist Convention have found more opportunities for denominational involvement at upper levels than have women in the Southern Baptist or National Baptist conventions. Helen Barrett Montgomery was elected president of the Northern (now American) Baptist Convention in 1921. Two black Baptist conventions have had women serve in denominational positions other than women’s groups: In 1990 a woman served as the executive director of the Sunday School Publishing Board of the National Baptist Convention, Inc., and in the same year a woman headed the Congress of Christian Education in the Progressive National Baptist Convention.<sup>18</sup> In the Southern Baptist Convention the president of the Woman’s Missionary Union was not included as a member of the Executive Committee of the convention until 1953. Among Southern Baptists only two women have been elected to convention offices: Marie Mathis and Mrs. Carl Bates; they were elected as vice president in 1963 and 1976 respectively. To date, neither the Southern Baptist Convention nor the National Baptist Convention has elected women presidents.

One of the best denominational employers for Southern Baptist women has been the Woman’s Missionary Union (WMU). From their organization in 1888 until after the turn of the century, the early officers of WMU declined pay. Like Miss Armstrong, they considered their work an offering to missions. Eventually professional specialists like Juliette Mather were hired in the 1920s to promote missions education. The result was an immediate

leap in WMU membership which soon required more attention from central headquarters and therefore more professional workers. Today WMU employs more than two hundred women.<sup>19</sup> For many women a career with a state WMU or the national WMU office has been an effective route to careers in other Southern Baptist arenas.

In recent years a serious decline of women in leadership positions in SBC agencies and institutions has occurred. In 1952, 14 percent of these leadership positions were filled by women. Thirty-two years later, in 1984, after a decade of emphasis on women's issues, women held 1 percent fewer leadership positions than in 1952. North Carolina's experience illustrates the serious decline in the numbers of women in denominational ministry. Between 1950 and 1980 the percentage of female directors of missions in North Carolina fell from 15 to 5 percent, and women ministers of youth and ministers of music dropped from 68 to 16 percent. Between 1950 and 1981 the percentage of female campus ministers in that state plunged from 63 to 7 percent.<sup>20</sup>

The area of personnel that suffered the greatest decline in women employees nationwide by 1971 was the Book Store Division of the Baptist Sunday School Board. In the two-year period between 1969 and 1971, the percentage of female bookstore managers fell from 71 to 47 percent.<sup>21</sup> By 1993 the percentage had fallen further to 19 percent.<sup>22</sup> It is becoming more difficult for Southern Baptist women to serve in denominational positions. The "takeover leadership," a fundamentalist group of Southern Baptists who took control of the convention in 1979, does not approve of women serving in positions of authority.

Chaplaincy is another sphere of ministry for Baptist women. Some women know early that their call is to the chaplaincy, and their training is targeted to prepare them for that ministry. Other ordained women enter chaplaincy when they cannot find pastoral positions in churches.

Baptist women work in a variety of denominational positions, many of them clerical or support services. To many these jobs may seem insignificant to a study of ministry. However, to some women these are not merely nine-to-five jobs; they are crucial forms of ministry. A survey undertaken in 1978 of women employees of SBC agencies revealed that 38 percent felt God led them to work for him in that job. Sixty-eight percent felt called by God to do the work they were doing. The same survey uncovered substantial

dissatisfaction with the ability of women to make a career advance in SBC agencies.<sup>23</sup>

A word must also be said about the unpaid denominational career of some Baptist women, such as some mission society presidents. These women have given their full attention to denominational work without a salary. For a season or two or more, they have been non-salaried professionals. Much of the mission work of Baptists is indebted to the millions of hours volunteered by women across the nation. Many a Baptist woman has devoted a large portion of her time to missions organization, missions education, or missions involvement. Baptists' strength in missions overseas and at home is a direct result of the volunteer ministry of thousands of women.

### *Local Church Ministry*

One of the earliest roles of public ministry for Baptist women was as the minister's wife. Leonard Sweet listed the "partner" role as one of the typical roles of ministers' wives in the nineteenth century. Sweet described the various ways these women were authentic partners in the ministries of their husbands. Baptist women, he noted, commonly prayed and spoke publicly. Some Baptist ministers' wives energetically used their abilities and influence in evangelism and in the church. Sweet saw them as the forerunners of today's clergy couple.<sup>24</sup>

Some wives of ministers today feel called to be partners in ministry. All wives of ministers do not feel a call to such a partnership, nor should they. However, those who do sense that call and respond to it need to be recognized as women in ministry. Evidence of the contemporary partner role emerged in surveys done by the Baptist Sunday School Board of the SBC. The Research Services Department surveyed ministers' wives in 1976 and ministers' families in 1978. Over three-fourths of the wives felt called by God to be pastors' wives. Twenty-three percent of them described their role more specifically as "set apart." One-fourth of the wives assessed their involvement in the ministry of their husband as a teamworker, sharing in his ministry. Over a third of them thought wives should be trained for their special responsibilities.<sup>25</sup> Some pastors' wives have earned seminary degrees. The pastor's wife who follows the partner model is not listed on the church staff and receives no salary, but ministry is her career.

Salaried positions open to women have not been abundant or well paid. In the nineteenth century, women began to be employed as organist or music director at a salary of perhaps one hundred dollars a year.<sup>26</sup> Vocational options in the local churches continued to be limited well into this century. Data indicate that women initially entered church positions with low pay and few benefits. As the salary and benefits rose, women had fewer professional opportunities. In the early 1970s as the women's liberation movement was stirring, Norman Letsinger studied the movement's implication for the Southern Baptist Convention. His findings reveal an erosion of women's leadership in non-pastoral church staff positions between the 1940s and the 1970s. Women had often served in the positions of educational director or music director during the 1940s and 1950s. As more education was demanded and better pay provided, more men became interested in positions formerly held by women. As men in increasing numbers filled the positions, the titles were changed to minister of education and minister of music. Secretarial assistance, greater fringe benefits, better salaries, ordination, and opportunities to preach, which women usually were denied, were usually provided for men in the same job, although women's tenure on the job tended to be longer.<sup>27</sup>

Today the non-pastoral church staff positions in which women minister range from minister of education, minister of youth, minister of children, minister of activities, or minister of music to church hostess to secretary to counselor. However, in many churches the most powerful employee may be a woman, for the most influential person in the congregation is the church secretary, according to one survey.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps this view arises from the extensive knowledge church secretaries usually acquire about the workings of the church and the power that knowledge gives.

### *Preaching*

Writing for the *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* in 1958, Juliette Mather said, "Southern Baptist women do not preach and are not pastors."<sup>29</sup> Mather was speaking the truth in 1958, but it had not always been so. Baptist foremothers in seventeenth-century England preached. During the first Great Awakening in the late eighteenth century in this country, three Baptist women preached in Sturbridge, Massachusetts. And few preachers anywhere matched the fire and zeal of Martha Marshall of the eighteenth century. She was even jailed in



Windsor, Connecticut, for preaching and exhorting. Leonard Sweet said that she launched the southern tradition of women preachers among Separate Baptists.<sup>30</sup> Freewill Baptists in 1815 were the first Baptists to license women ministers in America.<sup>31</sup> Even though Baptist churches gladly heard women evangelists in the nineteenth century, there was debate within the Baptist community about the propriety of women speaking in public.

The doctrine of usefulness as taught by the Puritans and later by Charles Finney compelled women to use the gifts God had given them. Baptist and Methodist women were encouraged to tell of their conversions and lead public prayers. In fact, many Baptist women first learned to speak in public in the prayer meetings and class meetings of their churches. But Baptists were slow to ordain women.

American Baptists ordained Edith Hill in 1894.<sup>32</sup> By 1925, dozens of American Baptist women were ordained.<sup>33</sup> Lansing Burrows, president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1914, noted that the idea of ordaining women had excited many Christians and had significant support.<sup>34</sup> But the support must not have been too significant among Baptists in the South, since it was another fifty years before a woman was ordained by Southern Baptists. In 1964 Addie Davis was the first Southern Baptist woman to be ordained into the ministry, but she could find no Southern Baptist church to pastor. In 1972 Druceillard Fordham became the Southern Baptist Convention's first woman pastor and also its first black ordained female pastor. In 1979 the Black Ministers Conference of Baltimore and Vicinity admitted women preachers for the first time, which Leroy Fitts called a "shocking sign of change in the role of women in black Baptist life."<sup>35</sup>

Since the early 1970s, increased numbers of Southern Baptist and National Baptist women have made clear their call to preach and have prepared theologically to do so, but only a few have found churches willing to call them. As of January 1993, National Baptists had 311 women in pastoral positions (91 as pastors, 220 as associates), with 110 of them ordained. In 1995 there were 225 ordained women in the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. As of April 1995, American Baptists had 831 ordained women, but 1,398 in ministry positions; Southern Baptists in 1995 had 1,130 ordained women, with 60 serving as pastors and 90 as associates.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, one woman's quip is all too true: "When I was a child I wanted to grow up to be a preacher. Then I grew up and decided I'd rather be a Baptist."<sup>37</sup>

Letsinger drew these conclusions regarding the Southern Baptist Convention: (1) the status of women in Southern Baptist circles is considerably below that of men; (2) many Southern Baptists have a limited view of the role women should fulfill in society and the church; and (3) many Southern Baptists have attitudes that are in direct opposition to the goals of the WLM [Women's Liberation Movement].<sup>38</sup>

While some strides for women were made in the SBC during the 1970s and early 1980s (with an increased number of women serving as trustees of agencies, employed as theology faculty, or reaching new career heights), the fundamentalist takeover of the SBC during the 1980s severely slowed or reversed those trends. The 1984 resolution (referred to earlier) discloses the current leadership's view of women's limited role in religious institutions. Historically, the 1970s and early 1980s may well be the peak period of ordained women's involvement in the SBC. Women are given more opportunities to minister in the American Baptist Churches USA (formerly the American Baptist Convention). The National Baptist Convention, Inc., remains reluctant to provide women a full forum for ministry. As noted above, both National Baptists and American Baptists employ more women for ministry than they ordain.

### *Influence on Theology*

As discouraging as Letsinger's findings are, women and liberation theology are making some impact on the theology of Baptists. Those Baptists who see all authority resting in men are not open to the issues which concern women or to the theology taught by women. On the other hand, there are some Baptists who are listening and changing. For those attentive Baptists, women are beginning to influence theology. Evelyn Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1900* provides a fine discussion of the influence of black Baptist women on the theology of their churches.

Like other Protestant women, some Baptist women find the solely male interpretations of God theologically limiting and oppressing. Like their Protestant sisters, some Baptist women find inclusive images, language, and theology to be liberating. As already noted, few Baptist women serve in pulpits where their theology can regularly be heard. Various Baptist women's groups do provide opportunities for women to hear each other speak or preach,

to participate in inclusive worship services, and to share their theology. In small, but not insignificant, ways Baptist women have been influencing Baptist theology. As noted early in this article, Baptist theology is liberating. Therefore, Baptist women are challenging Baptists to practice the theology Baptists claim. That influence has come primarily from the following areas.

### *Literature*

Because Baptist women have had few public forums in which to speak theologically to both men and women, their influence through public speaking remains limited. Their greater impact has been through their writing and publishing ministries. Women who wrote the early missions materials affirmed the use of women's gifts and were models of the professional use of women's abilities. Writing Sunday School and mission study curricula gave women opportunities to interpret or focus biblical materials in more inclusive ways. In some cases women used those opportunities to re-examine what it means to be human or to be woman. Through their writing women have quietly had some impact on Baptist theology. One influence of Baptist women is subtle but powerful: their influence on the theology of the social gospel. As writers, women emphasized the nurturing ministries of Jesus as their model for meeting needs in their own communities. The social gospel which came under strong attack from many pulpits was no problem for women whose mission interests and literature affirmed it as a crucial part of the gospel. While white Baptist pastors often portrayed personal salvation as the solution to all of society's problems, the women did not.<sup>39</sup> The women understood evangelism in more holistic terms; the person's physical and social needs must also be addressed. Salvation was of utmost importance, but as the women examined Christ's ministry they discovered that Jesus' ministry also was attentive to other needs.

Literature which identified needs and gave specific ways of meeting those needs influenced how those readers interpreted the gospel in their communities. As early as 1908 Baptist women saw medical missions as a natural model of Christ's ministry. The women insisted that treating people medically was a ministry in itself, not merely a bribe for evangelism.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the women believed that leading a community to be Christian in its beliefs and practices was more important than converting individuals to the Baptist faith. A belief in Christ could make a difference in every area of

society—its education, its laws, family life, the rights of others, and the needs of others.<sup>41</sup> This theology motivated the work of Baptists among the needy in the inner cities. Literature written and published by women was instrumental in shaping this theology and action.<sup>42</sup>

At publishing boards, as women became editors, the literature began to reflect some of their concerns. Family issues, inclusive language, scripture passages focusing on women, and contemporary illustrations reflecting women's interests became more frequent. Readers began to discover a Bible with more women than they had noticed before and a scripture which addressed issues of concern to women. Some readers objected to these new focuses, causing some publishing boards to move gingerly with the new trends.

### *Education*

In the 1970s Baptist colleges and seminaries responded to the women's movement by incorporating some Women in Religion courses into their curricula. Women theologians such as Molly Marshall at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, taught seminary students theology from a woman's perspective. Some professors incorporated more material related to women in their courses. Other professors acknowledged sensitivity to inclusive theology and inclusive language. In some institutions these sensitivities were isolated; in others they were institutional policies. As a result of growing fundamentalist control, these trends are now in reverse in Southern Baptist institutions. Molly Marshall was forced to resign in 1994.

Increasing numbers of women and men are being exposed to more inclusive theologies in some Baptist schools. Some students resist the exposure, while others clearly have their consciousness raised. As the influenced students leave schools to enter positions of leadership, they carry with them a new understanding of misogynistic interpretations of scripture, and a new appreciation of inclusive theologies, of an androgynous God, and of the need to affirm and support female leadership.

### *Denominational Support*

Organizations which support women in ministry have emerged in several Baptist conventions. The Spiritual Life Commission Women Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention, Inc., tracks and encourages their female

ministers. Women in Ministry of the American Baptist Churches USA provides similar services. In July 1995 Women in Ministry of the Southern Baptist Convention disassociated itself from the SBC and changed its name to Baptist Women in Ministry. Through these organizations ordained women bring feminine influence on theology to a wider audience. In these various small audiences, Baptist women and men are hearing women ministers call attention to biblical passages that focus on individual women, feminine metaphors, or issues of interest to women. Obscure stories such as the courage of the Hebrew midwives in Egypt (Exod. 1:15-22) are used by women ministers to broaden understanding of Hebrew history, women's role in it, and God's actions through the lives of Hebrew women. Women ministers preach a Christology that emphasizes the nurturing, compassionate, ministering Christ. Baptist women give new focus to the stories about Jesus' encounters with women, the significance of those stories in first-century Jewish culture, Jesus' use of feminine metaphors, and his concern for the oppressed in society. In contrast, male Baptist preachers often favor Paul's teachings over Jesus's stressing authority of men in the home and church.

In the last decade the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention has become more chauvinistic. The moderate wing of the denomination has formed the Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Both of these groups have listened to the concerns of women in ministry and have responded more positively to them. Both groups are careful to include women in planning, programming, and worship and in theological positions.

In all Baptist groups it is difficult to assess fully the impact of the female missions' leadership on the denomination's theology. It is also difficult to deny their influence. Baptists' keen interest in missions is largely due to the work and education of women's groups.

### *Women and the Baptist Experience*

The gap between Baptist doctrine and Baptist practice creates tension for some Baptist women. In recent years some young women considering ministerial careers among Baptists have determined that the gap was too great for them to bridge. These women have chosen to leave the Baptist denomination for those denominations more hospitable to ministering women. Consequently, Baptists have lost some of their brightest and best-educated young women. The denomination that nurtured them, reared them, and invested

significantly in their training has great difficulty finding a place in its theology for women to exercise gifts of ministry. American Baptists and Freewill Baptists encourage women in ministry more than Southern Baptists and National Baptists do. But in none of these Baptist groups do women occupy posts of leadership in proportion to their membership in the denomination. For example, the average black church has three times as many female members as male members. Yet leadership is overwhelmingly male. Once more, Baptists need to hear the address Nannie Burroughs gave to National Baptists in 1900, "How the Sisters Are Hindered from Helping."

Remarkably many Baptist women have found effective and varied ways of ministering. The denomination which in earlier days allowed women to be preachers and deacons, then retreated from that openness and severely restricted women is very slowly and reluctantly coming to terms with the new roles and expectations of women who take their Baptist faith seriously. BH&HS

## Notes

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6 Letter to the editor, *The Christian Index*, 30 November 1978, 12

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11 See Higginbotham, ch. 6, for a more complete discussion

12 Owen D. Pelt and Ralph Lee Smith, *The Story of the National Baptists* (New York: Vantage Press, 1960), 142-44

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- 21 Norman H. Letsinger, "The Women's Liberation Movement: Implications for Southern Baptists" (Th.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1973), 157
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- 24 Leonard I. Sweet, *The Minister's Wife: Her Role in Nineteenth-Century American Evangelism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 115. See also ch. 8
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- 31 Janette Hassey, *No Time for Silence: Evangelical Women in Public Ministry Around the Turn of the Century* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 56
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- 37 Carolyn Weatherford, "Shaping of Leadership Among Southern Baptist Women," *Baptist History and Heritage* (July 1987) 18
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- 39 A distinction is made here between white and black Baptist pastors since black Baptist ministers have more frequently preached a holistic gospel, believing that personal salvation should be evidenced in meeting crucial social needs
- 40 "Medical Missions," *Our Mission Fields* (July 1908) 27
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