

Voices: Texas Baptists' 'historic stance' on women in ministry

July 13, 2023

In New Orleans at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting, the convention of churches represented by the messengers in the room voted to [disfellowship two churches](#) for having women either serving in the role of pastor or fulfilling functions of the office itself.

While there has been much written and said regarding that decision—such as an [editorial by Eric Black in the *Baptist Standard*](#)—the purpose of this article is not to address that decision per se, but rather the potential reaction to the decision made in New Orleans.

Black stated, “The actions taken to solidify the SBC’s opposition to women as pastors highlights the need for other cooperative bodies—such as the BGCT—to make clear their official position on women in ministry.”

He goes on to state, “During his address to the BGCT Executive Board in May, Craig Christina—BGCT associate executive director and acting executive director—described the BGCT’s historic stance on women in ministry.”

The purpose of this article is to clarify language like this that has been utilized in recent weeks that communicates Texas Baptists always have had a historic stance on women in ministry. History teaches us Texas Baptists have not had a “historic stance” on women in ministry. This will become evident with a brief overview.

Historical analysis

It is hard to study the history of Texas Baptists without consulting Leon McBeth. In “The Changing Role of Women in Baptist History” in the Fall 1979 issue of *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, McBeth observes the record shows Baptists have been debating the place of women in church since the 17th century (p. 84).

Notice, the question never has been whether women have a place in the church. The question always has been fixed on what that place is.

The fact the Woman’s Missionary Union was founded in 1880 was a realization of the value and contribution of the work of women in ministry and missions, which J.M. Carroll makes clear in his 1923 *History of Texas Baptists: Comprising a Detailed Account of Their Activities, Their Progress, and Their Achievements*, a Baptist Standard publication (pgs. 855-56).

Former president of Howard Payne University, Carroll notes in his historiography: “After reporting the work of the WMU in Texas from 1898-1921, these cold figures show very inadequately the real work of our Texas Baptist women.

“Their achievements cannot possibly be recorded on paper. The intangible results are far greater than the tangible,” he continues. “The stimulus given by their work to all our other interests and to the work of our women is really beyond computation. Their wonderful achievements in the last four decades are worthy to be recorded in a great book. Who will write the book?” (p. 865)

Texas Baptists still are awaiting that book.

The Texas WMU paved the way in numerous ways in Texas Baptist life. They were the first to adopt a district model to divide up the state.

“This was neither the first nor the last time Baptist women pioneered plans which were later adopted by the entire denomination with little acknowledgement of their origins,” McBeth wrote in *Texas Baptists: A Sesquicentennial History* (p. 197).

Yet at the same time, some would interpret that the fact there was a designated place for women in ministry speaks to a more complementarian position on the part of Texas Baptists.

This ambiguity of a stance on women in ministry has been accepted historically, which implies today’s call, by means of theological triage to make women in ministry a second-order issue, is in fact a recent phenomenon.

This includes both those who have decided to disfellowship churches based on their conviction on the issue as well as those calling for clarification from other organizations on the topic.

This topic really did not begin to get attention until the latter half of the 20th century. E. Eugene Greer notes this in *Baptists: History, Distinctives, Relationships*, a BGCT publication.

“Almost unnoticed during the ’60s was an event which presaged a major source of conflict for Southern Baptists in years ahead,” Greer wrote. “A young Virginia woman Addie Davis was ordained by the Watts Street Baptist Church of Durham, North Carolina, in August of 1964.”

“Ordinations of women to deacon bodies and for various forms of ministry would grow slowly from that point on matching a national tendency toward expanded roles for women and leveling barriers perceived to have prevented their progress over the years,” he continued (p. 30).

The stance of Texas Baptists always has been uncertain because of heterogeneity of the convention of churches. It only has been in the past

few decades that lines have begun to be drawn on the subject.

Texas Baptists' true historic stance

Recently there also has been “centrist” language being used in the call for a response on the part of Texas Baptists. I would prefer Texas Baptists double down on our historic consensus rather than today’s centrism.

The BGCT has not had a historic stance on women in ministry. If anything, it has been obscure. Yet, Texas Baptists have had a historic consensus on local church autonomy.

My hope is that as Texas Baptists gather for the Family Gathering in McAllen, if anything is reaffirmed it would be our historic stance on the autonomy of the local church.

Greer says it best when he states: “Baptist structure has two levels—the church and denominational life. It is inappropriate to speak of the associational level, the state convention level and the Southern Baptist Convention level. All three denominational structures—the association, the state convention and the national convention—are on the same level. The local church is the highest authority in Baptist ecclesiology and the denominational entities are next” (*Baptists*, p. 95).

A reaffirmation of our historic consensus on local church autonomy would be an appropriate response to the decisions made in New Orleans.

Unfortunately, I am afraid not much could be done or communicated at the business portion of the gathering to address this issue, since there will not be resolutions at this year’s annual meeting due to time constraints.

Whatever is decided and done in McAllen, I pray it would be based on who Texas Baptists have been historically.

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