Southern Baptists and Women in Ministry

Reflections on some tacit rules.

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The subject of Southern Baptists and women in ministry is complex. What follows is my opinion and interpretation of some of that complexity. Having been associated with this discussion for many years, I am cognizant of my subjectivity. My hope is that what I can add as an involved bystander will provide some clarity for those both inside and outside the workings of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).

My association with this discussion

The only church life I have known has been Baptist. My early rearing was in an SBC-related church. Mine was a conservative church upbringing; I was given a Scofield Reference Bible when I was ordained.

My theological education and vocational practice is that of a Baptist, Christian ethicist. After my seminary work, I was employed with SBC institutions specifically to address social and ethical issues. With master of divinity and Ph.D. degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (SWBTS) in Fort Worth, I worked for more than three and a half years in Nashville, on the staff of the Christian Life Commission (CLC), now the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, dealing with social, ethical, and moral issues.

I was invited in 1981 to join the SWBTS faculty in the Department of Christian Ethics, serving until 1998 when I became part of the staff of the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT) as Coordinator of Theological Education. In January 2000 I returned to classroom work as the T. B. Maston Professor of Christian Ethics at Logsdon School of Theology, Hardin-Simmons University, in Abilene, Texas.

Some tacit rules underlying the discussion

In an ordered society, there must be rules of operation. Many are written down and related orally or by other means of communication. Tacit, implied but unspoken, rules also underlie the operating procedure for every system and institution. Tacit rules may have more impact than those written or spoken. Perhaps as an ethicist I have become aware of some of these at work in SBC life.

I want here to lay out clearly what I mean by tacit rules in SBC life. I will rehearse some of these tacit rules (in italics) and follow each with some interpretation (prefaced with I) as to how these affect the matter of women in ministry in Southern Baptist life.

1. Southern Baptists and women in ministry is a simple issue with which to deal.

I: The scale of the debate demonstrates this is not so simple. All sorts of concerns find interface: the roles of women in society; what is the family; authority and interpretation of Christian scripture; the stewardship of power; Baptist polity; the calling and practice of Christian ministry.

2. Tacit rules remain unspoken.

I: Many tacit SBC rules have been there for generations; some have become more dominant in recent years. My perception is that many tacit rules are now written and spoken.

3. Tacit rules, by definition, do little harm.

I: Violence has been done to God’s children. Robert McAffee Brown in Religion and Violence considers violence to be abuse of personhood. This violence can be experienced as either overt or covert personal or institutional assault. My view is that most of the violence in the Baptist wars in the last decades has been of the covert variety.

4. Power is always evil.

I: Power is like fire; how it is used determines its goodness or badness. Unfortunately, too many people experience power in its negative expressions and, in turn, apply it as they have experienced it. Nor have Baptists done a lot of reflection on the ethics of power, especially with regard to institutional expressions. Rather than having some in-depth theological reflection, power tends to be used according to the dominant expression of power in the culture.

One of the things I have watched is that running throughout this exchange about women in ministry are those personalities who have an insatiable drive and need for power—to be able to have the say over decisions and people.

5. The majority is always right.

I: Baptists began and operated for a long time with a minority perspective, a necessity for survival. In recent decades, in becoming sometimes the majority religious perspective in many communities, there has been a loss of appreciation for diversity of opinion. Not as much sensitivity to the value of minority perspectives has been evident. It is ironic that the minority perspective in the Bible is usually the one where God is moving.

6. Men are the head of the house, the church, and of society.

I: This is a quite formative rule of Southern society. Not all Southerners supported slavery; but the practice did pervade the economy and the expression of church life. Power of position was important. The SBC eventually addressed slavery and racism, but a case can be made that much racism still exists. One area in which Anglo men cannot let go of their perceived threatened positions is with regard to women. In other words: Women are to keep quiet; they do not overshadow or embarrass men. Ironically, as Arkansas writer Shirley Abbott pointed out in her book, WomenFolks: Growing Up Down South, there is a deeper level of tacit understanding: Women still get things done; they do get men to do things in spite of a sometimes oppressive, Anglo, white male culture.

A curious expression of this deeper tacit understanding was in the news recently from the comment of one of the SBC leaders. Asked about his understanding of a man being the head of the house, he replied that when he and his wife married, they decided he would make all the major deci-
tions of the family and she would make the minor ones. So far, he added, “there have not been any major decisions.” Though humorous when actor-comedian William Bendix used that line many years ago, it has the tone of being disingenuous in the context of theological discussion.

7. Women really are not that important to the work of the kingdom of God.

I: If some of those in positions of church leadership really think they can do without the involvement of women, they should just disallow women’s participation in volunteer jobs and in the amount of monetary contributions they make to the life and mission of local churches and Christian efforts around the globe.

7. The pastor is the most important part of the life of a church.

I: Contemporary Baptists are living out what their ancestors fought against in the Reformation: a dichotomy between clergy and laypeople—a first class and second class in the church. A system of privilege and oppression, with some overtly conscious of it and others complicitous to it, has come into place in the church and in the institutional life of the SBC. Deference is sought and given to those who put themselves forward as clergy. Indeed, a clericalism has developed. We are dangerously close, in some quarters, to operating with a de facto kind of apostolic succession mentality among some pastors.

8. Keep the churches’ biblical and theological literacy level as low as possible.

I: Another SBC leader commented on the most recent “Baptist Faith and Message” revision prohibiting women from serving as pastors. “Clearly this is what the vast majority of Southern Baptists have believed and do believe on this issue. . . . The practice of our churches confirms this.”

I must say that practice does not equal what ought to be. The “oughts” of life are the ethical dimensions. Where people are, in more classical thought, is dealt with as morals (from the Latin mores, or what people customarily do). This is a kind of lowest-common-denominator approach to life.

Unfortunately, churches usually operate at or below the level of a pastor’s theological and biblical expertise. The congregation may rise, to a point; then plateau. Another pastor comes, and the church begins another cycle.

Over the years there has been a reduction in opportunities for lay education regarding Baptist history, foundations for mission work, applied Christianity, theology, or church polity. The call of the Christian life still requires reflection, interpretation, and application. Without some educational framework, particularly where there is room for good, Baptist dialogue, then lots of folks have succumbed to believing whatever their church leader tells them.

9. “I believe it; the Bible says it; that settles it.”

I: This is an almost cliché statement about the Bible. But the Bible has moved to being second to some people’s opinion on life. A not-so-subtle tendency has come among preacher types particularly to equate what they say as equivalent to what the Bible says. The operative hermeneutic in many sectors among Southern Baptists will support a group in place and perpetuate that group, a hermeneutic that can support one’s goals and means to those goals.

A cliché has been that “Baptists are a people of the Book.” My observation is that most Baptists are relatively illiterate about the Bible.

10. Southern Baptists all believe the same things and should practice, for example, the same worship styles.

I: The idea of unity in diversity is on the wane among Southern Baptists. I have seen that idea evolve into attempts to make a monolithic, everybody-will-believe-the-same, no-room-for-differences kind of infrastructure.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Southern Baptists disassociated themselves from J. Frank Norris, pastor of First Baptist Church, Fort Worth, and a Fundamentalist preacher of wide notoriety. Norris was an autocrat who maligned those who disagreed with him. In recent years, those who have reflected Norris’s theology have been welcomed into the SBC.

Of course, other tacit rules can be highlighted; these, however, have had particular formative influence on this discussion.

Impact on institutions

Much energy has been given to a “conservative resurgence” within the SBC. But the differing approaches known as conservative-Fundamentalist and conservative-Moderate have coexisted all along. The names have changed, but the approaches have been represented since the beginning.

On one hand, the conservative-Fundamentalist approach has a higher profile and has implemented those tacit rules named above with a fervor. Some Baptists, such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), have organized to place distance between themselves and the SBC. Some state convention organizations propose to maintain a closer public attachment to historic Baptist distinctives.

The Christian Life Commission dates its SBC structural origins to 1908 and has represented the more socially progressive edge of SBC life. My own experience was that it was held in contempt by many Southern Baptists because of some of its positions on social issues. For a few years after my time with the CLC the influence of the trustee changes were felt there. But, as one of the first agencies to be addressed by those who considered the trustees had not been conservative enough, in recent years the name was changed to the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

When I was part of the CLC, we were reminded regularly that we spoke to and not for Southern Baptists, the underlying supposition being that no Baptist could or should speak for another Baptist. The tone of the current expres-
sion projects more one of speaking for Southern Baptists.

In the late 1970s, when a tide of interest arose with regard to women in society, the denomination, and in the life of the churches, it drew the attention of agency executives. A “Consultation on Women” was sponsored by several agencies, meeting in 1978 in Nashville. One pattern that became plain was that a “good ol’ boy” system was in place. There was resistance to women having a more public role in Baptist life, but a willingness to study the idea. Some of that, no doubt, found favor because of the missionary women, like Annie Armstrong and Lottie Moon, who had provided strong leadership in the SBC’s history.

At about the same time, the Seminary Extension Department (SED) produced a new course dealing with women in society and church, written by Minette Drumwright. For a time, it was one of the SED’s bestsellers.

Both of these latter developments ebbed, however. Increasing pressure was brought on denominational agencies not to promote women in ministry.

The tacit rules were personified during my time at SWBTS. The number of women who came as students inclined toward a preaching ministry first increased, then began to decrease in apparent proportion to the amount of animosity toward these women. Some of it was vocal; most of it evident in overlooking of their giftedness.

For a few years I served as faculty sponsor to the group “Women in Ministry.” It provided a rallying point and a reflection focus for the few women who said they wanted to lead in pastoral ministry and in other forms of Christian service. The group went into decline, however. The longer I was at SWBTS, the fewer women I met who would say they wanted to be involved in a preaching ministry. Throughout those years the numbers of women students remained about the same percentage of the student body (18-20 percent). However, I think the numbers did change among those who sensed increasing resistance to their ministry taking the shape of pastoral work. As well, there appeared to be a change in the middle and later 1990s in the profiles of the women who came to SWBTS. They were generally less informed about Baptist history and women in the Bible, and some also resisted the idea of women in pastoral ministry.

During these latter years I think I saw more reflection of the tacit rules than ever. Less and less of a historical Baptist view showed through.

Yet another dynamic entered the picture. As the administrative dynamics of all SBC agencies began to be more trustee-centered, SWBTS felt the impact, too. This was particularly true after the trustees dismissed President Russell Dilday in 1994. Overt and covert overtures were made that plainly showed the atmosphere of the institution was not welcoming toward women who saw a preaching/pastoral ministry as their calling. One example involved the distribution of material produced by an organization supportive of Baptist women in ministry. The publication Folio began to be published some years before Dilday’s firing and was made available to a faculty person for distribution at SWBTS. A complaint was raised by a trustee—a woman—who considered it an inappropriate publication for students. Pressure was brought to restrict the publication’s distribution.

I hasten to add there were male students who saw women not as a threat but as fellow laborers, and that more laborers, not fewer, for the Lord’s harvest are needed. The faculty, though predominantly male, was essentially supportive of women’s ministry.

Over my seventeen years on the SWBTS faculty I observed that women were almost always the best students, perhaps because they knew better over the long years of education how to survive and to excel. I would like to think they took the task of academic preparation more seriously than did many of the men. I regularly did student interviews regarding calling. Consistently, women could give a clearer articulation of calling than men. I have surmised that men sometimes did not have to provide much in-depth reflection about calling. Women did, and could do so well.

**Where is this going?**

It is not likely the end of this debate is in sight. Whether the issue is who should serve as clergy, biblical interpretation, or polity, tacit rules will go on. Most will become increasingly articulated. If the interpretation that only men can proclaim the gospel from a pulpit becomes more entrenched, more women will go to other than SBC seminaries for their theological education. Many will move out of SBC denominational and local church practice as well and serve in ministry roles in other denominational frameworks.

In the early 1990s I had a conversation with a friend who had lived and moved widely in SBC circles. I asked, “Where is all of this movement going?” The friend’s reply: “The SBC will become increasingly socially irrelevant.” I agree. Many Baptists will go on believing and acting on the belief there really is a qualifiable and quantifiable difference between the words a man speaks and the acts done in the name of the gospel, even by saintly women. Where there might have been a point of conversation and pastoral ministry done with the larger culture, that point of contact will be lost.

The shift from a confessional posture to a creedal one—the antithesis of a Baptist approach—is nearly done. The pattern of operating from codices of behavior will continue. Annual revisions of statements like the “Baptist Faith and Message” are likely. These formularies will have the effect both of “holding territory and people” and “keeping people out.” The historic points of agreement, principally that of missions, are about broken down. Cooperative work that was widespread two decades ago is now strained. That tension will become more intense.
Increasingly, the SBC will promote a system of theological reflection and ethical practice that is more one of bondage than of freedom. The very nature of the gospel as Jesus proclaimed it comes into jeopardy.

One Woman’s View

A church historian discusses her perception of recent SBC actions.

INTERVIEW WITH ROSALIE BECK

Rosalie Beck, a church historian, has been a member of the faculty at Baylor University since 1984. Originally a scientist, she entered Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth following two years of ministry in South Vietnam before its capture by the Communists. She earned a master of divinity degree at SWBTS, majoring in church history and receiving the first Robert A. Baker Church History Award as the outstanding student in that field. She then earned her Ph.D. in religion at Baylor, and was asked to join the Baylor faculty following completion of her doctorate.

Priscilla Papers thought it would be helpful in this discussion of the Southern Baptist Convention and women to ask for her perspective on issues that are related to the recent changes to SBC faith statements.

What practical effect has the Southern Baptist Convention’s call for a wife to “submit graciously to the servant leadership of her husband” had?

Too little time has passed to quantify the effect of the 1998 amendment on Southern Baptists. From a study of church history, though, I reckon the effect will be gradual, but real. The emphasis in structuring homes will be on submission rather than on servant leadership. Whenever the “headship” scriptures get trotted out to support a hierarchical family structure, lip service is given to the role of the man, but the focus is on the submission of the woman.

While recognizing that real differences exist between men and women, using Scripture this way affirms the traditional view that women are inferior; therefore, they must be submissive. High-sounding rhetoric covers pages and pages of justification for a strong stance in favor of a strict hierarchical model, but the words boil down to God made men better than women. As youth grow up in a church with this teaching, they will accept it and create a hierarchical family structure.

Now the SBC says, “While both women and men are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture,” based on 1 Timothy 2:9-14.

Using this passage to justify restricting the pulpit to males highlights a major issue in the debate over what the differences between men and women mean before the Lord. A basic hermeneutic I learned at seminary was that you don’t base a major doctrine on a disputed passage, and this is certainly a disputed passage. I find it interesting that the committee chose not to include verse 15, in which you learn that women earn salvation by having children who grow to adulthood in the Lord. At least that is the “literal” interpretation of this verse.

Each fall I give the students in my “Women in Christian History” class a copy of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 from the CEV, and ask them to explain verse 15, which is the natural closure to the passage and the climax of verses 13 and 14. They hem and haw and finally come up with good allegorical interpretations, because they know salvation is not based on making babies. Interpreters through the years have played with this verse to make sense of it. Verse 15 is crucial to this passage, but the SBC committee left it out. To me, that makes the entire passage problematic—not just because of the committee’s sexist interpretation, but because the passage itself needs careful study and interpretation. You don’t base doctrine on unclear, disputed, strange Scripture.

Furthermore, everyone ignores or de-emphasizes what doesn’t fit with their personal theology and stresses what does, even when reading the Bible. In our world, women wear jewelry and don’t braid their hair; but those are not issues in most SBC churches. Those injunctions can be safely ignored. The injunction for women to keep silent, verse 11, is also ignored in Sunday school, children’s programs, and music programs. Only when speech is seen to carry authority, as from the pulpit, is it restricted to men—by this interpretation.

I often ask my classes what would happen to the local church if women took injunctions to silence seriously.

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