

Voices: Texas Baptists celebrate unity in diversity on women in ministry

May 31, 2023

As associate executive director and acting executive director, I do not see it as my role to speak on behalf of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Texas Baptists speak collectively through messengers from cooperating churches at annual meetings and through an Executive Board on behalf of Texas Baptist churches between annual meetings.

Texas Baptists have tried to preserve unity and harmony by not entering into the fray on potentially divisive issues unless absolutely necessary. We sought to be both representative and appreciative of the various views held by cooperating churches and will continue to seek to do so in the future.

In recent months, several BGCT ministers and convention staff have been publicly denounced for being women in ministry. As a result, we have received numerous questions from pastors, church members and even board members about the topic of women in ministry: What is our position? Has our position changed?

After conferring with our convention and Executive Board officers, we thought it both timely and necessary to address this topic now.

In so doing, we should be mindful of the reality that many women currently are serving in ministry roles in BGCT churches—although only a few are in the role of lead pastor.

Additionally, many of our BGCT staff are women, and about half of our Baptist Student Ministry workers are women ministering to college

students on 137 college campuses around the state.

As the fourth largest endorser of military chaplains, we endorse women to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces as chaplains.

Furthermore, many BGCT churches are sending many female students to our Texas Baptist colleges and seminaries to prepare for ministry, and we are providing scholarships for them.

So, please understand our actions and our words as a governance board affect a great many people.

BGCT's historic position biblically based

As a convention of churches, where have we been historically on the topic of women in ministry?

First and foremost, Scripture shapes our faith and practice. As “people of the Book,” Baptists seek to understand Scripture, through the leadership of the Holy Spirit, to guide orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Old Testament

From an Old Testament perspective, we see the overwhelming majority of ministry positions held by men with the exceptions of Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14).

While women were allowed to minister at the entrance to the tent of meeting (1 Samuel 2:22), share in the music ministry (Psalm 68:25; Ezra 2:65; Nehemiah 7:67; 1 Chronicles 25:5-7) and participate in the Nazarite vow, which includes the offering of sacrifices (Numbers 6:1-21), men were typically spiritual leaders.

However, the prophet Joel did foresee the day when the Lord would pour out his Spirit on all people—male and female—to prophesy and serve (Joel 2:28-29).

New Testament

Fast forward to Pentecost, and Peter rightly proclaims to Israel that Joel's prophecy now was fulfilled (Acts 2:17-21). What the people of Jerusalem were witnessing in the ability of both men and women to proclaim the gospel was a direct fulfillment of Scripture.

Add to it that Anna was a "prophetess" whom the Lord used to encourage Joseph and Mary (Luke 2:36-38); several women taught and served in the book of Acts (Tabitha/Dorcas [9:36], Lydia [16:14-15, 40], Priscilla [18:26]; and Philip's four preaching daughters [21:9]); and the many women Paul affirms in various roles as co-laborers (Priscilla [Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19], Phoebe [Romans 16:1-2]; the apostle Junia [Romans 16:7], Tryphaena and Tryphosa [Romans 16:12], Euodia and Syntyche [Philippians 1:1; 4:2-3]; Nympha [Colossians 4:15]; and Apphia [Philemon 2]) among other women mentioned in the New Testament, and one can see how the door is opened to the topic of women in ministry.

In addition, Paul provides instructions on how women should pray and preach in worship (1 Corinthians 11:2-16), and he clearly asserts the equality between women and men (1 Corinthians 7:3-4; 11:11-12; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 5:21).

On the other hand, some New Testament passages seem to restrict the role of women in the church (see 1 Corinthians 14:34-36; 1 Timothy 2:8-15), and Paul exhorts wives to submit to the servant leadership of their husbands, albeit in the context of mutual submission (Colossians 3:18; Ephesians 5:22; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1-6).

For a more thorough treatment of this topic, consider Baylor University's

Truett Theological Seminary Dean Todd Still's essay [Women In Ministry: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Reflections](#).

Thus, one can see the legitimacy of being faithful to the biblical text, and yet, still disagreeing on the role of women in ministry.

Scripture-informed polity

Additionally, Scripture informs our understanding of ecclesiology and polity. BGCT Executive Director Emeritus Bill Pinson addresses many Baptist distinctives in [The Baptist Identity series](#) used broadly by BGCT churches as well as by Baptist conventions in other countries.

In particular, three doctrinal commitments influence how Texas Baptists think about women in ministry: the priesthood of all believers, soul competency, and the autonomy of the local church.

Priesthood of all believers

The priesthood of all believers means we need no high priest but Jesus, who functions as the sole Mediator between God and humanity, and that all believers—men and women—are a “royal priesthood,” function as priests before God and each other (not necessarily as pastors), and should be God's representatives to humanity on earth as we “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

Soul competency

Soul competency means God equips each believer with the competency to interpret God's will for himself or herself without being told what to believe by higher ecclesiastical authorities. For example, the decision to trust in Jesus as Lord is a personal choice, and each person is capable of choosing for themselves.

Autonomy of the local church

The autonomy of the local church means each church is self-governing and decides their own beliefs and practices.

Finally, it should be noted, however, as with some other doctrinal matters, Baptists do not always think alike regarding these cherished commitments.

BGCT resolutions

As a result of our interpretations of Scripture and cherished Baptist beliefs, Texas Baptists offer resolutions or statements from time to time to define where we stand as it pertains to theological, ecclesial or cultural topics.

The last definitive statement from BGCT messengers specifically on the topic of women in ministry was a celebration of the freedom of the local church to decide for themselves, as stated in a resolution passed in 1998 entitled “Biblical Equality.” In that resolution, messengers affirmed:

“The freedom and responsibility of women and men to respond to the call of Christ to serve as they are gifted by God;

The priesthood of each believer in discerning God’s truth as revealed in Scripture and led by the Holy Spirit; and

The freedom of each local Baptist church to commission for service all persons regardless of race, socioeconomic standing, age or gender who are called of God to model servant leadership.”

Then, as recently as 2021 at the BGCT annual meeting, messengers adopted a resolution celebrating the value of women in Texas Baptist life. It was titled “Celebration of Women in Texas Baptist Life” and reads:

“Whereas, women have served Texas Baptists in numerous and

complex ways, which include elected offices, faithful service on committees, local and foreign mission work, positions in higher education, as well as within local churches;

Whereas, Texas Baptists continue to affirm and celebrate the contribution of women advancing God's kingdom.

Be It Resolved, that the messengers of the 2021 Texas Baptists Annual Meeting affirm the ongoing efforts of Texas Baptists following Christ's example of engaging, empowering, and entrusting women with the gospel."

What does this mean for Texas Baptists today?

As both autonomous and Bible-believing, Texas Baptist churches have spoken and continue to speak for themselves on the issue of women in ministry.

Among Texas Baptists, conformity over the role of women in the church is neither a test of fellowship nor a condition of cooperation. We neither insist on uniform practices or ministry titles, nor do we compel the conscience of any Baptist to adhere to the conclusions of another on this issue.

Of the theological issues we consider worthy of defining harmonious cooperation in the BGCT, the issue of women in ministry is not among them.

We remain committed to advancing the gospel through the GC2 Movement to share Christ and show love until all people have the opportunity to say "yes" to Jesus.

So, let us not grow weary in well-doing, brothers and sisters. Let us not be

diverted or divided by secondary issues about which thoughtful and faithful Texas Baptists may disagree. Too much is at stake. We are stronger together, and we have a state and a world to win to Christ.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The content of this article is adapted from remarks originally delivered by Craig Christina, Texas Baptists' associate executive director and acting executive director, during session one of the May meeting of the BGCT Executive Board, where Christina was speaking to the board regarding the BGCT's long-held position on women in ministry. A version also appears in his weekly email sent May 31.