

Voices: Affirming limited roles for women in ministry

March 21, 2023

Read the companion article 'Affirming unlimited roles for women in ministry' [here](#).

Should Southern Baptist churches have women on their pastoral staff? This matter can be addressed properly only if we first define what the word "pastor" means and then clarify how Southern Baptist's often understand the concept of "pastoral staff."

Biblical definition of 'pastor'

Regarding the first matter, Southern Baptist's historically have contended the terms "pastor" (one who shepherds), "elder" (a wise, experienced leader) and "bishop" (an overseer of a church's affairs) are used interchangeably in the New Testament to describe one office of leadership in the church.

The basis for this argument is that these labels are applied to intersecting responsibilities. For example, the Book of Acts recounts Paul summoning the Ephesian elders to visit him at Miletus (Acts 20:17), where he tells them they are the church's overseers who must shepherd God's people (Acts 20:28).

Also, in two of Paul's letters, he instructs Timothy to look for qualified male candidates who can serve as overseers (1 Timothy 3:1-2) and admonishes Titus to appoint elders (Titus 1:5) who can function as overseers (Titus 1:7).

Peter makes similar connections when he describes Christ as a shepherd

and overseer (1 Peter 2:25) or commissions church elders to oversee and shepherd God's flock (1 Peter 5:1-2). This consistent kind of overlap convinces Southern Baptists that if someone holds the office of pastor, then they necessarily take up the duties of an elder and bishop as well.

Baptist Faith and Message on 'pastor'

This conviction is further solidified in Southern Baptist confessional history as documented in various editions of the Baptist Faith and Message. The original draft from 1925 states in Article VI: The Church that "its Scriptural officers are bishops, or elders, and deacons."

Notably, the word pastor is omitted. Yet for all practical purposes, the term is still viewed as functionally equivalent, since the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message removes both elder and bishop in exchange for pastor.

Although a new statement was added—"the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture"—the 1963 language otherwise was retained in 2000 when the Baptist Faith and Message was revised again.

Southern Baptist pastoral staff

Many Southern Baptist churches do not view all their ministerial personnel as pastors in the full way the New Testament or Baptist Faith and Message prescribe. Doing so would require all pastoral staff members to be seen as elders and bishops.

However, Southern Baptist churches usually have a "senior" pastor viewed as the one pastor/elder/bishop who supervises the staff. Sometimes the senior pastor/elder/bishop will delegate certain staff members to exercise assigned authority over other staff.

To make matters more complicated, staff may have the term "pastor" in

their individual titles because of designated duties—such as executive pastor, youth pastor, pastor to marrieds, pastor to seniors.

This means a kind of ecclesiastical pecking order exists where people who serve on a Southern Baptist church staff may participate in pastoral tasks while not having parity with the one senior pastor.

It is at this very crossroads where the question of women on pastoral staff needs to be addressed. On the one hand, Southern Baptists believe pastors also are elders and bishops. On the other hand, church staff are not normally viewed in this light. Thus, the difficulty in discerning a clear-cut answer to this issue.

Three points to consider

Southern Baptists should consider three points.

First, Southern Baptist churches should recognize that because ministerial staff normally have no functional parity with a senior pastor or other leading bodies—such as elders—these positions should not be equated with the pastoral office in the New Testament sense of the word.

This dilemma is one reason the trend among Southern Baptist churches to have a plurality of elders is growing. It's easier to maintain a distinction between the pastors—or elders—and staff.

Second, I agree with the Baptist Faith and Message 2000's clause restricting the office of pastor/elder/bishop to qualified men. The New Testament never provides a single example of women serving in this role.

Women are enabled and commissioned to share the gospel with the world, minister to the hurting, offer insight to those in need of personal guidance and actively be involved in many more areas of Christian praxis.

We also read of instances where women may prophesy, pray and participate in public gatherings of the church. Yet none of these functions ever are described in ways that contravene specified areas of responsibility given to qualified men who serve in the pastor/elder/bishop office.

Admittedly, however, this is a diminishing perspective because of the increasing cultural appeal of egalitarianism, ongoing exegetical debates about pertinent biblical texts—such as 1 Timothy 2:12 or Galatians 3:28—and pushback against exclusive male leadership because of tragic occasions where women have been victims of abuse by numerous pastors.

Third, the specific question of women serving on pastoral staff is complicated further by the fact many staff positions—whether bearing the title “pastor” or not—require involvement in pastoral duties the New Testament restricts to qualified men, such as teaching or preaching to a gathered church assembly.

In such cases, regardless of whether Southern Baptist churches restrict the title of “pastor” to pastor/elder/bishop or broadly expand it to staff roles, women should not participate in those designated functions.

This pastor/staff question is a large reason why the SBC is so heavily divided on the women-in-ministry issue today. The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 prohibits women from being pastors, but does this mean “senior pastors” only, or pastoral staff as well? If it includes the latter, which ones?

The jury is still out on this matter, and time will tell what Southern Baptists decide.

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