



**Affirming
Women
in Ministry**

**Roy L. Honeycutt,
President**

**The Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary**



As Southern Baptists consider the role of women in ministry; equally sincere persons have differing convictions about the subject. Printed in this brochure are President Honeycutt's views on this timely topic.

This statement is distributed in the hope that it will help each reader better understand the biblical perspective on which Southern Seminary's affirmation of women in ministry is based.

“Affirming Women in Ministry”

“I was in my second year of teaching and felt God was calling me into full-time Christian ministry. With that calling also came my desire to read my New Testament in Greek.” Are those words from an established professor of New Testament Greek, comments by a Southern Seminary student, or the remembrance of a mature pastor reflecting on the beginnings of his pastoral ministry?

Such testimony of God’s call to Christian ministry comes from none of those sources. Rather, it is the personal witness of eighty-nine year old Virginia Walters who began her study of Greek when she enrolled in Louisville in 1919. How does she assess her ministry from the vantage point of eighty-nine years? “I served as educational director in every church Tom had,” she recently commented. Still reading the Greek New Testament at almost ninety, she says, “Greek is an emotional experience for me. I have a peculiar feeling of nearness to Christ.”

Occasionally, individuals ask why Southern Seminary affirms women in ministry. Why has the seminary admitted women as students throughout the twentieth century? Why does the Southern Baptist Convention elect women as trustees to boards and why do seminary trustees occasionally elect women to serve on the seminary faculty? Why do we commend women as well as men to churches for staff positions in Christian ministry, and assist them in making contact with local churches? Why do we invite women to join Southern Baptists in vocational roles of Christian ministry as we respond to God’s call to be on mission with Him in His world?

First, affirming women in ministry is consistent with the heritage of Southern Seminary and is the logical extension of the seminary’s historical practice. Women in ministry is not a new phenomenon at South-

ern Seminary. Wives of students first audited classes in the 1880's and the first woman was admitted to this seminary as a regularly enrolled student in 1902. During the 1903-04 session there were 48 women taking classes. By the 1920-21 school year, of the 620 students enrolled at the seminary and the WMU Training School, forty percent were women (246). In 1949 the first woman enrolled for the Bachelor of Divinity degree, which until that time had been restricted to men committed to a preaching ministry.

Beginning in the late nineteen forties and early fifties trustees began electing women to the seminary faculty. Concurrently, all degree programs were opened to women. Sex was no longer an admissions factor for students enrolling at Southern Seminary. Continuing to this date, apart from basic academic credentials, the fundamental norm for admission continues to be an applicant's personal conviction of God's call to Christian ministry, affirmed by both the individual and his or her local congregation.

"Let no one misunderstand the commitment of this seminary to biblical authority."

Now, we as Southern Baptists are passing through a time when equally sincere persons have differing convictions about women in ministry. Especially is this true of ordination, whether as deacons or as staff ministers. While there appears to be general openness to "women in ministry" understood in the broad sense described above, support for women in traditionally pastoral roles of congregational leadership is quite another matter.

During this time of discussion we Southern Baptists are seeking to be faithful to biblical authority and to our understanding of God's will. Also, we are attempting to

relate responsibly to women who are answering God's call to Christian ministry. Sometimes disagreeing in our conclusions, we agree in our commitment to the authority of Scripture, the reality of God's call to the ministry, the indiscriminate distribution of God's gifts, and the autonomy of the local church.

Second, affirming women in ministry is faithful to the Bible, and to our consistent determination to reflect an authentic biblical theology. Let no one misunderstand the commitment of this seminary to biblical authority. The Bible remains our stable and unshaken norm for all matters of faith and practice.

The Bible teaches that all who are born into the family of God by faith commitment to Jesus Christ are accepted without discrimination. As of Jew or Gentile, so also of each person who is in Christ Jesus: "He is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14).

The Bible's clear commitment to freedom in Christ leads us also to affirm each person who is recreated in Him, male or female: "as many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27f).

Specifically, the Bible bears multiple witnesses concerning woman in ministry. In the Old Testament, her role in ministry is present in such activities as prophetess, diviner, queen, psalmist, and judge.

In the New Testament, the birth of our Lord was heralded not only by the song of Simeon (Lk. 2:29-35), but by the prophetess Anna who in her adoration "spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Lk. 2:36-40). Her witness was among the earlier proclamations of the gospel of Jesus Christ recorded in the New

Testament.

Jesus' redeeming and affirming support of woman appears throughout the gospels. He affirmed woman and assured for her a more positive station in life, creating within the church and the whole of Christianity a uniquely positive role. Women stood by the cross with Jesus through his darkest hour (cf. Mark 15:40f), and according to John's Gospel it was a woman who first taught the apostles that the Lord had risen (John 20:18). Philip the evangelist "had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied," suggesting that the New Testament church had no difficulty assimilating prophetic activity by women (cf. Acts 21:8-10).

To the church at Rome, Paul commends "our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae" (Rom. 16:1 RSV). Concerning women in worship, he insists that while praying or prophesying in public they should cover their heads. Yet, in public worship women did pray and prophesy in the Corinthian church. Paul greets as "fellow workers in Christ Jesus" his wife-husband collaborators Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:3), each of whom actively taught a new disciple named Apollos. Acts records that although "an eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures (Apollos) knew only the baptism of John." Priscilla and Aquila "took him and expounded to him the way of God more clearly" (Acts 18:26).

Yet, there are New Testament passages which restricted the freedom of woman in first century churches. Subordination appears in the counsel given Timothy: "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent" (I Tim. 2:11,12). Again, confronting the abuses of freedom at Corinth, Paul wrote: "As in all the churches of the saints, women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordi-

nate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a women to speak in church" (I Cor. 14:34ff).

Is the subordination of woman, God's intention for twentieth century churches? Or were those passages applicable fundamentally to a specific local church situation within the first century? Equally sincere persons probably will disagree as they answer these questions. But let us remember that the issue is the interpretation of scripture, not its authority.

"...we accept no student into a degree program at Southern Seminary who is not...committed to Christian ministry."

While interpreting these passages one should give attention to the fact that within the same context which stresses the subordination of woman, there are also verses which many conservative Christians assume to have applied only to a local, first century church situation. For example when Paul wrote that he did not allow women to teach or to have authority over men, he also insisted that women were not to braid their hair, to wear gold or pearls, not to wear costly attire (I Tim. 2:10). In Colossians he combines counsel to wives with advice to slaves; accepting first century slavery without objection (Colossians 3:18ff). So also, he apparently accepted the role of woman as a first century experience but without making it normative any more than he made slavery normative by accepting it as a condition of life which existed in the first century, but which was not allowed to disrupt one's loyalty to Christ as the Lord of life.

Few Southern Baptists would interpret scripture so directly as to determine the style of a woman's hair by Paul's counsel to

Timothy. Nor would they affirm contemporary slavery merely because Paul accepted it as a condition of life experienced by Christians in the first century. Committed Christian women devoted to Jesus Christ wear gold jewelry and pearls today, as well as expensive clothing. Both men and women agree to interpret stipulations prohibiting such dress and jewelry as first century in application.

Interpreting scripture correctly requires that one examine the totality of the Bible, not merely one part, or a verse here and there. Unless we “image the whole before executing the parts” (Emerson) we may find ourselves misunderstanding God’s intention.

Failing to follow this elemental principle of biblical interpretation, some sincere but misguided persons insist on demonstrating faith by drinking strychnine and handling rattlesnakes; appealing all the while to the Bible: “And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them...” (Mark 16:17f).

Third, affirming women in ministry is consistent with the unique nature of the divine call to Christian ministry. Southern Seminary admission procedures are stringent concerning testimony of a divine call to ministry. Persons recently converted or who have no demonstrated local church experiences consistent with their call to ministry are accepted on probation. During the first year such persons must satisfactorily demonstrate their suitability to the ministerial calling before continuing into the second year of seminary studies.

For decades women have responded to invitations by pastors, evangelists, and other church leaders to commit their lives to “full-time Christian service.” Women are convinced that by making such a commitment to

Christian ministry they are responding to the call of God. Their churches affirm this with them and recommend such women to the seminary for further preparation for Christian ministry. As evidence of this, in the fall semester of 1987 of the 10,456 (FTE) students enrolled in the six Southern Baptist seminaries, 2059 or 20% were women.

No one should be surprised that we affirm such women in their God-called ministry. For we accept no student into a degree program at Southern Seminary who is not thus committed to Christian ministry. This is the fundamental reason we exist as an institution of the Southern Baptist Convention. For a century and a quarter we have served Southern Baptists and the larger interests of God's Kingdom by preparing persons for more effective ministry in and through the churches. By this ministry we are partners with others in our commitment that "the kingdom of this world *shall* become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

Because we believe in the uniqueness of God's call to Christian ministry we are more than merely passive recipients of women students seeking admission to the seminary to prepare for Christian ministry. Joyfully we welcome and affirm all whom God calls, including women.

Fourth, affirming women in ministry is faithful to the Holy Spirit's indiscriminate distribution of God's gifts. Southern Seminary cannot bestow gifts of ministry. We can and do recognize such gifts and we affirm those gifts of ministry which the Lord entrusts to believers. Then, we assist students to enhanced and sharpen gifts given by the Holy Spirit.

Fewer books of the New Testament affirm more clearly than Romans and First Corinthians the diversity of gifts with which God endows believers (Rom. 12:4-13) (I Cor.

12:1ff). Such gifts exist within the affirming unity of the church as a fellowship of believers.

No prerequisite other than authentic Christian discipleship is required to receive the gifts endowed by God: "For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness" (Rom. 12:4-8).

"In admission of women committed to Christian ministry, the seminary deliberately shares decision making with local congregations."

Concerning gifts for women, some may seek to limit Paul's list of gifts to men simply because the New Testament commonly uses the third person masculine pronoun "his." But God's Spirit is indiscriminate in His distribution of spiritual gifts. Listen to the inspired prophet Joel describing the activity of God's Spirit: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days, I will pour out my spirit" (Joel 2:28f). This is the prophecy fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. With the coming of the Holy Spirit, "Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, 'men of Judea...this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: '...your sons and daughters

shall prophesy" (Acts 2:14-18). God practices no discrimination in the gifts of the Spirit: neither sexual, chronological, nor sociological. Men and women, young and old, as well as servants; each alike receives the gifts of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit, not human ingenuity, creates gifts of Christian ministry. By exercising their gifts women as well as men are responding to the presence of the Holy Spirit who is calling out not only women but all His people to the world mission challenge given to us by the Risen Lord. In this, as in all movements of the Holy Spirit, we might wisely heed the counsel of Gamaliel concerning the apostles' witness to the Risen Christ: "...for if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:38f). Could it be that the growing commitment of women to Christian ministry is yet another evidence of the contemporary presence of God's Holy Spirit calling the modern church to be on mission with Him in His world?

Fifth, affirming women in ministry is faithful to Southern Baptist polity and leaves both the calling of staff and ordination to the local congregation where they properly belong. As a community of faith and learning Southern Seminary is both the servant of the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention and of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We are called to live as stewards who are responsible to local congregations and to the divine imperative under which the lordship of Christ places each believer and every institution of God's Kingdom.

"...our decisions will remain consistent with the New Testament pattern of church government and the whole of biblical theology."

No fundamental conflict exists in such a dual claim on the stewardship of this seminary

which devoted Southern Baptists have supported continuously during the century and a quarter of our history. Yet, in such division of stewardship there is also a division of responsibility. Some decisions are properly those of local congregations and should forever remain at that point of decision making. Other decisions are delegated to responsible trustees duly chosen by Southern Baptists. Policies approved by seminary trustees are implemented by seminary administrative staff who are responsible for implementing seminary policies. Such areas include admission to the seminary, the nature and quality of seminary experiences, and the fidelity of seminary personnel to the fulness of the biblical revelation as our divine imperative.

Specifically, in the admission of women committed to Christian ministry, the seminary deliberately shares decision making with local congregations. Together, we act on the basis of our best understanding of the revelation of God which is applicable both to the seminary and to the local church.

For many years, Southern Seminary has required a letter of church approval before admitting a person to the seminary. That endorsement is read to the church during a business meeting, officially approved by the church, and signed by the church clerk. No student, man or woman, enters Southern Seminary without the following commendation adopted by a local church during a business session of the congregation. Consider a hypothetical application for "Jane Doe":

"Having evidence that 'Jane Doe', an applicant for admission to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, is

- an individual of personal and moral integrity;
- an individual of profound commitment to the Christian faith as evidenced by participation in the life of this church;
- an individual of emotional stability who is able to fill leadership responsibilities

in church life; and

- *an individual whom this church would recommend for a responsible role in Christian ministry;*
- we express our approval of her desire to enter the work of the professional ministry,
- and pledge our continuing interest and prayerful support."

We affirm women in ministry on the basis of such formal action by individual Southern Baptist churches who commend women applicants as individuals whom those churches "recommend for a responsible role in Christian ministry." Southern Baptist congregations support every woman studying at the seminary in her "desire to enter the work of the professional ministry."

As with the recommendation of applicants, so with the ministerial service of graduates, Southern Baptist churches are free under God to call whomever the Spirit may lead them to select as ministers. Individuals properly serve at whatever staff positions local churches believe under God to be appropriate. Southern Baptist churches may ordain or refrain from ordaining individuals as they may determine on the basis of their interpretation of the Bible.

Such dependence upon the local church is consistent with our denominational policy of congregational decision making, which we believe is faithful to the New Testament. By continuing to function in this manner, contemporary churches will keep faith with our heritage. Most significantly, our decisions will remain consistent with the New Testament pattern of church government and the whole of biblical theology.

**For additional copies write to
The Southern Baptist Theological
Seminary
2825 Lexington Road
Louisville, Kentucky 40280**

