At its yearly convention, the largest Protestant denomination in America passed a statement opposing abortion, pornography, homosexuality — and female pastors. For Southern Baptist leaders, these issues hang together. They assume that on their side of the culture war, Christians must oppose these practices as a piece. It is only the liberal, secular, or religiously compromised people on the other side who think differently. The press has also tended to present the issue in these polarized terms.

For many religious conservatives engaged in the culture war, women’s ordination has become a symbol of the pervasive influence of liberal, feminist, postmodern American culture. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) adamantly opposes the ordination of women as pastors, for it is here, they believe, that the values of secular culture are encroaching upon their territory, posing an immediate threat to their identity as a religious force standing against the evils of contemporary culture.

Sadly, neither the SBC nor any other religious denomination has the power to cure America of its toxic, violent, and sexually perverse entertainment culture. But the Southern Baptist leadership does seem to have the influence necessary to clear their pulpits of women. In doing so, they believe they are resisting the same cultural mentality that blithely feeds on images of violence and pornography, and has abandoned nearly all sense of sexual restraint.

Such a packaging of cultural ingredients is forced — and false. It is ahistorical and, we believe, unbiblical. The cultural and religious landscape is considerably more complex and diverse than this picture allows. When the SBC leadership hears the word “feminism,” they think of the secular feminism of the 1960s and its questioning of the institution of marriage and general abandonment of traditional sexual morality.

But a concern for women’s equality preceded the 1960s in America. The women’s movement of the nineteenth century fought for women’s equal participation in democracy and won, and it did so within a traditional moral framework. The early feminists promoted sexual purity and did not endorse homosexuality; many were biblically oriented Christians.

More tellingly, many Protestant — even “fundamentalist” — denominations in the nineteenth century recognized the gifts of women and ordained them to serve in various ministerial roles, including that of pastor. They did not do so because of secular pressures (women didn’t even have the right to vote at that time), nor did they reject the Bible as fully authoritative. They simply recognized these women as equipped by God to teach, preach, and lead.

Today a significant number of evangelical churches and leaders support the biblical legitimacy of women in pastoral leadership roles — while staunchly and consistently affirming the primacy and divine authority of the Bible. They take men and women to be equally created in God’s image, to be equally redeemed in Christ, to stand on equal ground before God, and to be equally gifted for service by the Holy Spirit. At the same time, they squarely affirm Christian tradition concerning the norms of heterosexual marriage, the sanctity of human life, and sexual fidelity. They recognize the created differences between the sexes without inferring that these differences confer on men privilege and authority that women are denied.

The few passages in the New Testament that seem to restrict women in leadership are properly interpreted, in light of the whole teaching of Scripture, as having direct application to an ancient, patriarchal culture in which women were not as well educated, respected, or legally recognized as they are today. Scripture makes similar allowances for slavery, but does not advocate slavery as a morally acceptable institution. In fact, many of the Christians who opposed slavery in America in the nineteenth century also supported women’s rights.

We hope that the watching world will realize that biblical Christianity has a bigger and brighter scope than that contained within the SBC’s resolutions.

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